

A Conversation with Tony Joe White
by Frank Goodman (10/2006, Puremusic.com)

When one thinks about swamp music (and one should think about swamp music, at least sometimes), the first guitar player who comes to mind is probably Tony Joe White. He is of it. And he is so highly regarded by his iconic peers that a handful of the most luminary showed up to contribute to his newest recording. When you make a record, and Eric Clapton, Mark Knopfler, J.J. Cale, Michael McDonald, and Waylon Jennings (posthumous) all come aboard to contribute songs, singing and playing, at that point surely you can conclude that you got all the way there in your lifetime.

And Tony Joe White started getting there really early. He hit in his youth, first with "Soul Francisco" and then even bigger, with the huge hit that is pure South, "Polk Salad Annie." He really nailed it to the wall when he penned one of the greatest songs of anybody's time, "Rainy Night In Georgia." One of the many interesting stories in the conversation to come is how that classic almost never got recorded.

Tony is a statesman of the swamp, and a real Louisiana gentleman. He is soft & very deeply spoken. When he talks about his family, his friends and bandmates, you feel the love without his having to mention the word. He's very grateful for the success of his great songs, which allowed him play the music close to his heart, without compromise. He still tours the world regularly, more abroad than in the States. The prophet is sometimes not recognized in his hometown, to paraphrase the biblical saying. But in many places around the world, he is a legend.

As if having an interview with Tony wasn't enough of a memorable pleasure, I got to see him front and center at the Mercy Lounge in Nashville during the recent Americana Conference. I had the video camera running, and we include a couple of clips at the end of the interview. I was so close that I jumped the first time he stepped on his wah wah pedal.

It's really like this: if you like the blues, if you like the swampy kind of groove, and you don't have a Tony Joe White record in your collection, you're missing it, man. Fortunately for everybody, the new record is vitally beautiful and full of inspired collaborations with his famous friends and admirers. And if you want to add a little Polk Salad to the iPod, you can pick it up on iTunes. You're now entering a different time zone, here's Tony Joe White.

PM: Hi, Tony, this is Frank Goodman. How are you?

TJW: Good. How you doing, man?

PM: Great. You got a little time for me?

TJW: Yeah.

PM: Oh, thanks. Man, I love this crazy town. I was just downstairs in the studio talking to the great Danny O'Keefe [the guy who wrote "Good Time Charlie's Got The Blues"] about roasting coffee with a ten-dollar popcorn popper and a Veriac voltage regulator [laughs], and then I come upstairs and get to talk to Tony Joe White about his colorful life. I mean, this is an amazing town.

[laughter]

TJW: I'd say so.

PM: I was thinking that, to me, you have really the ultimate kind of career. You have a huge single when you're young, and enough great cuts through your life to play exactly the kind of music you like, the music of your soul, the whole life long.

TJW: Yeah. I've been very lucky, man. Like you say, though, the writing is what kicked all that in and made it possible. It's something that I have always been very thankful of, that that kicked in, and that I could be free with the music.

PM: It's a blessing. I mean, of course, it's the blessing of your talent. I always loved the song "Polk Salad Annie." And my brother wrote me this morning when I said I had an interview with you today, and he wrote me reminding me where we were and what we were doing and what we were playing when that came out. [laughs] It really brought it back to life for me. That was an amazing time.

TJW: Where was that, where were you guys when it came out?

PM: Well, we were playing down the Jersey shore every year. We were teenagers, and just loved that song. Where were you when it came out?

TJW: I was in Corpus Christi, Texas. I was playing in a club down there, and had really just gotten back from France. I'd been over there for about eight weeks. I'd had that song that hit, "Soul Francisco."

PM: "Soul Francisco," right.

TJW: Yeah, out of the blue. And then all of a sudden I was in Europe, and never been anywhere but Louisiana and Georgia in my whole life. And so here I am in Paris. But

anyway, I got back to America, and back to Corpus, and then all of a sudden they said "Polk Salad" was kicking in. So I went, "Man!"

PM: Unbelievable. Where did that get in the charts?

TJW: It made number four in America, and then number one here and there, different places. But Billboard itself was four.

PM: So even though it was to be followed by many great songs, including "Rainy Night in Georgia," was that the biggest song for you ever, the big money maker ever over your lifetime?

TJW: No. "Rainy Night," man.

