

**A Conversation with Tommy Womack
by Frank Goodman (4/2007, Puremusic.com)**

The Lord works in mysterious ways, they say. Certainly seems to be so in the life of this preacher's son.

Tommy Womack is one of the few classic rock and roll musicians of Nashville, and he's rising quickly above the radar in a surprising moment. He's a veteran of significant acts like Government Cheese (he published an underground book about those years on the road, *Cheese Chronicles: The True Story of a Rock 'n' Roll Band You've Never Heard of*) and the Bis-uits. He subsequently released several solo records, always to critical acclaim. But it's never been an easy road.

His wife Beth had a series of good jobs in the media, so they got by, with their young son. But when her situation changed, Tommy was forced to pick up his first "real" job; in his early forties, that put him through changes. Although a writer of many very funny songs, he was no stranger to depression; in fact, he had been plagued by it at various periods of his life. A couple of years back he had a nervous breakdown.

He started to write about the depression in his blog online, and even decided to quit the music business altogether, finally just hang it up. A line appeared in a blog that would become a song that would start to turn his life around: "I'm never gonna be a rock star. There, I said it."

But in this period, the careers of several of his friends were on the rise, notably Todd Snider (also interviewed in this issue) and Will Kimbrough. Todd took Tommy out on bass for some dates. His longtime association with both of these artists started to put some solo dates on the books for him and his day job began to be augmented by weekend gigs.

He'd started writing songs in a new confessional voice about what was really going on inside himself, the disillusionment with his failed career and the dread his job created on a daily basis. He made a record called *There, I Said It*, and started playing the songs live. And people started reacting to the truth and the honesty that were standing side by side the funny songs, and the gigs started increasing, and radio started to play the record. Now his day job is part time, and the gigs are getting more full time. And telling the truth in a way that artists rarely seem to do has been an unpredictable catalyst. It's moving people. We love this new record, and we really dig Tommy Womack. Check him out both in this conversation and on the Listen page. Buy this CD, and see if the truth doesn't set you free, too.

Puremusic: It's really great to talk with you today. It's a special time to be doing this.

Tommy Womack: Yes, it is.

PM: This new CD, *There, I Said It*, I've listened to it a bunch of times, it's a fantastic collection of enlightened and enlightening rock 'n' roll songs.

TW: Oh, thank you.

PM: I'd never heard anything quite like it. It's a classic example of how sometimes something you wanted so bad for so long just won't come together until you let it go, and then it starts coming toward you.

TW: Yeah, yeah. And that's exactly what happened. I totally quit. And about a year after I quit I started having gigs come at me right and left, by e-mail, by phone--no agent, me not lifting a finger, and suddenly I was working seven days a week--five days a week at Vanderbilt and every weekend, and often during the week. And now I am part-time at Vanderbilt, and about to go down to even part-part-time. And other than that, being on the road and doing what I do.

PM: Beautiful. It might even be related to getting your antennae lined up correctly so you don't repel the very thing you're looking to attract, as happens with the opposite sex sometimes.

TW: Yeah, yeah. Right. When you were going to high school dances looking to get laid you never got laid.

PM: Exactly.

TW: [laughs]

PM: Or when you know you're looking to be a rock star, and you know it should have happened, and it didn't exactly. I mean, certainly you got way further than most people do. And then when you finally lay it down, then it starts coming at you like a whole new animal.

TW: Yeah, yeah.

PM: Admitting failure I think is very difficult. I found it difficult, but it seems especially so for the many musicians I've known. I wonder why that is, that they or we seem to be more delusional than your average bear, more immature, and more prone to excess.

TW: Well, there is a rule in town that I violated. It has come out in my favor now, now with the Nashville Scene article and the record being successful, while being confessional. But before all that, I had a nervous breakdown in March of '03, and chronicled it on my website, thinking that's what John and Yoko would do.

PM: Right.

TW: And I violated an unwritten law that says, "Don't let them see you sweat."

PM: Right.

TW: And I really violated the heck out of that. I felt that vibe from a lot of people in town, that I did what you just don't do. I mean, everybody in town, if you ask them, "How's everything going?" It's always, "Oh, fantastic."

PM: Right. It's sickening.

