Folk Alliance 2002 by Frank Goodman (Puremusic 4/2002)

Once a year, a large percentage of singer songwriterdom and the overgrown cottage industry around it converge at a hotel for what business people call a convention. It's in a different location every year, this year in Jacksonville, Florida. My girl Annie and I drove down from Nashville, got to the Adams Mark Hotel well in front of the throng of song, and got lucky with a riverfront room with a sliding door that allowed a fresh warm breeze all weekend.

I found the soiree a little more daunting than I did inspiring, but you can see a lot of great people play in very intimate settings. Hotels of past years had better setups for meeting people, I'm told—big center rooms for networking that led off to myriad showcase rooms, and the like. In the Adams Mark, there were a handful of floors where many normal and suite style rooms hosted a running schedule of performers from noon to six, and from eleven until two or three in the morning, sometimes later. So-called guerilla showcases were not permitted from 8 to 11 p.m., when the formal Folk Alliance showcases were being held in a nearby theater. Personally, I was not that interested in those, and we only went down to catch the amazing Billy Jonas, who was great, as usual. Nice theater, though, and the sound was good. We saw some of Rosie Flores, too, who played a typically sharp set with a good band.

Folksingers—it's a misnomer at worst, and misleading at best. Today, it means anyone who plays and sings with an acoustic instrument in their hands. And, if you do that, this is where you go to meet and play for the booking agents, radio programmers, and small label owners who specialize in it. Also to see your friends, make new ones, survey the competition, and commiserate. Someone told me the Folk Alliance was buskers playing for the homeless, and everybody wants a dollar.

That's the deal, really. Folk music today, or the acoustic scene, has a lot of passionate and talented people on the artistic and the business end, but there isn't much money changing hands. Sure, if you're Fleming Tamulevitch booking Ani DiFranco and Greg Brown, or if you're Richard Thompson playing solo to 400 people at The Ark at $35 apiece, that's different. But those exceptions are a fraction of one percent of the number of artists trying to play this kind of music.

Folk also encompasses many kinds of ethnic and instrumental artists, from Celtic to Cajun and free form guitar, folk dancing of various cultures, performance art (see our review of Billy Jonas this issue), and various kinds of bands. It's kind of a hopeless mishmash, really, with very few dollars to spread around to keep the artists alive. But a large number of people have it in their blood to play this music, especially to be singer songwriters. On the one hand, it's what keeps the scene going. On the other, it's what's pulling it down. In the 60s, there was a huge audience for Folk music, but today it's a very small part of the music scene. So an ever growing number of performers seem to be competing for an ever shrinking audience. But because of a surprising number of volunteers of all kinds, a growing national network of people who host house concerts, and a very committed artistic community, the scene continues.

Like most people there, I was playing showcases of my own, but I did make time to enjoy shows featuring Richard Julian, Annie Gallup, Louise Taylor, Ray Bonneville, Annie Lalley, and The Sherpas. I also kept appointments to interview two recently lauded songwriters, Phil Roy and Arthur Godfrey. They're very different characters, and well worth the read. Phil was chosen Artist of the Year by the Independent Music Awards and Arthur won the John Lennon Songwriting Contest this year in the Folk category. Phil is an extremely savvy songwriter who spent 20 years writing and getting cut by major artists in L.A. and then became a singer songwriter and Indie Artist. Arthur is a relentless singer songwriter currently residing in the Santa Cruz, CA area who has been at it for many years while his day job in the Post Office (eventually becoming a Postmaster for quite a few years) moved him around from place to place. We believe songwriters and fans of the genre will find their stories and opinions interesting, we certainly did.

Interview with Phil Roy

[As we sit down after rustling up some food at the breakfast buffet, Phil is saying how this is a new world to him, folk world and Folk Alliance, and that's he's seen a lot of talent around. We sat down next to Richard Julian and Mia Adams, Richard and Phil knew each other from past gigs.]

Phil Roy: Until six months ago, I never heard of the Northeast Folk Alliance, or the National Folk Alliance, or…

Puremusic: The folk nothin.

PR: The folk…no. It's off the radar of the nuts and bolts music industry that I was swimming in. I was aware of some of the artists, because I love good songwriting. But mostly people whose careers had begun a while back. Not many of the more recent figures. I know Richard here, we played together in Philly.

PM: Is it fair to say that it's only recently that you began to consider yourself a singer songwriter, that before that you were strictly a songwriter?

