

“Three Poles of Climatic Variation,” My Conversation with Robbie Fulks

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You can't miss the intelligence in the songs of Robbie Fulks. Its present without being pretentious. It's there in the carefully observed details that ground situations in reality. It's there in the emotions often buried beneath surfaces, emotions people overlook or suppress, ones his lyrics reveal. It's there in the phrase that seems both revelatory and familiar. If his songs hit with the same impact of a good short story or a well-told joke, it's because he has crafted them that way. He writes to express, not to impress. Listening to Fulks's songs, or his humorous between-songs stage banter, you know you are in the presence of someone who has not wasted his intellect but directed it at the stuff of life – like a telescope focusing on stars in the firmament – and used it to pull back truths that are ignored, overlooked, or not fully appreciated. This is my conversation with Robbie Fulks before his show at the Blue Strawberry in St. Louis.



Me: Robbie Folks at the Blue Strawberry this evening, and your Bluegrass vacation is continuing as you brought Shad Cobb and Missy Raines with you.

Robbie Fulks: Yep. I sure did, Keith. And I'm honored to be able to play with players this good. I just never, I really never saw myself doing this and it's a dream come true.

Me: Last time you were through, you had Don Stiernberg with you and I forget who the bass player was. You've got a cast, a rotating cast of side people who can play with you depending on the gig. How do you pick who to go out with?

RF: That's a hard question to answer. I mean, geography is part of it and who's available and not working that week is part of it, you know. And also who I haven't seen for a while and would really enjoy talking with for hours on end in the afternoon on the drives. That's part of it, too. So I'm, yeah, I'm in the catbird seat as far as a handful of great players spread out around the country.

Me: I'm always fascinated by or interested in how musicians who I think are really good became really good musicians. When it comes to a singer-songwriter accompanying themselves, it's like, there's Daryl Scott and there's you. (Robbie tsk-tsks to deflect compliment.) And-- no, you've got serious skills. I was just wondering, when did you start to get good? Because a lot of us in high school learned four chords and learned James Taylor songs in hopes of getting a girlfriend, and it didn't work out. What caught your interest and what made you get as good of the guitar as you are?

RF: I don't think there's any sort of non-egocentric or non-satirical way to answer that--

Me: That's okay You can be as satirical and egocentric as you like.

RF: All I can say is that I've admired great musicians, especially in the world of country music and bluegrass ever since I was a wee little tot. And so really, like Bob Dylan was an early hero, but Doc Watson was equally a hero. And so as soon as I heard Doc's, you know, first Vanguard record, I was trying to get in the game and trying to figure out how he did what he did. And I mean, it's just super hard core, obviously, the instrumental chops in bluegrass music. It's Mount Olympus. And so I've always aspired to it. And at times when I was young, I thought, "I'm there, I'm there. I'm one of these people now." But I wasn't. I just had like more humility to learn. And I'm still trying to learn it basically at age 87 or whatever I am.

Me: You've got some skills. I don't think anyone's going to argue with that. You've got skills as a songwriter too. Some lyrics are like poetries, others are almost like short stories or character sketches. I was just wondering, do you write anything besides songs? Short fiction? Do you have a book in you?

RF: I'm working on it, Keith, but--

Me: No pressure.

RF: Yeah, thank you. I'm working on that. Not sure it'll come to fruition, but I've got a book about halfway written, and it's about the nature of songs, why songs are made, and how they're used. So it looks at songs as kind of tools or instruments. And I do like to sometimes put tour diaries up online and let people know what I'm up to and be a little bit creative about the sentence writing. And I would say of all of it, like songs are maybe the hardest, you know. Songs are kind of... mysterious to me, which is why I wanted, one of the reasons I wanted to write that book about them, to understand them better, because half the time I don't know where I'm going or what I'm doing when I'm working on a song.

Me: Really? Because they turn out so well formed. I'm thinking of your most recent release on Compass Records, Now Then. Twelve songs, each of them different from the others, both in terms of tone, point of view, all the things that make music interesting. I remember when you were through last time, you said during COVID, you were going to buckle down, you're going to write some songs, and at the time you said you'd written two, and only one of them considered any good, which was "Your Band Sucks," is that right?