TW: "What are you doing lately?" "Doing demos." Which means, "I'm waiting tables."

[laughter]

TW: And I violated all that, just came out clean. And now suddenly I'm the patron saint of all neurotic and scared people, struggling middle-aged musicians, so it worked out for me--thank God--because once you come out of the closet with all your fears and anxieties, there's no getting back in the closet, you're out forever.

PM: It's amazing how admission of failure turns out to be an open rather than a closed door.

TW: Yeah, it did. It opened everything up for me.

PM: And opened onto a crowd of fans that's resonating with the truth of what you're singing about.

TW: Uh-huh. And it's amazing how many people out there are scared. Somebody famous said, "Most men live lives of quiet desperation." And I guess that's true, because people are just coming up to me right and left reacting to these new songs saying, "You're talking about my life."

PM: And you know how all the greatest Motown songs were always a very simple idea emotionally stated, and that's exactly what "Never Going To Be a Rock Star" is; something really emotional, simply stated.

TW: I'll agree with you there. And it took forever to get it out of my mouth.

PM: Right. To actually say that.

TW: I've started three website rants with the very chorus of that song, "I'm never going to be a rock star"--new paragraph--"there, I said it." And I erased every one of them. I could never put that on my website. I couldn't admit what was totally obvious to the rest of the world. I mean, if you look at me, I look like your dad--a friend of your dad's. Because I am, I'm somebody's dad.

PM: Right.

TW: I'm 44 years old. But coming out and admitting it on that record, then it turns out to be the headline article on the Scene, and lo and behold maybe I'm not going to turn into a rock star, I don't know if there are even really rock stars anymore--are there?

PM: No, not like we had rock stars; no, I don't think so.

TW: No. So I don't think I'm going to turn into one. But by admitting that, boy was it freeing for a lot of people.

PM: I mean, it's basically--it's akin to coming out of the closet.

TW: Uh-huh.

PM: It's like a major figure in society saying, "Okay, so I'm gay, sue me."

TW: Uh-huh.

PM: "Okay, I'm never going to be a rock star, so shoot me." [Certainly brings to mind Beck's breakout refrain: "I'm a loser baby, so why don't you kill me..."]

TW: And people are taking it--I didn't realize this, but somebody told me the other day--but they're taking it as analogous. "I'm never going to be a rock star" could mean, "I'm never going to be a successful executive," "I'm never going to make it to the top office at my job," "I'm never going to make tenure as a professor." People are taking it as not just a rock star, per se, but as a success beyond their wildest dreams in whatever their pursuit is. So people are finding it liberating hearing it that way, too.

PM: That's amazing, Tommy, to be affecting people like that. That's got to be a surprise even to the author of the song who found it very hard to finally spit it out.

TW: Uh-huh, it is a surprise. And boy is it rewarding.

PM: Yeah, it's unbelievable.

You must be just back from South By Southwest. How did that go down there?

TW: It was awesome, Frank. I played four times. I wasn't in the actual festival, I was an outlaw. And I always have more fun at the outlaw showcases than whenever I'm in the real thing.

PM: Oh, absolutely.

TW: And I played four times. I made money.

PM: What?

TW: Yeah, yeah. That's rare--that's like a rule, you don't make money at South By Southwest. I made money. I made 485 bucks.

PM: That's funny. Where did you make money?

TW: Just selling merch.

PM: Wow!

TW: I had my duffel bag. I'd bring it on stage with me, and I'd say, "Please feel free, after the show, to visit the gift shop." And I'd hold up my duffel bag--

PM: [laughs]

TW: --and I'd zip up my guitar in its bag after my set and step off the front of the stage and start selling. And the first gig I did was Cafe Caffeine on Wednesday morning at 11:00. And I made 120 bucks before lunch.

PM: Wow.

TW: It was hilarious, it was so typically Austin. Everywhere I went, the PA wasn't set up when I got there.

PM: [laughs] And did you have to finish setting it up, or what?

TW: Well, at Cafe Caffeine, 11:00 became 11:15, became 11:30, and there were people gathered. And I thought at first, being used to being an unknown, that they were just gathered to be gathered. And a couple of them said, "Hey Tommy, when are you going to play?" And I had no idea who they were. And then I realized, they're here to see me.

PM: Wow. In Texas.

