

A Conversation with Marty Stuart
by Frank Goodman (10/2005, Puremusic.com)

A person's got to know that they've got it going on somewhat when Lester Flatt asks you to go on the road and play mandolin in his band when you're only 13 years old. And when your bandleader dies years later and your next long running gig is playing guitar with Johnny Cash, well, where does one go from there?

On his own, naturally, and the well of music inside Marty Stuart is fed by so many deep and different underground streams that it will never go dry, and appears to be absolutely unpollutable. He went on, of course, to become a huge Country star in his own right after his legendary beginnings in the world of music. He has a string of million- play hit songs to his credit. More than anyone in the field, he can be said to have done it all, except that he keeps doing it with incredible verve, incredible love, and he really won't have done it all till it's all done.

Marty is disarmingly unaffected by all he has accomplished in his life, and is lifted high beyond self absorption by his reverence for the music itself and the many sources of his inspiration. When he speaks about the Cash family or the Carter family, about Hank Williams or the lives of Native Americans, you can hear a pin drop. Because he *knows*.

He's very happily married for many years to a legendary Country singer, Connie Smith. Every woman (and every man) would love to hear their spouse speak about them in the way that Marty speaks about Connie—it's humbling.

During the recent Americana Convention, I was moved by a couple of Marty sightings. His acceptance speech for the presentation of the Lifetime Achievement Award was memorable. The only moments that could compare in my mind were the "hello, I'm from another planet" acceptance speech of Buddy Miller ("I had no idea...I was just tuning my guitar...") or the mindblowing Jaime Hartford rendition of his dad's classic "Gentle On My Mind." I think it was the next night that we caught Marty and my friend Kenny Vaughan setting the Mercy Lounge on fire, that was unbelievable.

In accordance with his reverence for his world and his inspirations, Marty's also a rare photographer thereof. He produced a book of his photos, "Pilgrims: Sinners, Saints and Prophets", published by Rutledge-Hill Press. He's long been active in the family of the Lakota Indians of South Dakota, and his next album, "Badlands" is a collection of songs inspired by their legacy. The current album, *Souls' Chapel*, is a stirring collection of Mississippi Gospel rendered by Marty and the Superlatones. It is a must have for fans of Gospel and Country alike, and any fan of Marty's. Like all his work, it rings true, and goes all the way down to the source, to the soul.

Kudos to Universal South, for signing a deal with this essential American artist that empowers him to do a series of sets of recordings to showcase all the many turns of his musical diamond. Like the icons that have inspired his contributions, his place in musical history is assured.

Marty and I had a lively conversation this week on the phone. He's a fantastic guy, as you will see.

Marty Stuart: Frank?

Puremusic: Hey, Marty.

MS: Kenny Vaughan says hello.

PM: [laughs] Very kind of you to extend that, thanks.

MS: He's right across the room.

PM: [laughs] Oh, really? Are you guys in rehearsal or just hanging?

MS: We were just working on a song.

PM: You mean you're writing one or learning one?

MS: We're writing one.

PM: Ah, beautiful, yeah. I've been writing up a storm lately. Is that the best part of the process for you? That's my favorite part.

MS: Well, it's probably the most magical part of it.

PM: Right.

MS: I know how to make records, but you got to have something to make.

PM: Yeah. And if you don't have a great song, you really don't have anything.

MS: That's the truth.

PM: When I saw you receive the Lifetime Achievement Award at the Americana Awards Show, I thought that was a beautiful acceptance speech you made, but I couldn't help thinking, "But he's too young to be receiving a lifetime achievement award."

[laughter]

MS: Well, I'm the cat with nine lives.

PM: Exactly—that was the other thing. Well, which one of his lives are you talking about?

MS: Yeah. I always take those awards with gratitude, but you can't tie much too 'em. You got to keep rockin'.

PM: "Well, if I'm that to you, that's nice" kind of thing.

MS: Absolutely.

PM: Aside from Kenny, one of my closest friends and co-writers is Peter Cronin, whose wife Karen designs your CDs. She loves working with you.

MS: Well, she's fun to work with. She really gets it.

PM: So along the way I've heard some interesting plans you have with Universal South for albums and sets of albums to come that sound very impressive. I hope that it's appropriate to ask you how it works, how it lays out in your mind, and what's coming up with these records.

MS: Well, there was a series, you probably remember, on Verve Records, Ella Fitzgerald had a series called *The Ella Fitzgerald Songbooks*.

PM: Right, sure.

MS: And I had always heard about them, but I had never seen them in person until a couple of months ago when I went to New York City. They're not in box-set form. So I ordered them, and sure enough, there are the songs of Johnny Mercer and Cole Porter, and the Gershwins, all those great writers.

PM: Oh, I got to get that. [In fact, we went directly to Ebay after the interview and started with a Best Of collection from the Songbooks, a 1990 Silver Series reissue for \$6.50.]