RF: (laughs) Well, that wasn't called that, but yeah, that was the theme of it. Your band sucks. It was called "Bands."

Me: It didn't make the album, so I take it that you're able to go on and write songs that you thought were better than that one.

RF: Yeah, I got heavy into it. I wrote all the songs on my new record over about eight months of 2025, I guess. And yeah, the record came out in late 2025. And the way that I present the illusion that I'm a good songwriter is that, for every song that ends up on a record, there are another seven or eight that are started and thrown away. And so really, that's throwing a bunch away is my secret, if there's a secret.

Me: Two songs at the middle of the album, "My Hands, Your Heart" and "Thirty-Year Marriage," seem to carry, I don't know, the emotional turning point of the album. Those are beautiful pieces of writing.

RF: Thank you. I wrote "My Heart Your Hands" with Al Anderson, who's a longtime friend as well as a hero of mine. And the other one I wrote all by my lonesome, thinking about, you know, me and my wife and sort of the nature of a really long-term relationship like that. So, thank you

Me: Thank you. The song "My Tormentors," (sic) that's ... ow did you get the angle on that one? Because it deals with sexual abuse, though not explicitly, but that is sort of the subject of it. To approach that, "I'm going to write a song about that," ... how do you find a way to do that with purpose?

RF: Gee, so the song is "Your Tormentors" and it's about a variety, yeah, basically sexual abuse, but more like, you know, the weak person, whether that's a woman in a marriage or a child in a house with creepy people in it. I think there's three situations described in that song. And so I guess I was taking this, you know ... Kitty Genovese was this famous case out in Queens where a woman was savagely treated on the street in full public view and nobody did anything about it. And it's not clear whether it's apocryphal, this story, or how true it is, but it's an interesting, not to sound cold-blooded, but it's an interesting thought experiment. Like how, I mean, the thesis of that song, "Your Tormentors," is that... someone will abuse you, and as long as people can't see it, it's sort of out of sight. They'll know about it, but nobody will do anything about it. And maybe years later, they'll acknowledge it and say, "Oh, that's so terrible. I'm so sorry for you." But at the time, no one will step in and help you out. And so I'm not

convinced that that's true, but I think it could be. And I think it's got enough plausibility that I spent time writing that story song about it.

Me: And of course, I picked the darkest song album to dwell on. Let's talk about something a little bit lighter. You've moved to LA. How's life in Los Angeles compared to the places you've lived?

RF: Well, I can mainly compare it to Chicago because I lived there for 36 years before we moved to Los Angeles. And I would say compared to that, it's much warmer and it's got ... we live in a kind of a working class Latino neighborhood. It's pretty quiet, except for the dogs, but quiet in the sense that it's out of the melee of Los Angeles life. And it's not terribly far from the ocean and closer to the mountains and pretty close to the desert. So with those three poles of climactic variation, it's really satisfying. I love Chicago, but thirty-six years, I got a good feel for it. I was like, we thought we'd try something different.

Me: What is it like to be married to the voice of Long Claw from *Sonic the Hedgehog*?

RF: (laughs) I've never gotten that question before. Is that the name of her character?

Me: Long Claw the owl. [Note: Robbie is married to Donna Jay Fulks, an actress and voice-over artist.]

RF: The owl, yes, correct, correct. I never knew the name of the owl until now, so...

Me: You didn't know the name of your wife's character?

RF: No, I did not. I know the name Charlie from *Charlie's Angels*. She played Charlie in the reboot of that, which is just a voice, you know, on a machine, which is revealed as a woman. Sorry, spoiler alert for your listeners.

Me: Do you have to see all of your wife's performances?

RF: I probably should, but... yeah, I don't go through her radio or TV commercials so much and she doesn't come to my show. So that's the key to our functional relationship.

Me: Well, thank you very much for your time. It's always a pleasure to see you and best wishes and have fun at Hartford Days, the John Hartford event at the Bluegrass Hall of Fame where you are headed.

RF: Thanks. It was a pleasure talking to you.