PM: "Rainy Night" was bigger.

TJW: It's been the deal because there are over 140 versions of it.

PM: Oh, my Lord!

TJW: And "Polk," I think we got about 60 versions of "Polk." But "Rainy Night" is one of them things for orchestras and everybody just covered it. I was real surprised.

PM: 140 versions! That's one of the best songs I can ever remember hearing, "Rainy Night in Georgia." It's just one of the greatest songs ever.

TJW: I always said that when it ever came up and it got judged right, I was going to get revenge on that song and do it again, do it the way I felt it. The first time I didn't really feel like I nailed it. This time I did.

PM: That's a beautiful version on the new record. It's just so deeply soulful. I mean, it's one of those cuts where you feel so much more than the singer, you feel the person.

TJW: And you can see the night, man. When we started, my bass player and drummer, and the B3 in my old studio up there in Franklin that night, I told Jody, I said, "I'm going to lay 'Rainy' down, man. It feels like we should." And about halfway through it, it started raining out there, hitting the roof.

PM: Wow...

TJW: And I said, "Well, that's a sign right there we're on the right path.

PM: Unbelievable. And was Robbie on the bass that night, Robbie Turner?

TJW: Uh-huh.

PM: He's one of my favorite musicians in this town, and anywhere. He's just a remarkable player.

TJW: Little Robbie, he plays everything. But most people have no idea how good he is on the bass.

PM: Yeah. It's only your record and talking to him about the bass led me to understand that he was a bass player at all. Of course, we use him on pedal steel on a lot of our songs because you just can't find anybody better. But he's a phenomenal bottom-end guy.

TJW: Yeah, always, lap steel, banjo--I mean, he can play anything, and has been since he was about seven. But he can get funky on a bass when he has to.

PM: [laughs] And just one of the greatest guys.

TJW: Oh, God, man, out on the road, your jaws will lock up, he keeps us laughing so long.

PM: [laughs] Yeah, no doubt, like yourself, he's a man of many stories.

TJW: He's always got an armful of chips.

[laughter]

PM: Let's talk about "Rainy Night." It's funny how, with songs like that, there's no way, of course, a person can know that he or she is writing a song that will literally stand the test of time in a way so few things will.

TJW: Yeah. As a matter of fact, I almost didn't put that song on my album when I was cutting that thing back in them days. And my wife kept saying, "No, God, you got to do that." And I was kind of more into the swamp rocking, and really hard driving stuff.

PM: Right.

TJW: So anyway, I laid it down. If it hadn't been for her and Donnie Fritz wanting a copy of it, then Jerry Wexler would have never heard it, and I would have never got to hear how it should have been sung in the first place, with Brook. [Brook Benton had the huge hit with the song, in March of 1970.]

PM: Oh, my God. I mean, it just sends chills up your spine to hear a story like that.

TJW: So after hearing him sing it, I played it about sixty times in a row. They sent me a copy of it. And I went, "God, man, I got to learn this song. This is good."

[laughter]

TJW: It was like hearing it brand new.

PM: Ahh. [Enjoy a clip of Brook Benton doing "Rainy Night" here.]

Tony, what kind of a house and a home did you grow up in, and how did music take root in your life as a young person?

TJW: Well, our house is what they called a shotgun house. It's just a wooden frame with a tin roof. And it has a front porch and a back porch. And they call it shotgun because you can shoot through the front door and go all the way out the back end.

PM: [laughs]

TJW: And the bedroom is kind of on the side. On a forty-acre farm down by a place called Boeuf River in Louisiana swamps, cotton farm.

PM: Wow. And what kind of a home was it? What kind of a family unit were you part of?

TJW: Well, my dad, like I said, was a cotton farmer. My brother was the oldest. We had five girls in between us. I was the youngest. And him and my mother and all the girls and my brother all played guitar or piano during all them days.

PM: Wow.

TJW: And I remember just sitting around digging it. And I never did try to participate or do anything with the music too much, I would just listen to them. And then Charles, my brother, brought home an album by Lightin' Hopkins when I was fifteen. And I'd been used to hearing this gospel and kind of country stuff, folk tune types. And then I heard that, and man, I started kind of sneaking Dad's guitar into my bedroom at night and learning those licks and playing it. So the blues thing is what hit first.