PR: That is true. The singer part I've always done, but never committed to making my own records. I would help other singer songwriters finish their records. The last records I worked on were with Guster [an excellent folk rock outfit], I wrote or co-wrote 3 songs on that, and one by Acoustic Junction, a band that's been around a long time, and Adam Cohen, on Columbia. So maybe I considered myself a singer songwriter, but not an active one. Until I made my record. That's all I want to be now.

PM: What precipitated the decision to make your own record, *Grouchyfriendly*?

PR: I got to a real crossroads, professionally. I was going to have to alter the music I was writing to make a living. My friends were having big success writing for groups like 'NSync, Christina Aguilera, and Brandy. I had the skills to do that, and have operated in

that world. For a long time, I made a pretty good living at it. But for me, that really wasn't an option any longer. I was sick of trying to chase a hit. The rooms here are not filled with people trying to have a hit. Just people trying to make music, trying to write a good song. For twenty years in L.A., I was well rewarded for writing good songs. I had writing deals with big publishers, big artists and big films were involved. I sold a lot of records with people like Joe Cocker, I had the first single on his record that sold a couple of million copies, it's called "The Simple Things."

PM: Did you cowrite that with someone?

PR: Yes, I'm a big cowriter. I wrote that with John Shanks, who just produced the last Chris Isaak record, and Rick Nair. They actually had a track already done, and I wrote the lyric and the melody. I did that a lot, I was the word and melody guy.

PM: That's a great way to cowrite.

PR: Yeah, it is. It's like a crossword puzzle. Besides the Cocker cut, Widespread Panic and Pops Staples both covered "Hope in a Hopeless World."

PM: How did Widespread Panic happen to cut that song, what's that story?

PR: They thought Pops Staples wrote it. See, it's an old school thing. When guys of Pops' vintage cut a song, they just put their name on it, and that's how it looked in the credits: Pops Staples, Phil Roy, and Bob Thiele.

PM: But that's not how the copyright read.

PR: Right, and it wasn't the way the publishing went. But that's just the way it was done back then.

The Neville Brothers cut four of my tunes.

PM: Let's go over those.

PR: On an A&M album called *Family Brew* they cut "Let My People Go," which was also on the live Neville Brothers record, and "Day to Day Thing." They cut "It takes More" and they also cut one called "Good Song." And Aaron Neville did a song called "My Brother, My Brother," which is on his *Grand Tour* record, which went platinum.

PM: So the Nevilles have been very good to you. Did all those cuts exceed the salary you were drawing?

PR: The state of the industry being what it is, I'm not embarrassed to say that it did not. I recouped in one out of the five publishing deals I was in, my EMI deal. But most people don't recoup their draw.

PM: That's true even in Nashville, where the draws are much smaller.

PR: I would hear about that from my Nashville cowriters. We didn't call it a draw in L.A., simply an advance. It's true, the deals I had as a pop writer for EMI or SONY, it's like what the higher echelon writers in Nashville get. [Phil actually depressed the pause button on the recorder while we swapped some figures, excellent L.A. move.] The thing about it is, the three years I was with SONY, I had dozens of records come out. I was doing my job. I could only get the cuts, I wasn't in control of how much promotion a record would get, or what the single would be, would a video be made, would a vigorous radio promotion work for or against me, and many other factors that determine how a cut actually earns. So it was frustrating sometimes. You could have a really big fish on the line, and sometimes he just wiggles off and swims away. And you can get all the cuts in the world, but all that matters to the publisher in the end is how much of that advance did you earn back when the numbers were all in. That's the bottom line. Those days are completely different than what I'm doing now.

PM: Whether it's as lucrative or not, it's got to be much more fulfilling to be an artist.

PR: It's much more fulfilling. [We get sidetracked a minute by the ketchup incident, nearly start a song called "Needs Never Die," and resume, backtracking.] So anyhow, it had gotten to a point where I was ready to leave the business in a hole—I was ready to get out. [Greets an indie radio promotion guy a few tables away, begs off a conversation by pointing to the tape recorder, it's a convention.] So, I'd been working on these big projects that had huge expectations. I have high expectations now, but they're different. I have expectations to show up at a club and see a couple hundred people show up. That's a reality I'm very happy with. I was used to trying to nail a single on a record that was shooting to sell a couple of million copies, and that's hard to do.

PM: By an artist you may or may not particularly respect.

PR: That's right. But there is a thing about working musicians. I don't mean to demean anyone's craft, but say you and I write a song. We get a boy band to cut it. All of a sudden, I think "Wow, listen to the way that chorus comes in…"

PM: Suddenly, that group sounds pretty damn good.