TW: And I got my guitar out in the parking lot and started playing. And I did like four or five songs au naturale, just buskin' without any electricity, and I was killin' 'em.

PM: [laughs]

TW: And then they got the PA together by four or five songs. And I did like three more from the stage, and just knocked 'em dead. And Clare, who's the owner of the coffee shop, was just really grateful for me carpe'n the diem and going ahead and starting playing instead of just petulantly waiting for the PA to get ready.

PM: Right.

TW: And every show I did after that was just as good. I played Mother Egan's Pub later that night, and did really well. And the next day was Jovita's, which was really, really good.

PM: That's a great little scene there at Jovita's.

TW: Yeah. That was the Twangfest show. And they actually had a staff to sell merch at that one, so I really racked up. I hate to sound so mercenary about it, but it's a reality of the biz.

PM: It's about making a living, man.

TW: Yeah, it's about making a living. Then I got invited, after the Cafe Caffeine show, the bass player of Buttercup saw me at that show. And they're a great band from San Antonio. They invited me to be part of something at Hot Mama's Thursday night, so I wound up with a fourth show, and just had a ball. My rental vehicle was 330 bucks, I made 485 in merch. So I cleared the rental vehicle, and then some, was able to eat all the time. I went down there with, I think, 50 bucks in my pocket, saying to myself, "I'm going to live"--usually would take 100--"No, I'm going to try and make it on 50." And I wound up just doing so well business-wise that I was never hurting. And every show has been that way since the record come out. Something has happened with this record that's never happened with any records I've ever had. The buzz is good--I've never had a record touch this one.

PM: Well, records don't usually constitute something to actually talk about. But the spirit of this record is something that everybody is talking about.

TW: Uh-huh.

PM: I mean, since I started getting into it the last few days, I found myself in various conversations all over town--like, "Have you heard this record? That's really something, that guy came out and he said it!"

TW: That's intoxicating. I love hearing that.

PM: And everybody is going, "I know! He f****n' said it! I couldn't believe that!" And so to me, I wouldn't be surprised if various songwriters say, "Well, jeez, I ought to try and get real about some stuff like that in my life and see if I can write something true about what's happening with me instead of, 'Oh, everything is great, I'm doing demos.'"

[laughter]

PM: It's amazing. So this interview was a good idea of our mutual friend Vicki Lucero of Propaganda Media down there.

TW: God bless her, yeah.

PM: Which also led to the idea of asking you to play our Puremusic show Monday night, which I'm very excited about.

TW: I am, too. I'm really excited about that. [He was great, and we hope to bring video of that and a host of other shows to you shortly.]

PM: Hey, tell us a little bit about your family, would you?

TW: Well, I've got an eight-year-old boy, who, bless his heart, we thought he was over that bug, and now he's got 103 fever. He's laying on the couch right now.

PM: Oh.

TW: He just had some sherbet. He was fine--you know this cold that's going around--

PM: Oh, murder.

TW: --that doesn't leave.

PM: People have it for a month sometimes, yeah.

TW: Yeah, yeah. And it's come back for round two or three now on him. He's a sweet boy. He's been happy to have his dad home the last--well, I've been home the last two nights. Past that I was gone for like two straight weeks. Beth has gone to the store right now to pick him up some Motrin. She and I have been together for 22 years.

PM: Holy jeez!

TW: Married for--it'll be the 15th wedding anniversary this December. She predates Government Cheese by like three months. Beth and I got together in September of '84, and Government Cheese played their first gig in January of '85.

PM: Wow.

TW: So she survived all that.

PM: She's pre-Cheese.

TW: She is pre-Cheese, yeah. I did everything I could to destroy the relationship for several years. And thank God I didn't. I mean, I changed. I am proof that scumbag musicians and other lothario husbands--I am proof you can change.

PM: Wow, because you did. And you changed early?

TW: Well, I remember my last indiscretion on the floor of Grimey's apartment.

[laughter]

TW: It was well over--it was way before we got married. I was still living in Bowling Green.

PM: [laughs]

TW: And I felt so bad the next day. I got back to Bowling Green and went up to the Newman Center near campus and started knocking on doors until I found a priest. And I'm not even Catholic.

PM: Oh, my God!