PM: Right. Because when I hear your playing, I think, well, there must be a lot of Lightin' or a lot of John Lee Hooker or both in this man's background.

TJW: Yeah, yeah. John Lee, Muddy Waters, all kinds of stuff we was listening to back there by that river. Probably this day and time, it'd be an odd scene to see a bunch of fourteen, fifteen year-old kids, at all the house parties and the high school dance and everything, all we played was blues.

PM: Oh, man. I wonder if your parents had any idea they were raising somebody who in time would become a national treasure.

TJW: [laughs] To show you an example of it, I came home from Texas, and "Polk Salad Annie" was probably about number ten in the nation, and really rocking everywhere. And my dad was sitting on the couch. He had a Prince Albert cigarette in his mouth and was

playing his old guitar, just sitting there. And I walked in the house, and you know, the greetings, and all that, and he said, "Hey, I've been hearing you singing on the radio some." I said, "Yeah. It's going all right." And he said, "Well, look, you got a wife and baby now, and I'm just wondering what you're fixin' to do for a livin'."

[laughter]

TJW: So that was the national treasure, right there.

PM: That'd give you an indication of how aware they were.

TJW: Yeah. He had no idea, because he never made anything off music. He played it all his life. I mean, maybe somebody'd pass a hat or something, but it just freaked him out when I said, "This is what I do, Dad." And he said, "You get paid for that?"

[laughter]

TJW: I said, "Yeah, man."

PM: Oh, that's amazing.

How long has your son Jody been handling your managing your career?

TJW: About nine years now, right after Roger Davies stayed with me nearly eight or ten years. And Roger kind of wanted to spend a little more time with his two baby girls growing up in Australia there. Him and Jody had been together, and he took Jody under his wing years ago. And he called me and said, "Man, you ain't going to get nobody no better than what you got there in your own son."

PM: Wow.

TJW: I thought, well, I know that. So it just kicked in. So he's been at it probably nearly a full ten years, really.

PM: He's really come up with some interesting ideas for your career the last couple of records, hasn't he?

TJW: Yeah. He had come up with all that, both things. I didn't think he could pull it off, really, because even though we're all friends for a long time, I saw these people, but the distance--and the reclusive J.J. is hard to get to do anything.

PM: Truly.

TJW: And, of course, Clapton is in England. Anyway, Jody said, "Let me just give it a shot." And the next thing I know, J.J. is sending his version back with two more verses he'd written to it.

PM: Wow. So that's how that co-write took place.

TJW: Yeah.

PM: He heard the song, and then he added some verses, that's incredible.

TJW: Yeah. See, all these songs were cut down at my old studio, late at night with me, and Loose--Swamp Man Loose [drummer Jeff Hale]--and the bass player, Robbie, and sometimes Doc--Doctor Gloom [keyboardist Carson Whitsett]--would come over on a B3. And then what we'd do, we would send each man three songs and let him choose what he liked, which one. So we sent J.J. three, and "Louvela" was one of them. And I didn't hear from him, man, for about three weeks. And then, of course, he's got a studio there in his home and everything. And he said, "I hope you don't mind, I put five guitars on this, three harmonies, electric banjo, and I wrote two more verses."

[laughter]

TJW: I thought, man, that is so cool he got into it that far.

PM: That's unbelievable. And that's a great idea to give each guy three songs, so nobody feels pressured to do a certain one. Everybody gets to pick one. Were there overlapping songs? Like some guys could have picked the same song?

TJW: No. It was a lot of different ones. I had written a bunch of tunes. Because these were a collection of songs over eight years, just demos, really. And Clapton chose "Did Somebody Make a Fool Out of You?" because he wrote back and said, "Man, I've been wanting to do that song for ten years." And he said, "And now we got a chance to do it, let's do it this way." So then I went, "Cool. Let's go."

PM: Wow. And so did he add his tracks there and send them over?

TJW: Yeah. Jody took it off of my old reel-to-reel, sixteen track-- dropped it off, took it to Protools. Jody flew over to London. And Eric had a studio rented for two days. The first day he went in and put a bunch of guitars on and did a bunch of vocals. And Jody said, "All of them were perfect, man." And he walked over and he said, "Well, we'll sleep on it, mate, and then we'll come back in here tomorrow and really fix it up."

