# An Interview with James Keelaghan

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Heather Sparling is an ethnomusicologist at Cape Breton University. Her current research focuses on Atlantic Canadian disaster songs. Please visit the project website: disastersongs.ca. She interviewed Calgarian James Keelaghan while he was in Cape Breton for the Celtic Colours International Festival in 2011. James Keelaghan, one of Canada's most popular folksingers and songwriters, has written three disaster songs: one about a 1949 Montana wildfire that killed 13 ("Cold Missouri Waters"), one about the Hillcrest Mine in Alberta, where hundreds of miners died in various disasters in the early decades of the twentieth century ("Hillcrest Mine"), and one about the loss of the ship *Captain Torres* off the coast of Cape Breton in 1989.

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HS: Why don't we start with the backstory around "Captain Torres"?
JK: I was in Australia, it was the year that that CD came out, so I think it was 1999. I was playing at a folk festival called the Woodford Folk Festival just outside of Brisbane, and that was amongst the songs I played, and I got back home and I got an email from a woman who has since become a good friend; her name is Carol Helman and she lives in a little town called Bellingen in New South Wales. She and her husband go to Woodford every year and then when they come back home they take all the CDs that they've bought and they invite the neighbours and they have a big dinner and they play everybody their favourite selections from the festival. And she said there was something eerily familiar about the "Torres" that she couldn't put her finger on but she was about to play the song, and she was explaining to the neighbours about me and about what the song was about. Well, one of her neighbours said, "The reason why that's so eerily familiar is because I'm the widow of the captain of the *Torres*." And Carol wrote, asking if I could send down a CD for Kate. So I wrote a letter and said that my intent was not to profit from the memory of her husband and those other men, but just that the story wasn't widely known in Canada and the reason why it's not widely known in Canada was that it was the same night as the Montreal Massacre.

So, I said, I just wanted the story to be more known, because I thought it was a very courageous thing that they did. I sent the letter down and several months later I got communication back from her and she said that she got the CD, she read the lyrics, and couldn't bring herself to listen to the song. But she had been six months pregnant at the time the ship went down, and her husband, being the captain, was so busy on the bridge that he didn't go down and make a phone call. And so she never got a chance to say goodbye to him and her daughter has never known her father. She said she was going to keep the CD until such time as her daughter was old enough to understand and that the song was going to be the phone call goodbye for her daughter.

So when you write about contemporary disaster, the thing I find is that occasionally in the audience there's people who know people who are involved, and there starts to be these very complex lines that begin to be drawn from the song out into people's lives. That to me is the most amazing thing about the songs and about the effect of the songs.

HS: How did you come to know about the *Torres* in the first place?
JK: Well, it was my sister, Margaret, who phoned me. She said, "I just heard this guy on Peter Gzowski [of the CBC] and he was talking about a trip he made sailing around Cape Breton. He told the story about a ship that went down and all the guys made a phone call home to say goodbye. You should write about it." *Click* [like a phone hanging up]. I eventually managed to trace down that it was Silver Donald Cameron that Peter Gzowski was interviewing and it was that book he wrote about sailing around Cape Breton [*Wind, Whales and Whisky*]. The *Torres* thing is sort of two pages in the middle of the book. He's down at some jetty somewhere along here, just as a guy's about to take two family members of sailors who died out in a boat, out into the straits so they can lay a wreath on the water. And so he tells the story of the shipwreck. And the brother of this guy, of one of the sailors who dies, throws the wreath out on the water and then turns to Donald Cameron and says *"La mer ne pardonne pas*," the sea forgives not.

Ever since Margaret had told me the story, before I actually read the story, I'd been constructing sort of a storyline. And I had this chord progression but I didn't know what it was going to be. As soon as I saw those words, *"La mer ne pardonne pas*," they fit perfectly over the little chord structure that I had written. And then the song just all sort of folded out from there. And it's a little bit stranger than some of the stuff that I've written because most of the story songs that I write, the narrator's identity is pretty

explicit from the beginning of the song [but] on that one, it's not really until you get to the bridge that you realize that it's the wife of one of the sailors when she says that she was home when the phone was ringing. So, it was a little bit different that way, in terms of building the narrative. But again I wanted it personalized so I wanted somebody, rather than just it being, you know, straight recitation of the facts, that it's a story from somebody's life about something that affected them. And that's when I find that the stories really take on a life of their own within the songs.