PR: Suddenly, we now have some financial peace. But it's like going to Vegas. Like Nashville, where hundreds or more songs are written every day. How many of those are gonna get a Martina McBride cut? A very small fraction. I want to make my records, singer songwriter records. They're not folk records.

PM: No, your stuff is more soul, R&B based, more urban.

PR: Right, but there's a lot of guitars and stories. So I think there's a sufficient folk element there, you know.

PM: Did you know you were writing your own record when the songs for *Grouchyfriendly* started to gather? Or did a group of songs that weren't as pitchable to others start to look like your own record?

PR: Well, most of the record was written for something else, probably 90 percent. I could go through track by track and tell you what project each had been written for.

PM: Songwriters might find that very interesting, as well as fans of the genre.

PR: One of my last L.A. scenarios was something that I was really excited about, and it brought on a nervous breakdown at the end. That's a strong word, but it did induce some level of temporary mental illness. [laughs] I got a call from Hans Zimmer, one of the biggest composers worldwide for film. This year alone he did *Pearl Harbor* and *Blackhawk Down.* He's the President of Music Into Film at Dreamworks. The call was about a new animated feature coming out this year, which Paul Simon had already done some work on. The ball got passed around a lot, and Brian Adams ended up with the job. But I got a call when Paul was still on the project. I was asked in to look at some very rough animation and storyboards in progress, and I worked on the project for several months. I thought that I had finally gotten a big break, and it all fell apart for me, ultimately. I mean, the last songwriter on a big Dreamworks animated feature was Elton John. So I thought I was entering a new league, being asked to write songs for an animated feature, like *The Lion King.*

PM: So how did it fall apart?

PR: It just fell apart as part of a process. Every step of the way it can fall apart. The music I did for it was some of the best work I'd ever done, with a man named Gavin Greenaway, who continued to work on it. If it wasn't for the work I'd done with Gavin for this film, and the introduction to Gavin by Hans Zimmer, I don't think I'd be talking with you right now. I got so hurt and so angry that these songs were going to sit on a shelf, I just thought, "Hell with it, I'm gonna make my own record." "Show Me the Way Home," and "Where Do We Go From Here" which was co-written with Hans Zimmer, are both songs from that project that ended up on *Grouchyfriendly.* "Everything My Heart Desires" was from the film *As Good As It Gets.* You know the movie? Okay, well, the part where Jack Nicholson is saying "You make me want to be a better man…"

PM: The best part of the movie.

PR: That song is playing in the back of that scene, for seven minutes. You'll hear a woman singing it, named Danielle Brisebois. No one really heard it, it was on the soundtrack record that didn't really sell. So I decided I would put it on my album. So probably ten out of thirteen songs on the record were written for those and similar projects. "It's Alright" was originally written for Adam Cohen's project. But I finally realized I couldn't do it anymore, that I couldn't take it anymore. "Why do I write all these songs and nobody hears them?"

So I gave them a voice, and made an album in the old fashioned sense of making an album, which is an art form. It's not about singles. You make a record. Something about my instincts must have been right, because people are really responding. I knew that it must not sound like anything else, and that it should be on the quiet side. I knew that the only chance I had at 41 in the folk and acoustic pop world was to be uniquely myself. And you saw the press and the compilations I got on with a lot of big names at the top of AAA and acoustic pop scene, without a manager or a label, without a publicist.

PM: So how did your record get so many places without all those things?

PR: I did have one person I think you should mention. There's a company called Sound Advisors [www.soundsdvisors.com]. Louise Coogan and Peggy O'Brien. Louise was an on-air personality in NYC and an independent AAA radio promoter. Peggy was a music business attorney. They saw a need for people who were between novices and people with major deals, in the arena of career development. One of the first things I did was send the CD to Music Choice, which is MicroSongs. On satellite dishes, you get all these music channels. One of the little channels is "Unsigned." So I figure that's me, and I send it in. I didn't hear anything for two months, and then the phone rang. The woman at the other end of the phone said, "My name is Louise Coogan. I host the show on Direct TV. I have submissions piled up to the ceiling. You are the first one I have ever picked up the phone and called. Who are *you*? This is fantastic." It was one of the first indications that maybe I had done something very good. The very first indication was that Tom Waits liked it very much, and gave me that beautiful quote.

PM: How did that happen?

