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Godfrey uses Americana music to underscore play about overcoming hardship

MORE AMERICANA

TENNESSEAN.COM: Go to keyword **AMERICANA** for other stories on the Americana Music Association's annual conference and awards.

COMING TOMORROW: See Saturday's Tennessean for coverage of tonight's fifth annual Americana Honors & Awards.

DEONE JAHNKE

Arthur Godfrey's gritty songs are now the centerpiece of a play that he describes as "an Americana tale."

By PETER COOPER
Staff Writer

Arthur Godfrey was a postman up in New England.

And then he was a singer-songwriter. Still is. But he's also a playwright. This week at the Americana Music Association's annual conference, Godfrey is hoping to garner interest in "If I Only Knew Your Name," an "Americana tale" that features 13 of Godfrey's original songs.

"We tried to write an Americana tale: a basic, simple story that people could relate to, a true story about hardship and people lifting themselves up to it," Godfrey said of the work he wrote with screenwriter Edward Pittman. "We'll have to wait and see if folks bite. That's not a good business plan maybe, but it's really the next step."

Americana music tends to favor artists whose sounds are rooted in country, blues, jazz, folk and rock. This week's conference culminates in tonight's awards show, for which the Dixie Chicks, Neil Young and others are nominated. Americana artists aren't normally featured on contemporary country radio stations, though a growing group of Americana stations play the music. By an "Americana tale," Godfrey means he's using Americana music to tell an American story.

Godfrey, whose gritty songs often evoke his upbringing, speaks in a heavy, endearing Boston accent and tends to say things like, "Hey, I wicked appreciate it." Raised in a section of Boston called Whiskey Point, he married young and took a job with the U.S. Postal Service, shelving his musical aspirations in favor of a steady job that allowed him to raise his family.

"In 1993, I was able to transfer to New Harbor, Maine," he said. "That's when I got serious about songwriting again. For the last three years before I left the post office in 2003, I had six weeks vacation a year and I'd be out playing."

His ability to get out on the road

▶ Please see **GODFREY, 2D**

Godfrey: Americana artist stretches his artistic muscle

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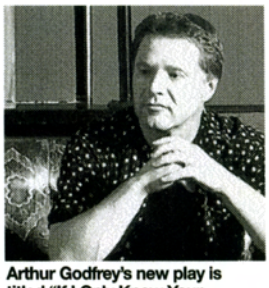
was hastened by his win in the national John Lennon Songwriting Contest in 2001. He won again in 2003, and those victories allowed him some national recognition. By then, he was stationed in Santa Cruz, Calif., where powerful Americana station KPIG took a shine to his recordings.

In 2001, actor Sean Penn happened upon a Godfrey performance and became an instant fan. Penn arranged some important gigs in New York for Godfrey, and the postman decided to make a career break in favor of playing music full time.

"I retired and was able to get a small pension that enabled me to try to do my art," he said. "I turned 50 this year, and I got a card from one of my daughters that said, 'Music and telling stories is your life. If you don't do it, Dad, you're not gonna have one.' Playing music is a solitary life, and it's not that easy. But at this point I wouldn't know what else to do. To go back to mainstream society now would be a little odd. There's no turning back for me."



Arthur Godfrey's new play is titled "If I Only Knew Your Name."

Godfrey isn't the only Americana artist to stretch his attention into art forms beyond singing and playing. Steve Earle has written plays and books. Bob Delevante is a professional photographer and designer. Jim Lauderdale and Tom Mason are actors. Susanna Clark is a painter. A loosely defined genre like Americana is apt to attract expansive talents rather than specialists. Godfrey hopes his musical play, details of which may be found at www.ifionlyknewyourname.com, will allow him to tell a personal story in a universally appealing way.

"I grew up in the city, I experienced all this stuff, and I write true-life songs about that," Godfrey said. "My songs, and this play, are about divorce and marriage and love and sexual abuse. I think if I was the kind of person who was afraid to expose myself through songs and through this play, then I'd never have had the (guts) to leave a secure job and try to do this for a living."

The two-act play involves an East Boston character named Kevin O'Brian who befriends a prostitute who works the streetlight beneath his window. Their friendship allows them to confront abuse and illiteracy issues, with Godfrey's songs revealing and reflecting on plot points rather than merely providing a backing soundtrack.

"My work is about my history and geography, but I'm hoping people will be able to melt into the story themselves," he said. "At the Americana conference, when people walk past my booth, they might scratch their heads at first. But then I hope they'll go, 'That's (really) cool. I've never seen anything like that.' " ■

IF YOU GO

WHAT: The fifth annual Americana Honors & Awards with host Jim Lauderdale. It's part of the Americana Music Conference, which began Wednesday and continues through today. The awards show includes appearances by Sam Bush; Elvis Costello; Vince Gill; Delbert McClinton; James McMurtry; Marty Stuart and his Fabulous Superlatives; Rosanne Cash; and many more.

WHERE: Ryman Auditorium

WHEN: 7 p.m. today

TICKETS: $35

CONTACT: Check for availability: Ticketmaster outlets, the Ryman box office, www.ryman.com or by calling 255-9600.