HS: You commented about how good stories find the people to tell those stories, and I wondered, what is it that makes a story compelling? What makes it worth telling?
JK: I think it has to illuminate something about human nature. Going out on a really long limb here, in terms of that particular song… I mentioned that it was the same night as the Montreal Massacre. So in one incident, there's a man who does something horrendous, and all men in society sort of share a part of the blame. And then over here, there's 29 guys who are doing what most men would do, which is, at the moment of crisis, thinking about their families and thinking about saying goodbye. In a way, this song sort of illuminates what I think is the better side of human nature. They could've fallen to quarreling on that ship. There could've been all kinds of fights and people desperately trying to run away from the situation. But they didn't. They calmly lined up and they phoned to talk to their loved ones and I think that illuminating that part of the human condition is part of what that song is about. It's about the fact that a lot of times, most times, I think, in extreme circumstances, people exhibit the best of human nature rather than the worst of human nature.

HS: What role, for you, does the melody play? Where does it come from?
JK: Each one is different, and I'm different now than I was ten years ago, and "Torres" actually, I think, sort of marked a break in the way that I was doing stuff. I'd often have sort of a rough set of lyrics and then I'd try and find a melody. But with "Torres", it was very much the chord structure first. It was looking for a story. That chord structure was looking for a story and, like I said, when those words sort of popped up, they got wed to that. So my approach now, the approach I'm mainly using in songwriting now, is that I have sort of a chord structure and kind of a melody in mind and then I go off in search of sounds and lyrics that kind of match that melody. But as a general rule, one of the things I tell my songwriting students is that when you're writing a song that's based in history, you have to sort of suit the melody and the chords to that time. I think you want to try and suit the melody and the music to not have it distract from the tale.

HS: Do you now typically have melodies first and then set the lyrics to the melodies?
JK: My real working time is when I'm writing. It tends to be from about one in the morning to about five in the morning, just when the world is quiet. And I can just sit and just play chord patterns over and over again or rhythms over and over again and sing stupid phonetic things over them to see what kind of sounds sit right. So it's just that kind of process. It's just sort of sitting and playing on the guitar and going "Oh, that's a nice groove", or "I really kind of like that groove", or "I really like this chord progression with these passing chords." And just remembering those. There was time when I would just sort of store them in my brain. Now I just make a quick little recording of them. And I can walk around, you know, during the day and just think about the melody or think about the rhythm and sing different things against it until I get something that sounds like it fits with that.

HS: There are not too many songwriters that I've found that have multiple disaster songs to their credit. I wondered if there was something that you found compelling about disasters? What is it about disasters that inspires you?
JK: Well, it's about the raw human nature, you know, because it really happens in situations like that, and I think that's what I find attractive. There's also built-in drama to the situation: you can tell a dramatic tale because the drama's already there. And I really like the challenge of finding the approach into the song, about the point of view. I really love looking at it from a whole bunch of different angles and then finding that one that really zings me and pursuing that. It's like a crossword puzzle or a mystery novel or something. I'm just really compelled by how to tell the story. And I find that a challenge with every one of the songs, finding that point of view. And those are the two things, I think, that really compel me: the nature of human nature and the nature of myself as a storyteller. I'm finding my way into the song.

HS: You're a storyteller, so you're very much in that ballad tradition, but you're not necessarily conforming to some of the formulas that were typical of earlier disaster songs and I wondered if you are you consciously trying to avoid those formulas. Or is it something less conscious?
JK: I don't think I've really thought about it until you

actually mentioned it now. I want to personalize the song. When a person retells what happens to them in a disaster, it's not facts and figures, you know, it's emotions and what I was feeling and why I did this and why I did that. And I think in the process of personalizing it, you have to leave some fact out of that. I tell some of my songwriting students actually that they shouldn't let the facts get in the way of telling the story; sometimes you have to play – not fast and loose with the facts – but you have to massage the facts in order to get the story to come out right.

At some point the ballad was there to convey journalistic fact down through the ages. Then once we get into a place where that becomes the media's job, where that becomes the job of newspapers and television and whatnot, it frees up the [song]writer to write about the more emotional aspects of it, because everybody is roughly familiar with the facts. But before I sing a song, I tend to give some of the background to the story in case that isn't known. So I let the background be this prequel to the story and then tell the story.