PR: I'd known Tom and his wife Kathleen through friends, intermittently, for about ten years. One time we ran into each other after a show of his, and Kathleen said, "You know, Phil, you've written for all these big people, but we don't know what you do. We don't know what your music sounds like. Please send us some music." And so, instead of putting my Ray Charles or Joe Cocker cuts on a CD for them, I put together six or seven songs of what I considered to be me. Not necessarily successful tunes, but ones I liked. And he called me back a couple of days later, to say they really loved it. They're both really amazing people, and it was a beautiful thing he did for me, there. It was a time in my life when I was very confused. That phone call gave me enough encouragement to go ahead and finish the record. And his generous quote when the record was done made it possible to get others to listen to what I'd recorded. The film director Wim Wenders also came to the table with a quote, as did Leonard Cohen.

PM: What's the story there?

PR: Wim, in a restaurant. In L.A, these things are more normal. One of my co-writers on the record, Nicholas Klein, wrote the music for the last two Wenders movies.

PM: Well, sure, Nashville has that in its own smaller way. My first day in town, I sat down with a sandwich at a deli. To my right were The Judds, and to my left was F. Lee Bailey. I thought: "I'm gonna like it here."

PR: Of course, there you go. Absolutely right. But naturally, the Hollywood thing is the Hollywood thing. So I gave Wim my record at a gallery one day, very humbly, I'd met him before. I didn't hear anything more about it. Two or three weeks later, I saw him in this restaurant. He came over to my table and said, "I love your record—it's incredible." But you know, you just never know. You send a CD out sometimes. You may not hear back right away. If I hadn't had the good fortune to run into Wim at that restaurant, I wouldn't have known that the disc was knocking him out.

PM: So, how did you turn that good fortune into a good quote for your press kit?

PR: I just basically told him how much it meant to me that he liked my record, and that his words might help other people hear my music. If it was possible that he might say something about it that I could quote, that would be very cool, if not, totally cool. You know what I mean? It's a tricky situation.

PM: Nicely done, though. "Your words might help other people hear my music…" I like that.

PR: I'd been in the music business for a long time. By this time, I knew that I'd made a pretty good record. But I'm just another guy with another CD. And there's way too many of them now. When you and I were coming up, no one made their own album—how could you make your own album? Press the vinyl?

PM: It seemed like having your own TV show.

PR: Yeah, how could you do that? Well, now you can even do that, on the local access channel. Or you can put it on the Internet.

PM: That's coming up for Puremusic, I'm pretty sure of that.

PR: Oh yeah, I see it now. So, we both agree, there's too much music out there. Everyone has access to little $500 4 track digital recorders and CD burners. Everyone has a guitar. I think it's one of the problems with the music business right now. It's very hard for the people in decision making positions to actually know what to listen to, to listen to it, and figure out what to do about any of it, if anything.

PM: Even on the gig booking level, I'm hearing that the little club owners are just overwhelmed and getting burnt out by the volume of music hitting their desk and the relentless follow up of far too many singer songwriters. Like publishers, they just get good at saying "no."

PR: Even with my credits, which are pretty good, the doors still didn't open. You can list all the records your songs have been on, all the films they've been in, the good quotes…didn't make the difference at first. The thing that got it moving for me was when my friend David gave my record to a DJ on KCRW in Los Angeles, which is a very hard nut to crack. It's the eclectic NPR station in Los Angeles. They have every radio promoter in the world trying to get their stuff on there. Promoters are being paid lots of money to get their stuff played on KCRW. Anyhow, they started playing "Melt" on KCRW, and the phone lines lit up. Then the other DJs started playing it. Almost all the DJs at the station had a copy of *Grouchyfriendly.* Then the DJ sent it to his friend in Philadelphia, at WXPN [another hard nut to crack], and David Dye at The World Café started playing it in heavy rotation, as did WXPN. Then WFUV in NYC [Fordham University in NJ, but the eclectic station in the metropolitan area]. And Jody Denber of KGSR in Austin, Texas added the record. The indications were that I had what could have been a very big record in the hands of a big company that was really behind it in a promotional campaign. That's where David Gray started. People started to draw possible similarities. But on the David Gray record, he had everything in place. He had Dave Matthews' label, he had a manager, he had distribution and marketing, publicity and promotion. And it takes every bit of that to really play that kind of ball. So, I was sitting there with something extraordinary happening, but without any of the infrastructure of real success in place.

PM: What kept you from rushing to get it in place at that point?