MS: So the idea was for Superlatone and Universal South to put out a similar concept, except just not singing songwriters. So far, it's *Soul's Chapel* and now *Badlands*, and the Ryman bluegrass record, and there are about four more [series] in the barrel that are in different states of development. Around the first of the year, we'll be going back to the studio to start making more records.

PM: Unbelievable. So the one after *Souls' Chapel* is *Badlands*, and that's the Native American record, right?

MS: Sure, that's right.

PM: Could you tell me more about that? I'm not really wired in.

MS: Well, it's ballads of the Lakota Indians. I guess its spiritual father is the *Bitter Tears* record by Johnny Cash. And when I was in his band we went up to Pine Ridge Indian

Reservation [in South Dakota] and did a benefit concert. And it was pointed out to me that the reason we were there was that it's the poorest county in the United States.

PM: I see.

MS: And I fell in love with the Native American people, and have been back many, many times since then. Connie and I were married up there.

PM: Wow!

MS: And so I've been adopted up there. They're like my family. So when I was getting into this adventure with Superlatone and Universal, I thought, well, I've got a record deal, and I can do anything I want to. So I created this record and wrote songs, past, present and future stories of the Lakota Indians from up there.

PM: Unbelievable.

MS: It's pretty cool.

PM: Holy jeez. So one is led to believe that when you found this new home at Universal South that basically the guys you're working with said, "Well, Marty, you can do whatever the hell it is you'd like to do."

MS: They gave me a playpen and some crayons.

PM: It's just unbelievable.

MS: And a budget. It's a heavenly thing.

PM: In these days, in the record business, the deal you get is carte blanche?

MS: Yeah.

PM: [laughs]

MS: Isn't that crazy?

PM: I think you got to be Marty Stuart to get that deal, but I'm glad somebody is.

MS: Well, and the idea is to use it wisely, because the music business will come and go, but while it's upon us, the idea is to make real things.

PM: Yeah. Because there's no more fickle lover than the music business.

MS: Uh-huh.

PM: You pulled a couple of them out in that Ryman show, but maybe you'd share something with the readers about some of the amazing instruments in your collection and from whence they came.

MS: Well, the Pop Staples guitar is a gift from Mavis, Yvonne and Purvis. And that's the one I played at the Ryman. And of course, there's the Clarence White guitar.

PM: Right. And there was a great old Martin.

MS: Oh, the one from Hank, yeah.

PM: How did you come into that Hank Williams acoustic?

MS: I traded Johnny Cash a Merle Travis guitar for it.

PM: [laughs]

MS: And there's a 1957 J-200 that was Johnny Cash's that was on all those album covers that's pretty great.

PM: Oh, my God...

MS: Yeah.

PM: Yeah, very few on the planet can boast of a collection like that, and the ones that can aren't playing them like you are, on stage.

MS: Well, that's the idea, is they got to work.

PM: Yeah, they got to work, and they got to be played, because it's a crime when guitars that came from holy places sit in somebody's glass case—

MS: I know. We played a concert with Ricky Skaggs Saturday night. And after the concert, I jumped on his bus, and we were listening and looking at DVDs. And he had been a part of that ceremony last week where they put Bill Monroe's mandolin in the Hall of Fame. But before they put it under glass, he got to get it out and play it for a couple hours, and this guy videotaped, and I was watching it. The first question I asked him, I said, "Was that mandolin glad to be out of the case?" He said, "Oh, man, it's like it was screaming to get out and get played."

PM: [laughs] Oh, it's such a shame to think of it just getting glassed up.

MS: I know it, I know it.

PM: The Marty story that I like to tell is one about when I first got to town in '89, I was the freelance Mesa Boogie dealer at the time.

MS: Sure.

PM: And I stopped by SIR to loan somebody something. And the guy at the counter said, “Hey, Frank, this is Marty Stuart.” And you turned around and you said, “Hey, man, you want to play Clarence White’s guitar?”

[laughter]

PM: My jaw about hit the ground, man. And when I tell that story, people say, “Yeah, well, that’s just the kind of guy Marty is.”

MS: You’re still welcome to play it. [It’s a double Telecaster, with two bodies back to front.]

PM: [laughs] I saw you playing it the other night at the Mercy Lounge, and that was an incredibly rockin’ show.

MS: Oh, that was a fun one.

PM: Is there an instrument that you haven’t tried yet that you wish you could play?

MS: I still wish I could play the guitar.

[laughter]

PM: I know you’ve done some interesting projects with Billy Bob Thornton, but I don’t really know the nature of them. Could you share something about those with the readers?

MS: Yeah. It started with me scoring some of his films. One was *Daddy and Them*, one was called *Waking up in Reno*, and I think the big one was *All the Pretty Horses*.

PM: Oh, I saw that. That was fabulous—and great music, too.

MS: Thanks.

PM: You read that book then, too, probably.

MS: I never read the book.

PM: The book was unbelievable.

MS: Cormac McCarthy is one of my favorite authors, but I didn’t want the book to influence what I was playing. So after that, Billy Bob decided he wanted to be a recording artist.