For "Cold Missouri Waters", my audience seemed particularly attuned to mathematics. In the song, 15 guys jump out of a plane, 3 guys survive, but there's 13 crosses, and the numbers don't add up. The reason is that 15 guys jumped out of the plane and they were joined by the forest ranger from the Meriweather Ranger Station. All 16 of them ended up [by the fire]. That's why the numbers come out that way. But I've had tons of people ask me, "Well, wait a minute, 15 and...?" But it would've taken an entirely new verse to introduce the forest ranger into the thing, would've added another verse to the song in order for me to get him into the song and up the hill with him, and it would've detracted from the story, it would've been this strange little sidepiece. So, instead, at the end of the song he says, "When I arose like the phoenix in that world reduced to ashes, there were none but two survived." He doesn't include himself. He's talking about the other two guys. So he speaks as himself and says, "There's none but two survived," but actually there's three, because he's the guy speaking. So I had to do this funny little fiction within the song in order to make the numbers balance out to be true to the facts, but I had to leave some of the facts out in order to make it a good song. So I think you sort of pick and choose sometimes about those kinds of things.

HS: How did you come across the story for "Cold Missouri Waters"?
JK: That's one of the oft-told tales in Alberta, you just hear that story. When my dad came to work in the oil fields in 1951, it was one of the first stories he heard about the area. It was about these guys who died two years earlier in Montana. It's just a really, really famous story, and if you spend any time with any people in sort of the mountaineering community or the hiking community, you'll hear that story. And so I'd heard the story since I grew up and then a friend of mine, Tom Phillips, who's also a great songwriter, he was working in a bookstore in Calgary. It was at the time when Norman Maclean wrote a book called *Young Men and Fire* and [Tom] handed me the book. That was our regular thing: I'd just walk into the bookstore and Tom would hand me a book and that would be the book I'd leave with. And *Young Men and Fire* is a retelling of the story. But it's not only a retelling of the story, it's about the mathematics of fire spread, it's about what changed in firefighting after that, it's about everything that led up to it, and it's a fascinating book on about 19 different levels, partially because Maclean died before he finished it. It had been his lifelong work; he'd been fascinated by the fire for years and so he'd been reworking and reworking this manuscript and he died. The editors finished it for him. But, while reading the book, you also get the idea that you're being told a story by an old man in pain, which he was at the time, and that he's anxious to tell this story but he doesn't think that he's going to be able to get it out. And you actually get a sense of that when you read the book, like the author really comes through in the book. And so, rereading the book, I thought "Yeah, I'm going to have to write this down as a story or do this as a song." The one person who is just a total ghost in the book is Dodge. There's pictures of all the others of them, but there's no pictures of Dodge in the book. He just floats as this ghost through the book, and so I felt like I wanted to give him a voice and have him tell his side of the tale. His absence from the book became my license to have his presence in the song.

HS: Something like 80% of the Canadian disaster songs we found were from Atlantic Canada. Do you have any thoughts about what is it that makes this songwriting tradition so strong on the east coast versus other parts of Canada?
JK: It's length of time: this culture has been in place here for 300, almost 400 years. It's had time to develop a culture. There's been white people in my part of the world for ... 120 years? There just hasn't been time yet to build up a tradition there. It's going to take hundreds of years before there's an identifiable tradition that comes out of that zone. And it's going to be interesting to see what that tradition is, because it's probably going to be some kind of weird *mélange*, you know, because of everything coming in from the outside. But, you know, here [in Cape Breton], it was like there was a culture

transported from Europe and really transplanted here and then it created its own local variant. There's nothing like that in Calgary. I grew up with Ukrainians and Italians and British and everybody just all in together, so there was no common shared tradition, and it's going to take, like I said, hundreds of years before you actually get a tradition like that, and that's why it sort of gave me kind of a clear shot, because a lot of the history hasn't been written about, you know? And it's unknown because of the transitory sense, you know, because it's the kind of place where people come in and make money for a while and then leave so they don't get invested in the area and don't necessarily find out about the history or the traditions.

HS: How do you feel that your three disaster songs relate to each other? Or do they?
JK: They don't. They're just stories. I think that they're disaster songs is the only relation to them, but they're all vastly different stories. Because, I mean, "Hillcrest Mine" isn't even really a story. It's just more about capturing the mood of what happened after the disaster itself and the stuff that came out of it. "Cold Missouri" is, you know, from the point of view of somebody who's in the middle of the situation and "Captain Torres" is from the point of view of somebody who is a little bit more tangential to the situation; they're still in the middle of it, but they're sort of on this side of it, rather than being right where the action is happening, you know? So, yeah, I find they're all different.