PR: It was all happening pretty fast. I'd never played NYC before, and my first show there was headlining The Bottom Line. And it was a pretty big deal. Then I got offered a few record deals that almost anyone at this conference would have been over the moon about. But since I'd been around the music industry for so long, I knew that they were just wrong. I just couldn't believe what they were offering in the folk, singer songwriter world for a record deal. Compared to what they would offer in the pop world, it was a horrible insult. Pennies in the pocket. I would give away my album for free, I've already made it, and I'm not that into money. Money is not the root of my ambition. But I'd need to see some commitment from a company to promote the records before I'd entertain the idea of signing a serious deal with them. It's about promotion. I mean, I have your CD right here. This might be the folk album of the year. But if no one knows about it, no one knows about it. So I was very adamant about certain things. Plus, there's a certain amount of respect that someone shows you by showing you how much they want to pay you for what you're bringing to the table. This is how they show how they value it. And I felt a lack of respect. Like I said, if I felt it was someone with the right intentions, I'd put up my record for free.

PM: Were any of these bigger companies miffed when you said "Thanks, but no thanks"?

PR: Well, it's a long story that we won't be able to get into here, but another big company came along. They basically said, "Phil, we love you, we love what you do, we believe in you as an artist. We're gonna distribute your music all over the world. You're

gonna have everything you need to have people all over the world exposed to your music." And I waited a year for it to come about. After many promises, that division of the company literally folded. The dot com meltdown, the repercussions of September 11th, it's just business. Anyhow, it didn't happen. And I understand. But I put my eggs in that basket, and believed it was gonna lift off like a big balloon. The people were good people. And they showed their respect by what they paid me for my trouble to honor their agreement in the only way they felt they could at the time. They didn't have to do that, but they chose to do it, because they knew I was struggling by that point. This independent songwriter thing is not like having a big advance, or even a steady draw. I don't have a publishing deal right now, but I'm waiting and looking for the right one.

Anyhow, but if you look at what's happened with the record, you can see I've managed to get a lot of action. There's a Phil Roy song on 120,000 units of various compilations out right now.

PM: Did you get on one of those HearMusic deals?

PR: 40,000 copies of the HearMusic/Starbucks compilation, Volume 6. And on that record are Lucinda Williams, Ryan Adams, Charles Mingus, the Blind Boys of Alabama…I'm right where I want to be. 20,000 copies of World Café Volume 11, with David Gray and Dar Williams, Indigo Girls. And me. "Why Do We Make It So Hard" got on 50,000 copies of the Paul McCartney/Garland Appeal benefit CD for breast cancer research [www.garlandappeal.com]. But mostly it's the song "Melt" that's made it onto these compilations.

Like most songwriters, when that box of 1000 copies of *Grouchyfriendly* showed up at my door from UPS, I had no idea what I was gonna do with them. Give some to friends…sell 'em, who's gonna wanna buy one? And now, I've had to order 8000 of them.

PM: Is there good distribution out there for *Grouchyfriendly*?

PR: If you go to a record store, you can order it. A company called Phantom Sound and Vision carries it. But it's not the kind of thing where it's in stock at Tower records. That's been the hardest part of the whole deal, distribution. Because for the small distributors to handle it, they want to make sure it doesn't get returned. That means that it has got to sell, and the best way to make sure it sells is to put some marketing money into the product. They want to know that you have a little war chest of money to do a little promotion before they get involved.

PM: Like the Tower Records Listening Station.

PR: Right, it costs four grand.

PM: I know, we did that one time.

PR: Was it worth it?

PM: No. Sold some records, got us some gigs, but no. Especially at the time.

PR: And you know, I don't have any extra right now. I'm running lean, making a new record, spent twelve hundred bucks to come to Folk Alliance, you know? Or whatever it was. I wish I woulda saved some when I was making that big money.

PM: How is Zassafrass doing for you? [A very good booking agency, Crow Johnson and Carol Florida. They also handle Louise Taylor, Ray Bonneville, and other notable artists.]

PR: You know, they're getting me gigs and doing a really good job. They seem to be very well respected by this crowd of people, too. [At this point Michael Lille walks up, a fine singer songwriter who does Artist Relations for Elixir Strings, and we all shoot the breeze awhile before resuming.]

So, one thing I hope your readers get from this interview is that this stuff that's happening to me can happen to them. It's an important thing to know, that if you can make a record that touches people and you get a break, something can happen. I'm becoming the poster boy for that. If you just make a record that's good, chances are that nothing is gonna happen. Something has to be exceptional about it, a song or a performance, something—and you have to catch a break, like I did with my friend giving the tape to a DJ. Just one song done exceptionally can be so much more important than going in and laying fifty down pretty well. There's too much music out there. But it is still possible to be an independent artist and get on the radio, and go to NYC for the first time and headline The Bottom Line. Louise Coogan of Sound Advisors hooked the gig up, don't try to do it alone. She talked to Alan Pepper, and because of all the play I was getting in WFUV, the room was full. Herbie Hancock was at my stage door after the show to tell me how much he liked the show; it's one of the highlights of my life.