PM: Oh, that was after that.

MS: Yeah. And so we made two or three records together. And I love working with Billy Bob, because the sky is the limit. He's probably the most creative human being in the world. And I just think he's one of the greatest actor/director/writers that God ever sent our way.

PM: Yeah, he's an incredible brain.

MS: You bet.

PM: I once went out to the high desert of California and did an interview with him about his music, too. He was doing a video with Travis [Tritt] out there at the time, so I went out and we talked about his music. He's a really amazing person.

MS: He really is.

PM: I listened to a couple of her beautiful hits this morning, maybe you can tell us a little about your wife, Connie Smith.

MS: Well, I think that what's left of that great era, concerning the ladies, is probably Dolly and Connie.

PM: Right.

MS: And both of them just have those unrepentant pipes.

[laughter]

PM: That's a lovely adjective.

MS: And to my ears, they carry, from their perspective and genre, the greatness of it on their shoulders.

PM: Yeah, the sound of that kind of purity is truly rare.

MS: I mean, I'm so tuned in to what Connie is about, and who she is, and how she sings. If you held a gun on her, she couldn't tell you how she does it. He opens her mouth, and it just happens.

PM: [laughs]

MS: And so when I sit and watch videos of whatever genre, from country to pop or whatever, I see girls that just do amazing vocal tricks, and then so many of the girl singers in country music, they just kind of show up and do what's told. And I think, man, it's so refreshing when that's over to turn to Connie and say, "Sing so-and-so," and hear her sing it.

PM: Yeah!

MS: Hear how it's really done.

PM: Yeah, somebody's got to tell these girls it's not about melisma, it's about charisma.

[laughter]

MS: That's right!

PM: So my old friend Kenny Vaughan is sitting there. You guys are just fantastic together. Your band has become a great home for him.

MS: Well, I think we'd all played through all kind of musical scenarios just to get to each other, but it's the band of a lifetime. [The band, Marty Stuart and his Fabulous Superlatives, also features Brian Glenn on bass and Harry Stinson on drums, with all players contributing harmony vocals.]

PM: Do you have any favorite songwriters working today that come to mind?

MS: The ones that I work with, or the ones I listen to?

PM: The ones you listen to, and who inspire you.

MS: Well, Patty Griffin is awful good.

PM: Oh, yeah.

MS: And just when I think I can write a song, I listen to a Guy Clark record or a Bob Dylan record, still, and there you go.

PM: Yeah, that'll keep you humble.

MS: And that's the difference between song crafters and natural-born writers.

PM: In your schedule, do you find time for reading?

MS: Yeah, I try.

PM: Read anything lately that turned you on?

MS: Well, I like biographies. And the last two things I read were—Larry McMurtry wrote a book called *Buffalo Bill, Annie Oakley, and the beginning of Superstardom in America*, which is a pretty good read.

PM: Oh, I'm going to get that.

MS: And Eudora Welty is one of my favorite southern writers and photographers. There's a new biography out called *Eudora*, I guess, and so I bought that. And then I picked up a book in an airport today—I had to have because it said, *God, the Biography*.

[laughter]

MS: So that's what I'm up to.

PM: Anything special on the turntable, as we used to say?

MS: Me and Kenny Vaughan got in here with Harry Stinson and listened to the Ventures the other night. That was pretty fun.

PM: [laughs]

MS: We listened to *Out of Limits*.

PM: Yeah, you got to go back to the source now and then.

MS: Yeah.

PM: Are you what you call a spiritual person, Marty?

MS: Oh, I try. I love the spirit, and I love spiritual matters. As I get older and further into my journey, it's what matters the most to me.

PM: And in what way do you incline, spiritually, toward the Christian way or—

MS: Yeah, absolutely.

PM: Is there something musical or otherwise that you haven't tried yet that you'd like to attempt?

MS: We don't have enough time to talk about it.

[laughter]

MS: My friend Tom Allen, the great painter, he said, "You should always keep something in front of you that knows more about you than you know about it." So there's plenty of that.

PM: [laughs] Last one: Who would you love to sing a duet with that hasn't happened yet?

MS: Connie Smith.

PM: That's my man. Marty, so nice of you to take the time with me today.

MS: Oh, Frank, good to hear ya.

PM: All right, man. Hi to Kenny, and I hope to see you soon.

MS: Will do, man.

[In addition to clips from *Souls' Chapel*, we thought we might include a selection from a greatest hits compilation on our Listen page, just to give a sense of some of Marty's other sounds for those readers who haven't yet had the pleasure. Instead we decided to go with an assortment from Marty's classic album *The Pilgrim*, check those out. And if you're looking for a couple of remarkable photographic experiences, tour the sites of two of the photographers whose shots are featured on these pages: James Minchin, whose recent images of the artist are seriously stunning (<http://www.jamesminchin.com>) and Jim McGuire, maker of great portraits of many of the musicians creating the music that matters in Nashville over the past three decades (<http://www.nashvilleportraits.com>).]