HS: "Hillcrest Mine" has a much happier vibe to the music and I'm guessing that some of that has to do with the fact that you're trying to capture this mood, but I just wondered if you wanted to talk about that.
JK: Well, "Hillcrest Mine" is a call to action, rather than just a straight retelling of the tale, and so it has that sort of anthemic, you know, call to action kind of feel. [Meanwhile], the other two are really about story and about ballad. So they serve two different purposes, you know, in terms of the set and also in terms of what they're trying to achieve.

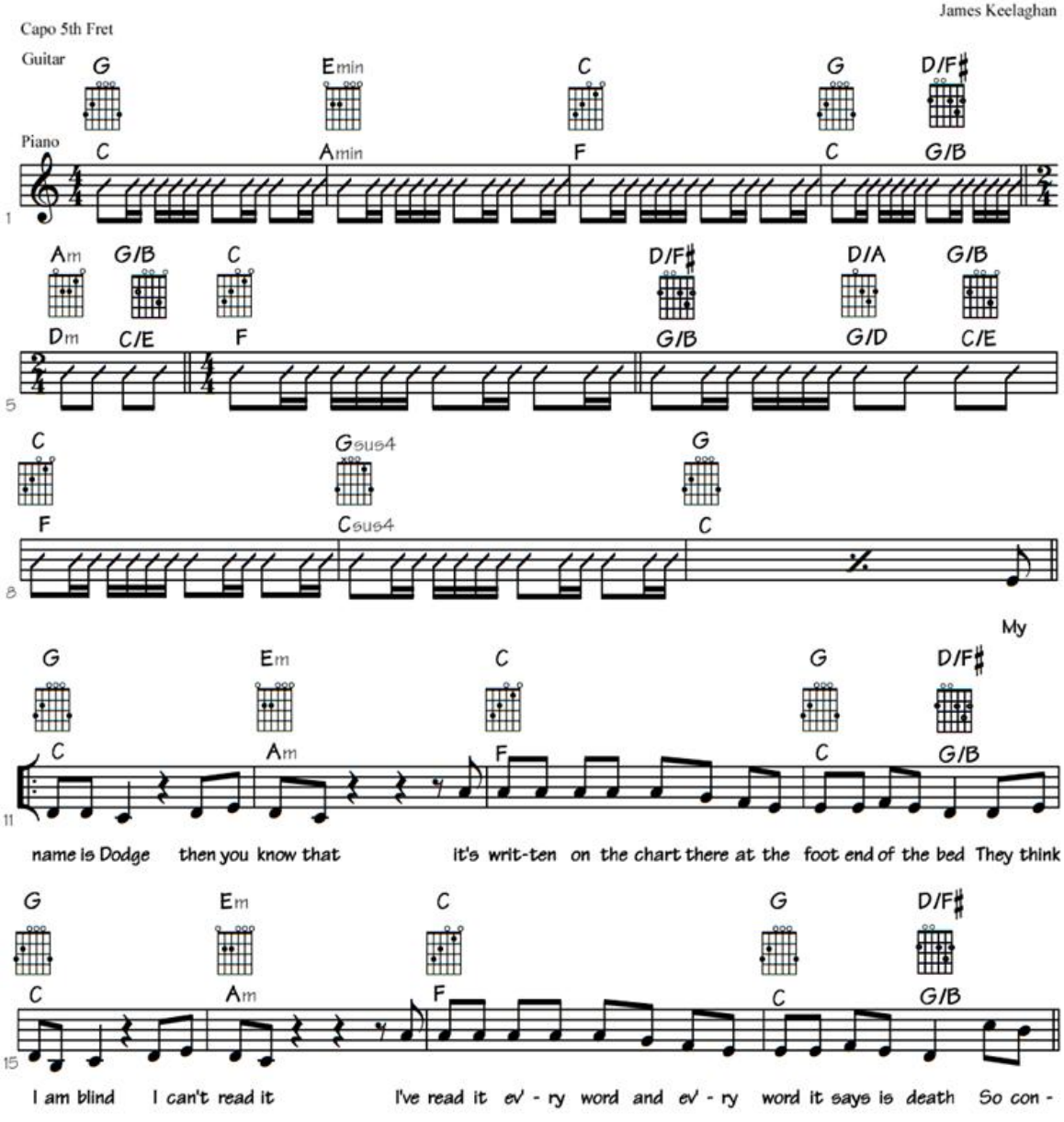
HS: Why has "Cold Missouri Waters" been so popular? Is there something inherent about that particular story or message or melody or something you think captures audiences?
JK: I think it's all those things. I think I managed to wed interesting lyrics with an interesting melody, keep it short enough that peoples' attention didn't wander; it was a perfect combination of a whole bunch of things. And then other people recording it, you know, makes the spread happen and some singers get a vicarious thrill that they also get to tell the tale before the song, but they get to tell it in their own fashion, they can highlight whatever it is that they want to highlight it or tell the facts that they want to tell. Because there's an infinite number of facts that you can tell before the story. Like I've been introducing it the past couple of months because somebody sent me an obituary for this guy named Earl Cooley that was in the *New York Times* and Earl Cooley is in the second verse of the song, but not named. He was the guy that, when they came out of Missoula and they flew up the river and then made three passes down the canyon before they dropped the stick, there were two guys lying on the floor of the plane with their heads out the door and one was Wag Dodge, who was the crew chief, and the other guy was Earl Cooley. And then when they made the final pass, Dodge stood up and Earl Cooley remained lying on the floor and then as each man stepped into the doorway, he'd tap them on the leg to tell them it was time to step out into the sky and so he actually shows up in the second verse where it's, you know, "Pick the drop zone, C-47 comes in low, feel the tap upon your leg, tells you go," so I've been introducing it the past couple of months by just talking about Earl Cooley and adding that dimension to the thing, you know? And, you know, you could introduce by talking about the fact that the guy whose cross third from the top of the hill was in the Second World War, he was in the 101st Airborne, he dropped into Normandy, he dropped into Arnhem, he did all the major drops with the 101st, survived it all, and died on a mountainside in Montana.

