

**Gary James' Interview With Jim Croce's widow**  
**Ingrid Croce**



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It was back in September 1973, that the world mourned the loss of singer, songwriter Jim Croce. Jim Croce died in a plane crash. He was only 30 years old. Left behind was his wife, Ingrid and their baby boy, A.J. In 1985 Ingrid Croce opened *Croce's Restaurant and Jazz Bar* as a tribute to her late husband. The restaurant is located in San Diego. A.J. has grown up. Ingrid has re-married to an attorney named Jim Rock. Ingrid Croce has combined her memories of Jim Croce and her recipes in a book titled, "Thyme In A Bottle: Memories And Recipes From Croce's Restaurant", (Harper/Collins Books).

We spoke with Ingrid Croce about her restaurant, her book, and the obvious, life with and without Jim Croce.

**Q** - Last time I read about you was in this book, "Rock Wives". I thought you were down for the count. How did you manage to re-group your forces and become this successful business woman?

**A** - Really, it just took a lot of energy. I have a very positive, on-going attitude. I'm a major optimist, and I'm a tenacious person. I don't let go. When I want to get somewhere, I just keep working at it. I've got a lot of good energy to do that. I'm lucky. (Laughs). I think luck has a lot to do with it too.

**Q** - And you have 5 restaurants?

**A** - Two restaurants and three bars. Live Jazz, Rhythm And Blues, and another atrium bar that's at the top of the restaurants.

**Q** - Are you in the administrative end of the restaurants or do you cook in one of the restaurants?

**A** - Actually, I began 12 years ago when I did everything. I did advertising, promotion, the cooking. The only thing I did not do was waitress because in the beginning when I first started the restaurant, it was more of a catering business. People would come into my kitchen and say "Can you serve me food"? This food smells so good on the street. So, I set little tables out in my kitchen and I found out shortly after that when the ABC and Health Dept. and Building Dept. came into my catering kitchen, that I needed in fact to have a restaurant, rather than just a catering business to serve people. So, I started to learn about the business from the ground up, everything from permitting to cooking. I cooked for the first 5 years. Then, when I opened Croce's Restaurant and Jazz Bar, I hired a professional chef to come in and use the recipes I had in the restaurant, family recipes, and really began building a repertoire of contemporary American International recipes. So, right now my position is owner, executive chef. I still do the PR and marketing and work with managers we now have in each department. We do everything in-house, at Croce's. We have our music department. We do book talent for not only Croce's, but for other events. We do Human Resources here, and finance, and accounting. Of course, on the other side of the street we do all of our wine and food training, I put all the menus together, but unless I'm kind of putting a recipe or designing a plate, more than likely there's someone physically doing the work. I'm still responsible for coming up with the menu items and making sure all of our produce is coming from the place where I feel comfortable. You know, overseeing it all, but not hands on. I guess my most hands on position is Human Resources, dealing

with the people and the progress of each individual.

**Q** - Does that mean you're working 12-14 hours a day, 6 days a week?

**A** - Yeah, exactly. (Laughs). I'm going to be turning 50, so this next year, and I'm hoping my schedule cuts down a bit. That's my hope, but I really love my work, for the most part. Sometimes it's a little more stressful than I'd like it, but I'm not quite sure how I'm going to deal with slowing down.

**Q** - You're not going to franchise Croce's?

**A** - No. Not now. In fact that's a really important thing about, my new book, "Thyme In A Bottle". The plan in doing the book was to give people the opportunity to know about Croce's and learn our recipes, and see the management style and the way in which we run restaurants. I'm really concerned about all of these conglomerate kind of restaurants and establishments, even in retail, that cut out the local business person. In being in one place, I really feel connected to my city and to what's going on here, and I want to keep it that way.