PM: That's too much. Did you do that show with the guys from the record? We need to talk about them.

PR: Those guys…I mean, people respond well to my solo show, and I can do all the songs from the record. But I can't play like those guys. I went to music school, I'm a pretty good guitar player, but I'm a songwriter. Maybe I should practice some more, I'm seeing a lot of really good guitar players down here. The guys on the record—don't listen to me, or the songs, just listen to the guys on the record. Because they are all artists unto themselves.

First of all, Heitor Pereira is among the most consummate guitarists one could ever meet. He's on the new Willie Nelson record. Willie's manager called Heitor up and told him, "Willie thinks you're the best guitarist he's ever played with." I introduced him to Hans Zimmer, and he's been on every film that Hans did in the last year and a half. We were trying to put a band together, and some of this music came out of that, we cowrote a lot of the record.

Ricardo Silveira is another amazing guitarist. Ricardo and Hector are friends from Brazil. Ricardo is a little older, and was at one point a kind of mentor to Heitor. They hadn't played together in eight years. Ricardo just happened to be in town when I was recording. So I knew that if I could get the two of them in a recording session, that something special would happen. I put a 1913 Washburn in Heitor's hands, and a 1956 [Martin] 0-18 in Ricardo's hands. So these old American guitars were in the hands of these Brazilian virtuosos. They'd never played a note of these songs together before. We ran it a couple of times, pushed "record" and that's what happened.

That changed my life—that's why I'm married, that's why I'm on the radio, that's why I'm here. "Melt," which opened all the doors, was cut with a vocal and two guitars. The bass and violin were both overdubs. [Bassist] John Leftwich is another virtuoso, he's played with everyone from Freddie Hubbard to Lyle Lovett, and was Rickie Lee Jones' musical director for seven years. Buddy of mine for fourteen years. There are a number of other very talented players on the record, but the essential quartet is those three guys and myself.

Julian Coryell, son of Larry and one of the best singer songwriters out there, is also instrumental on the new record. I waited so long for people to cut my tunes, and it was important for me to put an outside song on the new record, and I picked one of Julian's, called "Nothing Left to Use."

PM: Are you going to put out the new record yourself?

PR: Have to, didn't want to. I'm not a flag waving Indie Artist, but I'm not waiting for anybody's permission anymore, either. I did that my whole life. I'm not waiting for their budget, or their idea about what tunes to put on the record, or what the single or the video will be. I've stopped waiting for people's permission to do music.

Interview with Arthur Godfrey

[When we first met, I didn't recognize Arthur. People frequently don't look like their press photos. He excused himself, as he had a stamped addressed postcard to his wife that he was walking over to the reception desk to have added to the morning post. Although never on stage, Arthur does stutter somewhat in one to one conversation. We handled that without any ado, and began a fast friendly discourse. He was very warm, and diffidently engaging, with a strong Boston accent.]

Arthur Godfrey: I was lucky in November, I found out that I had placed second in the Billboard International Song Contest in the Country/Folk division. It was with a song "Danielle," from the *East Side of Town* CD. This contest stipulated that entrants could not have made more than ten thousand dollars that year from songwriting. Not from gigging, but publishing. By contrast, the Lennon contest was open to everyone, regardless. I believe that contest to be hundreds of thousands strong. In the Billboard contest, there are

eight categories. The Folk and Country categories are combined, for instance. They take the top three winners from each category, and they appear at the Bluebird Café in Nashville, which was a thrill for me. The biggest deal for me was that all 24 winners are placed on the Billboard CD of the Year, which went out to 500 of the biggest Music Reps in the business, from radio and press to management and booking. And I liked the way they treated the first, second, and third place finishers equally. It was an amazing year. I only entered two song contests this year; I won one and placed second in the other. And I entered each of them a day or two before the deadline.

The Lennon Contest had twelve categories, but only the top finishers won prizes. We all got a contract with EMI [with a 5k advance], Yamaha recording gear, and a $2000 cash prize. We all go to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in June for a big ceremony, and Maxell presents an additional $20,000 prize to the song they consider the overall winner. [Lennon contest website is www.jlsc.com] The judges in the Lennon contest include celebrities like Elton John and Billy Joel. Yoko started it five years ago in John's memory. You get a letter from her agency embracing you into the family that says, "It is our goal now to help you achieve your dream of being a songwriter, in John's memory."