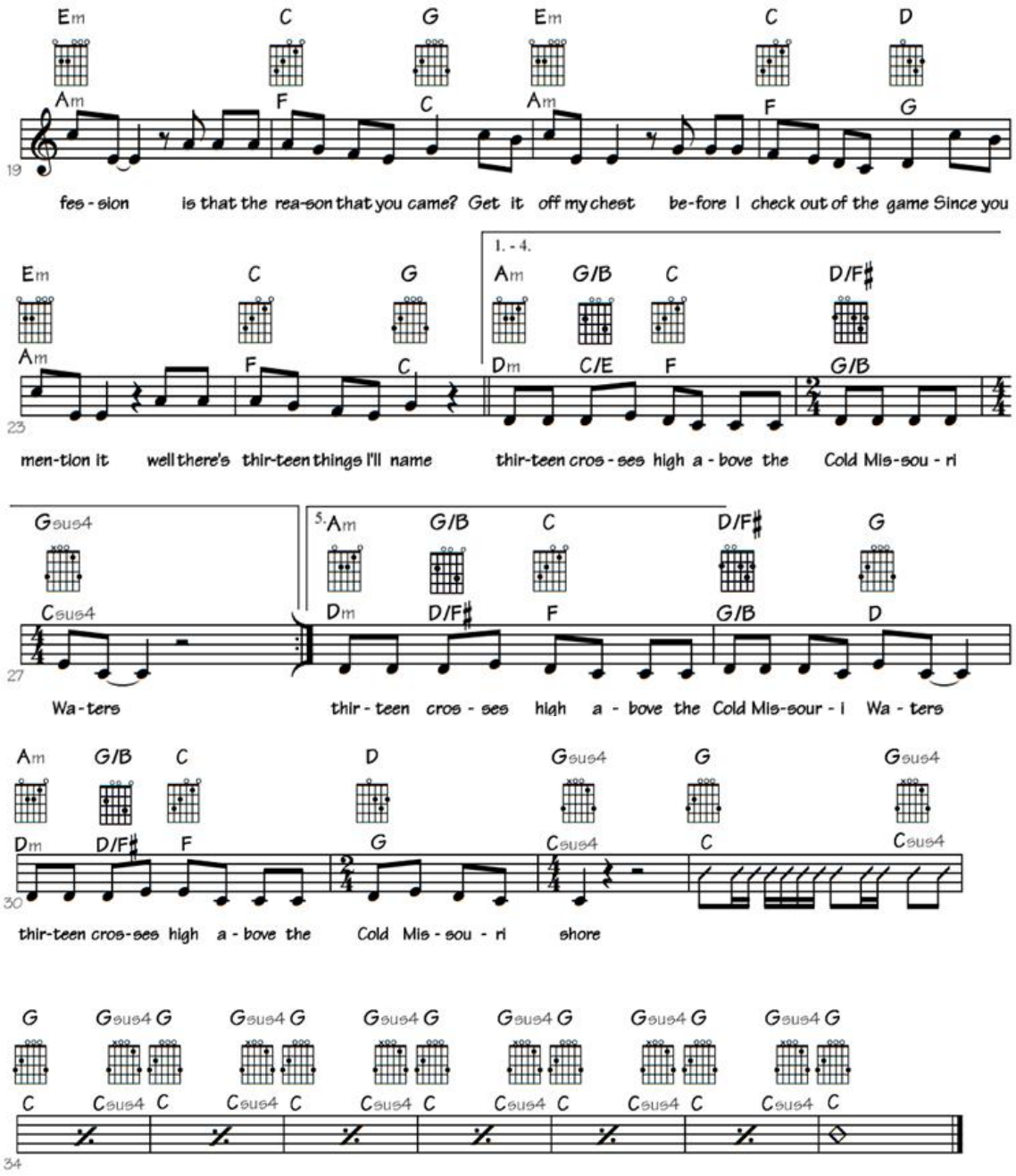
You know, you can talk about the fact that Dodge was basically hounded out of the Forest Service because one of the guys who died near the top, the guy named Thole, and his father were high up in the Forest Service and this guy was convinced that Dodge had killed his son and was not going to rest until Dodge was out of the service. You can talk about the fact that Dodge died at 38 from Hodgkin's lymphoma five years after the fire, or the fact that his wife describes him as coming off the helicopter from the site immaculate, not dirty, not mussed up, nothing. He walked off the helicopter like a god. Or the fact that everybody thought he was out of his mind, but he knew till the day he died that he had done the right thing and that his crew mutinied and it was their fault they died and he had nothing to apologize for. There's so many ways you can introduce that song, so many little pieces of the story that you can drop in before that are going to make this song, you know, just that much better.