**Q** - There was at time when you and your son (A.J.) moved to Costa Rica. What was that all about?

**A** - Actually it was kind of a fluke. Shortly before Jim died, he had a friend, who was his A and R man, Corb Donahue over at ABC Dunhill. Corb Donahue and Jim had planned to get a getaway place that they could just go to and kind of relax and get away from everything. I didn't even know about this. Shortly after Jim died, a friend of mine said, "Why don't you come down to Costa Rice and just relax down there?" A.J. and I said yeah, that sounds like a great idea. We jumped in a van with a couple of surfers and we worked our way south along the beaches. By the time we got to Costa Rice, it seemed to be the most beautiful place in the world to stop. That's actually how we came upon Costa Rica.

**Q** - Outside of your book, "Thyme In A Bottle", I have not seen another book on Jim Croce. How come?

**A** - I was married to my present husband Jim Rock, 8 years ago. Jim and I wrote a biography of Jim Croce about 8 years ago, and finished it 4 years after that. When we worked with the publisher, they wanted to turn it into something that had nothing to do with Jim Croce.

**Q** - They were looking for scandal?

**A** - Kind of, but also they didn't even have the personality of who Jim was. Although there's a lot of information in the book we wrote that I think fans would be interested in. I really felt that after all the work and energy, and it was an excellent catharsis for me, the answer was to buy the book back and to write a book about the best parts of our relationship, of not dwelling on lawsuits or dwelling on the negativity and kind of getting more of the energy of what our lives were like, the positive part, the good food, the good music, the good times. I felt the best way to do that was to come from my perspective. For the first book, we kind of came from an outside person. We didn't do it from my perspective. I think it also lost a lot of the character that way. Jim's music says more about who Jim Croce is than anything I could do. So, I figured when it was all done that the best thing for people who really love Jim Croce was to listen to his music. Thank God there's a lot of it around.

**Q** - I once talked to a guy who was a big Jim Croce fan. He made what I remember as being a very interesting observation. He said whenever he felt down, he'd listen to a Jim Croce song, because he knew no one could've been more down than Jim, to sing the song he was singing. That got me thinking, was Jim Croce basically a sad guy at heart?

**A** - (Laughs). That is so funny. He was so upbeat. "If you dig it, do it", was Jim's slogan. And if you dig it

a lot, do it twice. He really lived his life very full. He had a great sense of humor. I think that's funny. I can't even think of Jim as a depressed person, on any level.

**Q** - No one has ever brought that up to you before?

**A** - No. Never. I've heard it exactly the opposite way; "when I was in Vietnam", Jim got me through it; "my parents were getting a divorce when Jim was making his music and if my parents and I hadn't listened to that music, we never would have made it." The first time I opened Croce's Jazz Bar, I had 26 Japanese businessmen sitting there singing "Bad, Bad Leroy Brown". People had a very positive response to Jim Croce. So, I guess you can find whatever you want in music, or in anything. You can make it your own.

**Q** - On average, how long did it take Jim to write a song like "Operator" or "Bad, Bad Leroy Brown." Was it fast?

**A** - It was varied. Usually fast. In between songs, Jim would tell the audience how the song came about. Some songs, he'd write down the first two verses. Then the third one wouldn't come to him yet. When Jim and I used to write, we wrote 30 songs in a week. So, there were a lot of songs that were written. It doesn't mean all of the songs were gonna be excellent songs. But, once in awhile, it just happens that that magic is there. Songs being written in terms of timing, some things took no time at all. Words and music were right there. We'd just sit down and do it. Other times Jim would take, I don't know, a month, two months to really complete the song. Not usually longer than that. Not usually longer than a month I'd say.

**Q** - You and Jim once made a record for Capitol (Records). Where did they catch the two of you, and did they do any promotion for that album?

**A** - None that I know of. We met them through a producer, Nik Venet. It was co-produced by Cashman-West. We did the album in 3 days. (Laughs). That's not done these days. We just went in, and I think we did one or two cuts on just about everything, then it was mixed and sweetened and put out. Jim and I traveled across the country. We did about a hundred thousand miles a year in our little VW and playing college concerts and small clubs.