Yoko came through the Monterey [CA] area last year with a lot of John's paintings, and 15 of his songs that he had handwritten, and made a thousand prints of each one, beautifully framed. Before the prints, they made 24 total proofs. [We go through a rather long ordering process with our waitress, and Arthur returns with full attention to the spot where he left off, as if no break had occurred.] They had stuff ranging from a $500 scribble of John's to very expensive paintings. I love the song "I'm So Tired," and they'd already sold 987 of the thousand prints of that song, since they'd been to many cities on the tour. I explained to the lady my love for John and his work, and she made it possible for me to purchase one of the 24 proofs, the one for "I'm So Tired," which I have on my piano at home. So I'm looking at this amazing document, signed by John and Yoko, when the call comes in about having won the John Lennon Songwriting Contest. Maybe that sounds corny, but it was surreal.

Puremusic: When you got the call, was it out of the blue, or had you some warning?

AG: Well, I'd just hit the Billboard thing, and I had a good feeling. About a month ago, I received a call that said I was in the running, that I'd made the final 25. So I just wanted to place. They said the winners would be going up on the Internet at midnight, I think, it was going to be 9 p.m. California time. It was a couple of weeks ago, on a Tuesday. I checked the web at 9:01, and it said "Grand Prize Winner: Arthur Godfrey." You just go into shock, you know.

PM: Since many of our readers are themselves songwriters, many will want to know: "Who is Arthur Godfrey, anyway?" So let's tell them, where you came from, and where you're coming from.

AG: Well, I'll give you some press that tells you a lot about my background, and you can share what you think is appropriate. I will tell you that I don't do the pretty boy thing. I'm

more often compared to Tom Waits, Bruce Springsteen, Joe Cocker sort of thing. [My mind reeled, trying to draw a quick parallel between these three characters.] Besides my own songs, the songs I sing are Woody Guthrie, John Prine, Townes Van Zandt—real songs about real people. I've been playing music all my life, from being a choir soloist at Symphony Hall as a youngster to playing in bands through high school and college at Kent State. Went in the service at 17, out before I was 21. Married and divorced, three beautiful daughters, two in college. The other one is 16, lives with her mom. I'm 46, I've worked for the Post Office for 18 years, seven facilities in three states. I've been a Postmaster most of that time, I'm retiring pretty soon, and my house is paid for. I used to run large facilities, and seven years ago I took a small Postmaster's job in New Harbor, Maine. It's a beautiful seaside town.

I have over 75 copywritten tunes. I took my catalog of songs and started performing. I've been playing the same club up there, a high scale club I played every Friday night. I've been playing solo for four years, just honing my craft. Now I'm fortunate to have a good band in CA, and play many solo gigs as well. My point is that I stopped playing in bands and played solo for four years, to get back into the groove and pulse of writing and singing and who I am on stage. I come at you like a freight train. I'm soaking wet ten minutes after I hit the stage. I throw down, case closed. And that's what makes me different from the other solo acts out there, and even songwriters with bands behind them.

I met my current wife, Laurie, she was from CA. Her parents have a vacation home in Maine. Three years ago, we came out for a trip to Prunedale, CA, between Monterey and Santa Cruz. It's a real hotbed for Americana music because of KPIG, which is the world's largest Internet radio station as well as a long established station in this area [see our story on the recent Americana Convention].

PM: Sure, I'm an old Bay Area guy, I'm familiar with KPIG.

AG: My sponsor there is a woman named Arden Eaton. She's the CA Americana representative. She and John Sandidge of Snazzy Productions [also a KPIG personality] have been very good and helpful to me. He booked me at the Strawberry Festival and with Sonia Dada and Zigaboo Modeliste. Anyhow, I moved out there and started getting airplay on KPIG, and generated a lot of attention. A couple of weeks later, Norton Buffalo got involved, through my KPIG friend Dave Nielsen, who engineered my record *East Side of Town*. My goal with that record was to crack the Americana market. All of the songs on the CD are one or two takes, no ProTools, no electric guitars. I wanted the lyrics and the songs to be totally audible and understandable.

Anyhow, I'm down here meeting with EMI, ASCAP, and a major Indie label, hoping to do some business. They're very interested in the record, don't want to record anything over or do other art, they like it just the way it is. I love the art, it's by John Johnson. He does all the KPIG art. I wanted to incorporate a city scene and add a little of the Far Side vibe. [Here we got into a discussion of various folk labels.]