HS: Thank you very much for you time, I really, really appreciate it.
JK: Thank you, Heather.

# Cold Missouri Waters

James Keelaghan






1. My name is Dodge, then you know that
It's written on the chart there at the foot end of the bed
They think I am blind, I can't read it
I've read it ev'ry word
And every word it says is death
So, confession
Is that the reason that you came?

Get it off my chest before I check out of the game
Since you mention it well there's thirteen things I'll name
Thirteen crosses high above the Cold Missouri Waters

2. August Forty-Nine, north Montana
The hottest day on record, the forest tinder dry
Lightning strikes in the mountains
I was crew chief at the jump base
I prepared the boys to fly
Pick the drop zone
C-47 comes in low
Feel the tap upon your leg that tells you go
See the circle of the fire down below
Fifteen of us dropped above the Cold Missouri Waters

3. Gauged the fire, I'd seen bigger
So I ordered them to sidehill, we'd fight it from below
We'd have our backs to the river
We'd have it licked by morning
Even if we took it slow
But the fire crowned, jumped the valley just ahead
There was no way down, headed for the ridge instead
Too big to fight it, we'd have to fight that slope instead
Flames one step behind above the Cold Missouri Waters

4. Sky had turned red, smoke was boiling
Two hundred yards to safety, death was fifty yards behind
I don't know why, I just thought it
I struck a match to waist-high grass
Running out of time
Tried to tell them "step into the fire I set
We can't make it- this is the only chance you'll get"
But they cursed me, ran for the rocks above instead
I lay face down and prayed above the Cold Missouri Waters

5. When I rose, like the phoenix
In that world reduced to ashes there were
none but two survived
I stayed that night and one day after
Carried bodies to the river
Wondered how I stayed alive
Thirteen stations of the cross to mark their fall
I've had my say, I'll confess to nothing more
I'll join them now, because they left me long before
Thirteen crosses high above the Cold Missouri Waters
Thirteen crosses high above the Cold Missouri shore