**Q** - Did you ever play in Syracuse?

**A** - We sure did. Syracuse University. Jabberwocky. We played Alfred (University). Really New York was a big one for us, 'cause it wasn't very far. We did Kentucky, Tennessee and mostly south up to Minnesota.

**Q** - What year was this?

**A** - That would've been 1969, 1970.

**Q** - There's this hotel in Vegas called the (Imperial) Palace, where they have this "Legends In Concert Show". Are you familiar with that?

**A** - No. I'm not familiar with that.

**Q** - It's a presentation of tribute acts. One guy does Elvis. One guy does Buddy Holly. One guy does Sammy Davis, Jr. One guy does Jim Croce.

**A** - I've heard about that. That's where I've heard about that. I've had people who are Jim Croce impersonators come to the restaurant.

**Q** - Do you have them play?

**A** - No. I don't.

**Q** - Because that would be too tacky?

**A** - Tacky yeah, and we truly don't have that kind of music at Croce's. We do traditional jazz. We do pretty much what A.J. plays, not just his music. You know, A.J has his own records now. We play real Jim Croce in-between, the live music. I don't think we want any imitation of Jim. We just like to have as best as we can, the real thing.

**Q** - Was the song "Time In A Bottle" written for you?

**A** - After Jim and I did the album, and things did not work out with the album, we moved to a little farm town called Lyndell, PA. About 36 or 38 people lived there I think. Jim started to drive a truck, and work teaching students. I did pottery and grew our own garden. This is kind of the original Croce's restaurant back then, 'cause people used to come over and eat. I just decided one day it was just so silly that Jim was working 3 jobs and not really getting a chance to do his music. I decided that I would put my recipe in to Pillsbury Bake Contest. I didn't win, but when I told Jim that night that I was not a winner, but that we were gonna have a baby, all of a sudden his whole attitude changed about things. He came from a very traditional Italian, Catholic background. His family was really heavy into getting good 9 to 5 jobs, pension, and the whole thing. When he found out we were gonna have a child, he realized he was gonna have to do something about it. He sat down that night and wrote "Time In A Bottle". I really believe it's more about the immortality of life. A. J. might have been the trigger for that song as well as our relationship. I think Jim was a very eclectic songwriter. When he wrote something it usually wasn't one circumstance that spurred it on. It was a lot of different people and a lot of different circumstances that brought that song together which is why I think his music is so universal. He didn't just have an experience happen to him and say "I'm gonna write a song about it." He looked at other people, and talked with a lot of other people. He was in a sense a journalist of what was going on at the time.

**Q** - You were 15 when you met Jim Croce. He was 20. When he sings the line, "I've looked around enough to know that you're the one I want to go through time with", how did he know that? You were two kids really.

**A** - When you're writing a song that is universal, it's not you. It's not you saying that. It's you saying that I've lived life and this is the way I want to spend my life. I think it can't be taken literally. I don't think you should listen to Jim Croce ever with a black and white point of view. He was black and white in his actions, but in his thinking he had all the spectrums of light color. (Laughs). It was all in there.

**Q** - According to Rolling Stone's Encyclopedia of Rock 'n Roll. Jim had to alter his guitar technique after breaking a finger with a sledge hammer.

**A** - Pretty dramatic.

**Q** - Is that true?

**A** - I think it's exaggerated, but the point they were trying to make is that he did construction work, minimally, and drove a truck. Jim would drive out to the junkyard and before you know it, all the guys we're sitting around talking stories and having a good time. He did drive a truck and he did work construction and he did hurt his finger. He got it stuck in the back of a truck. He was wearing his wedding ring which he nicely pulled off the back of a truck and nearly lost his finger doing it. I think it was altered for a short while. I don't know that that was the impetus of this guitar playing.