TW: And he was super Catholic on me, too, you know, no sympathy. It's like, "Well, you've done something bad, and you're going to feel bad for a while. What do you want me to do, wave a magic wand?"

PM: [laughs]

TW: And that was the last time. I so love being 44. I go on the road, and I have this old song I've been singing for years and years. It was on my first solo record. Government Cheese recorded it before that. And it's still very popular. It's called "A Little Bit of Sex." And I guess it's eternally popular because everybody likes sex. And I do a little monologue after the guitar lead section, it comes down to this sort of "Wild Thing" repetitive chord change underneath it. And I just talk about--the story changes nightly, but I basically reflect on how glad I am to be 44, and when pretty women come into the club I just sort of admire them like a fine vase, or something, and that's it. Then I go back to my hotel room, and sleep alone, and wake up feeling fine, perhaps a little undersexed, but an honest man's pillow is his peace of mind.

PM: Right.

TW: And I go home to my wife without anything on my conscience, which is great. And I think that's just part of being 44, as opposed to 24, when every girl that showed up at the gigs was a potential groupie.

PM: Right, was a mark.

TW: Yeah, yeah.

PM: How is your family different from the family you came from?

TW: I am doing the best I can to be an attentive father. My dad was a preacher.

PM: Hmm.

TW: And there are two types of preachers: ones who are happy, and as much a spiritual repository as they are a conduit. And then there are preachers who are great on Sunday morning, and then they come home and they're just spiritually empty the rest of the week. And that's what my dad was; he was a borderline sociopath.

PM: Wow.

TW: Hardly ever talked to us. At dinnertime he would come into the dining room table and turn up Walter Cronkite all the way so he could still hear the news while he was eating dinner. There was no dinnertime conversation. My mom put up with him from 1939 until he died in 2000. And he was a good man--once he realized how bad he'd screwed me up--because I was very suicidal depressed guy around the age of 19, 20--he got a clue. And he did his best the last few years of his life to patch things up with me and--

PM: How did he do that?

TW: He just started talking to me. The first time he told me he loved me when I was like 19 or 20.

PM: Oh, my God, he actually got there.

TW: Yeah, he got there. And the Telecaster I play to this day, he bought.

PM: Wow!

TW: Took me fishing for the first time when I was 20. He really worked hard once he realized--because he screwed up all us three boy kids plus the girl.

PM: And did he say, "I'm sorry," or just that he loved you?

TW: Yeah. He never fully said, "I'm sorry," but not long before he died he said, "You four kids have grown up to be good kids, and most of it comes from your mama." And that took a bit for him to admit. To this day, don't get my mom started on Dad, because she had to live with him since '39.

PM: But she's still around.

TW: Yeah, yeah. Mom is still in Madisonville, Kentucky. And I finally have another coffee shop gig in Evansville, Indiana, which is like 40 minutes up the road, which makes me happy, because I get to go home and see Mom whenever I do that gig.

PM: What's the name of that place in Evansville you play?

TW: The Penny Lane Coffeehouse.

PM: Wow. And she's all right, her health and stuff is not bad?

TW: Oh, she's falling apart. She's got no lower back to speak of. Her spine is degenerated. She's bent over all the time. She'll be 84 next month, April 23rd she'll be 84. And spiritually she's great. She was a much better preacher's wife than he was a preacher. Well, he was a good preacher at the pulpit, on stage; but off stage, no. But she's the most Christian person I've ever met. I got my sense of humor and my intelligence from her. I got my performer from Dad, because both of them grew up in Arkansas. Dad was born in 1918, Mom in '23. And if you wanted to be a performer in Arkansas in those days, you became a preacher.

[laughter]

TW: There was no repertory theater. I mean, if you were black there was the King Biscuit Radio Hour, I guess, if you could sing. But Dad couldn't sing or anything. He became a preacher. And he was a good one. I remember him preaching a whale of a sermon on Sunday morning. And he'd come home and get in that recliner, and not say a word for six and a half days. And you didn't get between him and that television if you knew what was good for you.

PM: Are you what you'd call a spiritual guy?