So the next day he just come in and halfed his guitar licks, and just got it down. Simplicity--you know, he's that type, too, less is best. I mean, it's just hard to reach it, but you can hear the space in it.

PM: Right. Yeah, it makes so much difference to just have a little breathing room in between things. I saw so many bands last night where I had to walk out on them because it was like, "You're playing three times too many notes, my man."

TJW: Yeah. They don't think. It's just so cool to drop down on stage with just a drummer and sparse licks.

PM: As we were saying about your son and manger, Jody, he really came up with some outstanding ideas for your last couple of records. First *Heroines*, with all those great females, and then *Uncovered*, with all the great guys. I mean, it's just a brilliant strategy and a beautiful part of the Tony Joe White story to have done those two records. That was really brilliant.

TJW: It was for Jody. I thought it was just great. But I was looking at it totally as just my people that I admired through the years, and had continued to admire.

PM: Yeah.

TJW: And all of a sudden, he said, "Let's put them together." He said, "Name me a few." I said, "Well, heck, I'd have to name a hundred people." He said, "Well, let's just start with girls. Name me five girls." And of course, I had Tina Turner in that batch, but she was not singing at that time, she had laid back. So that's how it started, when he said that. And he said, "You know, down the line we got to hunt these men down to star in your stuff." And I said, "Well, yeah, but we'll see when we get there." And then all of a sudden the time arrives, and here we go.

PM: It's just incredible that he pulled it together, because I mean, on top of yours being a very busy schedule, I those guys--well, Waylon is now deceased, God rest him, and all the other guys are incredibly busy characters.

TJW: Real busy. And Jody, at the time, was finishing his Masters over at Belmont here. Music publishing and management, and all this, and I was going, "Man, when do you have time to sleep?" And he said, "I'm kind of like Roger, I just love every minute filled up." Well, I'll tell you right now, he has got every second filled up.

PM: Wow. He's a heck of a guy.

TJW: [laughs] It overtook him, man.

PM: And on top of being great cuts, I mean, on top of the J.J. co-write, a couple of the others were co-writes, too, the Waylon tune and the Michael McDonald tune.

TJW: The Michael McDonald, yes, the Waylon, no. The Waylon was a thing--he come out to my house about eight years ago, and he had just gotten out of the hospital with that heart thing, or the stroke or something. And Jessi was just riding him around. [Jessi Colter, Waylon's wife] And he wanted to know what I'd been doing. I says, "You know, just"--I had a couple of reel-to-reels, old ones in my bedroom back here, and a mic. And he said, "Man, I wrote this song in the hospital, and I don't know if I can play guitar or sing anymore." I said, "Well, let's go back here and turn everything on, and I'll shut the door, and you stay in there by yourself and check it out. Just hit the red button."

PM: Wow.

TJW: So he hollered at me about twenty minutes later. He said, "Come in here and check this, man." It was absolutely perfect.

PM: Whoa.

TJW: And so that song went on a reel-to-reel that already had about eight or ten of some of my old demos on it. And so it sat there and sat there, and got moved around, the studio got moved over to the old house. In the meantime, Waylon had passed away and this and that. And that's all we could even think about. We didn't think about the song. And Jody was going through some of the old stuff and found that thing, it was like an Indiana Jones archive or something.

PM: No kidding.

TJW: I said, "Where did you get that song?" He says, "This is the one you all did in the bedroom."

PM: Holy jeez.

TJW: I went "Goodnight! It was meant to be."

PM: Wow, what a beautiful story.

TJW: And what's really rough about that story is Jessi told me later after he had passed away, she said, "Before he passed away he said, 'The only I ever didn't like about Tony Joe White was he never recorded one of my songs.'"

PM: [laughs]

TJW: And now here we got it.

PM: Oh, my Lord.

TJW: So there's a lot of little inside happenings on this whole thing that's just unreal, almost magical or mystical like happenings. Like Doctor Gloom, man--Carson Whitsett--

PM: Yeah.

TJW: --our B3 player, I mean, on the front of "Did Somebody Make a Fool Out of You?" you'll hear that eerie organ.

PM: Yeah.

TJW: He had already unplugged his organ into my machine. But when Jody dropped it onto Protools, later on, it shows up as the little color response.

PM: Wow!

TJW: So Jody says, "Come in and listen to what Carson did on the end of "Did Somebody Make a Fool Out of You?" I said, "Well, he didn't do nothing." He had done it unplugged. And Jody said, "No, he was sitting over there just real quietly hitting the keys."