**Q - Strange how these stories get started.**

**A - Well, he might've started the story. This was what he was all about. All the characters that come out of Jim Croce songs are all bigger than life.**

**Q - Who was responsible for Jim getting ripped off? Was it the record company? Was it his management?**

**A - They were all one person. Actually, they were all one group. It was Cashman and West and an attorney named Kernet that I was fighting in litigation.**

**Q - So Cashman and West had a production deal with ABC-Dunhill Records?**

**A - Well, they had production, publishing, management. It was just a whole ball of wax kind of situation where there was no accounting being done. When Jim died, he literally died penniless. He had no money. He had one pair of jeans and a t-shirt. After playing for 2 years, 360 concerts a year, it was pretty questionable. What in the world was going on here? I do know that it takes a lot of money to start an act out. Hotel rooms cost a lot of money and travel. But, you're talking about 2 guys traveling 360 concerts a year. There had to be some money somewhere! Plus publishing.**

**Q - Did they have a tour bus?**

**A - No. They flew everywhere. Mostly commercial airlines. The last tour they took was a make-up tour that Jim had. He never got sick. He was really diligent about getting to work on time and making sure he didn't miss a concert. He had missed this concert the year before because of some throat problems he had. He went to do a make-up tour. I think he was being paid \$750 a night, which basically broke him even after he paid for the flight there. But, he really felt strongly about his obligation. So, he did this. This was a rented plane out of Texas. But, he usually didn't take private planes. It was just this make-up tour that he needed to do really quickly. Then he was gonna be off for the first time in like 2 years, on a break, at which he planned to go to Costa Rica, which, at that time I didn't know. It was a plan that he and Corb Donahue had made. It's kind of ironic that I ended up making that for a long period of time, a second home.**

**Q - Did you ever have any know of premonition that Jim's life was in danger, traveling around in these small planes?**

**A - Well, you know, it wasn't only premonition in terms of concern about his flights. I think if there was anything sad about Jim, there was a certain feeling that I had, and it may have just come 'cause I was so close and loved him so much, that there never was gonna be enough time. But, I always had that feeling that there was never gonna be enough time, which is why "Time In a Bottle" is such an ironic song.**

**Q - Would that be your favorite song?**

**A - I think so. But it's also my favorite song because in a sense the antithesis of that song is also very true, that if there isn't enough time, then you better damn well spend it the way you want to spend it, because if you don't, you're wasting it! I'm terrible with man-made time. I'm never on time. I try so miserably. I just try very hard to spend my time doing things at the moment that seem like the most fun and the best thing to do.**

**Q - What was there about Jim Croce that attracted you to him?**

**A** - I can only say everything. For me, I just turned 16. I was physically attracted to Jim. I was attracted to Jim's intelligence. I hadn't even heard him sing, and I was in love. Then when he sang, that clinched it. That was the end. Singing together was the most sensual and the most fulfilling experience of our relationship.

**Q** - Did you ever think he was going to be famous?

**A** - I always knew he would become famous. I never had a question about it. But, it wasn't why I married him, It was just inevitable. He was the most spectacular person I ever met in the entertainment business - and still is. There is no one like Jim. A really, really unique individual. Really intelligent and really capable of making people feel special.

**Q** - Being re-married now...

**A** - Very happily.

**Q** - If you told me you were once married to Jim Croce, that would scare me off. Thank God there are men out there who can handle it, because let's face it, Jim Croce is a hard act to follow.

**A** - Well, you know, they have their own act, their own reality. I'm very fortunate I met a wonderful, strong and healthy and intelligent man that is a person I want to share my life with. Jim always said it would be silly of me to feel a threat by a man who's been dead for 20 years. Jim is gone and I'm very much alive and I'm very much here. I don't think anyone knows Jim Croce better than Jim Rock. He loves him in his own way. He feels a great deal of closeness to him. It is a very unique person that could take on the position of being a husband to a person with a famous husband, or a wife with a famous husband.

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