TW: Oh, yeah, oh, yeah. I consider There, I Said I It, in a very leftist way, my first Christian record. And I've started kind of coming out about my Christianity to people-- not to wig them out, and not to insinuate myself into the Christian music thing in Nashville, because I certainly wouldn't fit. I use a lot of dirty words, and I question the Resurrection in track nine.

PM: Right, absolutely. [laughs]

TW: But I grew up with it. And everybody needs some sort of spiritual center, whether they consider it God with a capital "G," or if they get it through gardening, or whatnot. [to Beth] He just went in his bedroom, sweetie. I don't know--I guess he's laying down, I don't know. [to Frank] My wife just walked in the door.

PM: Yeah.

TW: Kroger had no Tylenol. Hmm.

PM: That sucks.

TW: So I would like to be instrumental--this may be a little delusional--I'm not Martin Luther or anything--but I'd like to help Christianity go kicking and screaming into the 21st century.

PM: Wow.

TW: And I like proclaiming it--well, I don't proclaim it--I don't witness at my shows, I don't lead a prayer, I don't do anything like that. But I do kind of like bringing it up now because I like putting across the notion to people that Jesus is not a member of the GOP.

PM: [laughs]

TW: And not every Christian is, either. [to Beth] What are you looking for, sweetie? I haven't seen it. [to Frank] She's looking for the thermometer. Our boy had 103 temp when we got home.

PM: That's scary.

TW: Yeah, yeah. I mean, when I picked him up at daycare, I felt the back of his neck. I just put my arm around him as a regular matter of course, and got a little second degree burn on my fingers from his neck. He was like an oven.

PM: Damn.

TW: So she's in there taking his temperature now. And I think Mom is going to be staying home from work with him tomorrow, because I can't. I got a Belmont Internship Fair from 9:00 to noon.

PM: For whom?

TW: For me.

PM: Ah.

TW: I'm going to try to find me an intern at Belmont to come work with me at my house.

PM: Did you have to pre-register and get a table and all that stuff?

TW: Uh-huh, exactly.

PM: Yeah.

TW: I want somebody to help get my files in order and get my music room in order. And in exchange, in addition to the three hours college credit they would get, I am a repository of--

PM: The music business.

TW: The music business. I can pontificate at length to this youth and scare them to death.

PM: Yeah, from a unique point of view.

TW: And urge them to change their major.

[laughter]

PM: Speaking of track nine, "Alpha Male," that's like the perfect rock 'n' roll version of a talking blues, the real precursor to rap.

TW: Uh-huh, it is a talking blues. It was written as somewhere between a talking blues and a Kerouac number. I wrote it at a bar in Franklin, while a friend's band was playing. And I was sitting at the bar. I don't drink anymore, so I got to do things to occupy myself when I'm sitting at a bar--which is probably not the wisest place to sit at. But I was seized with this writing, and I had the bartender spit me out two strips of cash register ribbon, two feet long apiece.

PM: [laughs]

TW: And I filled up the front and back of both strips, an equivalent of four feet of cash register ribbon, front and back. And that's "Alpha Male."

PM: That's classic.

TW: And very little of it changed from that original scribble. I wrote it at the bar there in about the time it takes to sing it three or four times. It all just spilled out.

PM: Wow.

TW: And it's very stream of consciousness. And the great thing about stream of consciousness is that you don't have an outline to follow, you just--

PM: Let it roll.

TW: You just let it roll. And it went from--I remember reading it in a van to a couple of friends right after I'd written it down. I got an e-mail from one of them the other day, they're just thrilled to death they were there at the birth of the baby.

PM: Wow! Yeah, it's like "Subterranean Homesick Blues," or something.

TW: Uh-huh.

PM: It just kind of rolls that way.

I know you're a very good prose writer. Is reading something you like to do and make time to do?

TW: I wish I had more time to do it. I love to read. One of my favorite things in the world is to be in bed with Beth and Nathan asleep--yes, he still sleeps with us a lot of the time--

PM: Wow.

TW: --which I hope we're not scarring him for life. But it's kind of cozy. We got to admit we kind of like it.

PM: Yeah.

TW: But one of my favorite things in the world is they're both asleep, I'm still awake in bed with a bowl of Doritos--because you can't have the bag in bed, it makes all that noise.

PM: Right, it crinkles.

TW: So I pour some Doritos in a bowl. And I do a lot of historical biographies. Abraham Lincoln is a particular favorite.