PM: Holy shit.

TJW: And so we got to listen. Man, it give us chill bumps because of not only the way it sounded, but the circumstances that it happened under. Doc, when he came into the studio that night, was not feeling well, but he wanted to try one song. And he got Jody to take him home right after that song. And the next morning, he calls and they had found out what was happening to him was there was a big old tumor in his head.

PM: Wow.

TJW: And so he was off into some kind of world right there. He didn't even know we'd quit playing the song or whatever. So Jody put it in the front of the Clapton tune, which makes it even more eerie sounding. But you'll be glad to know that Doc has went through all the treatments, and it shrunk everything down, and now he's back playing his organ. And me and him wrote a song three weeks ago.

PM: Wow!

TJW: So that's the good news part of that. But, gol, how freaky can it get?

PM: Oh, man. There's a lot of spooky beautiful love stories connected with those tracks.

TJW: I know it, because who can say where that thing had taken him off to at the end of that song?

PM: Right.

TJW: He was totally alone. We called his name two or three times, that we was finished with it. He didn't ever even look up.

PM: Wow. Oh, that's amazing, Tony.

Talking about co-writes and stuff, I really like that sometimes you write with your wife, Leann, and there's even a three-way with Jody that begins the record, "Run For Cover."

TJW: Yep. Leann and I, through the years, we may not write two or three songs a year, but they're always happening songs, and usually end up with somebody big or something big happens to them.

PM: Wow.

TJW: I mean, "Undercover Agent," for instance, laid around on pieces of paper all over the house for weeks and weeks where I finally started picking up on it, or even knowing what it was about.

PM: Now, does Leann write solo, too, or only with you?

TJW: She'll write a lot of things down, and then come to me, and then we'll hook the guitar up, and I'll see what's fitting what, or this and that. I may change it a little bit, or we may start a new one while we're trying to work on that one. You can't ever really put any structure on it.

PM: Yeah. Is she strictly on a lyrical side?

TJW: That's it. That's all.

PM: Yeah, right. How about on the written word side of things--do you find time or make time to read much? Do you like that?

TJW: I read a lot, yeah, especially at night, in hotels and things like that. I mean, reading--I hardly ever watch TV, so yeah, reading is my deal.

PM: Anything that turned you on lately?

TJW: I have really been into the writer James Lee Burke. He writes mostly about New Orleans, the New Orleans detective. And a lot of the characters I really like in it. Him, and also there's a guy--it's a Spanish name, we just finished a book--it was *The Book Cemetery* or something like that. God, it's great.

PM: You're an artist that tours globally and is, oddly, more appreciated around the world than he is at home. I guess it's just the culture we live in. Do you have a favorite place that you like to play, a certain spot in the world?

TJW: Well, I've always had a soft spot in my heart for Europe and Australia. Europe because it's where it first started, my first hit, and the people in France. I love to play in Australia, because it reminds me of early Texas, early Louisiana days, where people get just a little bit wilder, and get up on stage with you, and jumping.

PM: Really?

[laughter]

TJW: Yeah. It's wild, man. But then, again, I was in New Orleans and then over in Lafayette last weekend, and it was the same kind of happening. So I thought, well, that's good to know, playing in good old America, and the people are rockin', so...

PM: Yeah, they can still come out of their bag around here.

TJW: Yes, I still felt good about it.

PM: [laughs] Are you what you'd call a spiritual guy in any respect?

TJW: Yeah. I am. My church is the sky and the land and all. I'm more Indian, you know, Cherokee, than anything. So I don't go to church, but I do believe in all of it, the spirit and God, and what he's made, and everything.

PM: Well, yeah, I certainly feel like I'm talking to a very spiritual guy.

So I hope to see at least one of your shows around town this week. I know you're doing an in-store at Grimey's that I'd like to see. Is that today or tomorrow, or do you know?

TJW: That's tomorrow afternoon. I think it's at 4:00 o'clock.

PM: Okay. Well, I plan on coming out there and shaking your hand and getting to meet you.

TJW: That'd be great, man.

PM: Because I'm really, really grateful for your time this morning. And I really think the world of your music.

TJW: Well, I'm looking forward to meeting you there, and we'll hook up, then.

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