As corny as it may sound, my true goal was to crack the Americana market. I work 18 hours a day, and I wrote 500 letters by hand to the DJs that were playing me. I mean stamped and posted letters now, not emails. I like emailing too, but there's something about getting a letter that still means more, it's not just that I'm also a postal employee. When I went to the Americana Conference, I absorbed the expense of everyone receiving a CD of mine in their registration bag. I prepared 750 press kits to go in those bags. When I came to Folk Alliance, that meant 1800 CDs to go in the bags. [That's over a three grand investment right there, CDs in every registration bag at those two shows.] You know, if you don't do nothin, you don't do nothin.

I really believe in myself. I'm the hardest worker I know, and one of the best songwriters. There's a craft to it, and it takes a long time to hone it, and I work really hard at it. And if people hadn't been saying all along that they were really touched by the songs, I wouldn't be wasting their time with it. I must be doing something right, I'm winning some awards. And if you treat people like you want to be treated, I think it comes back to you. And you just prepare the best you can and to whatever extent you can afford, and do absolutely everything you can do to make it happen. When I left the Americana Conference, I knew I'd done 100% of what I could do there, and that's how I'll feel leaving Folk Alliance, too. So I feel like a winner, regardless.

[At this point, I pointed out Jim Fleming from Fleming Tamulevitch, and explained to Arthur who he was, and how influential his booking agency was in the Folk World. Where others might have been reluctant or "cool" or a host of things, Arthur was completely fearless and focused on the opportunity of introducing himself to Jim. Although I explained that his agency was practically in the business of turning down hordes of hungry songwriters on a daily or weekly basis (and certainly at Folk Alliance, which I'd witnessed first hand at their Exhibit Hall booth), Arthur was completely undaunted, and was merely considering his imminent words, apparently. At one point, he stood up as Jim was ending his conversation, and waited nearby. When Jim turned his way with an order of food to go, Arthur approached and introduced himself, out of earshot. I was surprised to see Jim give Arthur the compulsory fifteen seconds, then put his food down, let it get cold for what seemed like a full ten minutes, and exchange cards. This cat's got more than just cajones, I thought. He believes in himself so strongly that other people are truly compelled to check it out. It's a disarming blend of humility and confidence that creates the time necessary to tell you his story, short version. He's serious as a heart attack.]

AG: Thank you. [We talked a minute about stuttering. He said that he had problems with words that had s, t, or w in them as a Catholic school kid. Spelling bees were nerve wracking, hoping he didn't get a word with one of those letters. I said, "Yeah, and then you grow up and win the John Lennon Songwriting Contest." I didn't mention that I'd never lost a spelling bee as a Catholic school kid, and wondered what it would be like to win the John Lennon Songwriting Contest.]

PM: He gave you a lot of time, Arthur, that was cool. [I made a remark about his cajones.]

AG: You know, it sounds corny, but I believe in myself. And I work hard.

PM: Yeah, it's really different, Arthur, and I'm learning. I know a lot of people who have balls, but that deeply rooted belief that I see you have in yourself, that's a different thing.

AG: I know how I like to be treated, so I always start by saying, "Could you give me a moment of your time, I know you're very busy," and usually, they will. If I go to a seminar and someone like you or someone like him is talking, I'm never part of the group that rushes him directly afterward. I always wait in the back corner with my head down until everyone is gone, and then I go up and do my thing. It's not an act, it's just my way.

PM: Hey man, it works. When I saw Jim put his food down…he got to that crossroads very quickly and said to himself, "Okay, I'm gonna give this character a few minutes, and see what he's about." What did you tell him, how much about yourself?

AG: I told him everything I told you, but in that amount of time. And the packet that I gave him has my CD in it, and a CD of a country song for Nashville that I want to pitch to EMI for the contract that I won in the contest. [The prize was a single song contract with EMI, but it did have a $5000 advance against royalties attached to it.] I love Nashville. I was down there recently, and I was talking to all the cab drivers, they're all songwriters, everybody's a songwriter down there. I was in one of the touristy country bars downtown, and I asked a guy onstage who was playing for tips to play a Hank Williams song. He asked if I was a songwriter, and I said yeah, that I was in town because I'd won this contest. He said, okay, then he was gonna play me his hit, and started singing "When it's time to relax, one beer stands clear…"

PM: Next time you're down, we'll have to have you appear on one of our Puremusic.com Writers Nights at The Basement. [He will be appearing on our June 14th show.] I need to make a few calls, see if I can get you on Billy Block's show, or something like that.

AG: Thanks, Frank, I'll see you down there, for sure.