PM: Wow.

TW: And reading--now that things are changing in my life where my mind is not stressed out all the time--working at Vandy all the time really stressed me out a lot. I couldn't leave it at the door when I left at night.

PM: Ouch.

TW: And it messed with my ability to read. And now that things are getting better--I haven't been this relaxed in years. I'm eating better. I'm feeling better. I'm doing what I want to do. This record is doing well. I really feel like I've finally knocked a hole all the way through the wall after 22 years. So I'm feeling a little new peace of mind, which I think is going to be conducive to doing what I want to do, which is get back into fiction. I

like having read fiction once I've done it. Fiction is always--you got 30 pages of investing your time, wondering, "Am I going to give a fuck about these characters in this situation. It's fiction, it's made up." Whereas historical biographies, I'm just a junkie for them.

PM: Right.

TW: Because I already know the character I'm reading about, I know that I'm interested in it. And the one I'm reading right now is called *The Misquoted Jesus*. I bought that at the airport.

PM: Oh, that's a good book. I just bought that myself.

TW: Oh, really?

PM: Yeah.

TW: I started that on the plane ride to Austin, so I'm into that. I've had *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle.

PM: Oh, one of my other favorite books!

TW: I hadn't read it yet. It's on the side of the table. And I've got this Abraham Lincoln oral biography, which was originally published in the '30s, and it's all first-person accounts.

PM: Wow.

TW: Everything in it is somebody who talked to Lincoln that day and wrote it down in their journal, or wrote it in a letter, or it's a saved piece of correspondence. It's all first-person, first generation.

PM: Oh, my God.

TW: No Carl Sandburg--nothing is twice removed. And Lincoln endlessly fascinates me. He's my favorite rock star in a lot of ways.

PM: [laughs] He's one of your role models.

TW: Yeah, yeah, totally. I'm always asking, "What would Lincoln do?" He was a bandleader's bandleader.

PM: [laughs]

So which way do you see this wagon train rolling now?

TW: The Village Voice quote last week was great: "Think Spalding Gray if he grew up in Kentucky with a guitar and a vinyl copy of *Black and Blue*." I like the notion of evolving a show that goes from spoken word to jam band, where you're going to get a great bit of rock 'n' roll at the end. Like a Springsteen show, no matter how much angst and lecture he

puts you through during the show, you know you're going to get your reward at the end with "Devil With the Blue Dress," and "Twist and Shout."

PM: [laughs]

TW: You know that's going to come. So I see a show like that coming--I'm already giving readings from *Cheese Chronicles* and other essays as part of the show. And we play my tunes, and we stretch them out a bit. And I see skits eventually as part of it. Because we already have a couple. We've got a couple of routines--like I said, during "A Little Bit of Sex," I tell stories. And Lisa, my harmony singer, has her parts that she throws in. She knows her lines. And my drummer is great with sound effects, just leaning down into a snare microphone which has reverb on it. And it turns out to be things like, well, Zappa's "Titties and Beer," little skits within the songs, something fun for the audience to get them to laugh, so that not everything is so heavy all the time.

PM: Right.

TW: And I see it going there. I'd like eventually to have the kind of show and audience that might come see me over and over again because my confessional songs make them realize they're not alone, and they get a big comfort out of that. So I could see doing a show where people come see me just to see, "What is Tommy going to say tonight?" Because I already have a bit of a rep as, "What will he do next? What will come out of his mouth next?" I'm a big Bill Hicks fan. I'm a big, big fan of that kind of honesty. I've found honesty is my stock and trade now, through having originally chronicled my breakdown on the website. And like I said, you can't put that genie back in the bottle. I am forever now "Tommy Womack, the open book."

PM: Right.

TW: So I can see that as always being part of the shows. And a mixture of spoken word, skits, entertainment, and a lot of great music, and really making people feel good about themselves when they leave.

PM: It's a beautiful thing. And you're the guy for the job, Tommy. I can't wait to see you play our show on Monday night. And I really, really appreciate you taking the time to talk tonight. I look forward to having you on the cover.

TW: It's my pleasure, Frank.

PM: Okay, Tommy, you take care. Hey to Beth. And I'll see you on Monday night, my man.