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LOST NOTES AND MYRIAD BLESSINGS

JOHN PRINE'S

first album of new material in nearly a decade
takes up with cancer, kids and true love

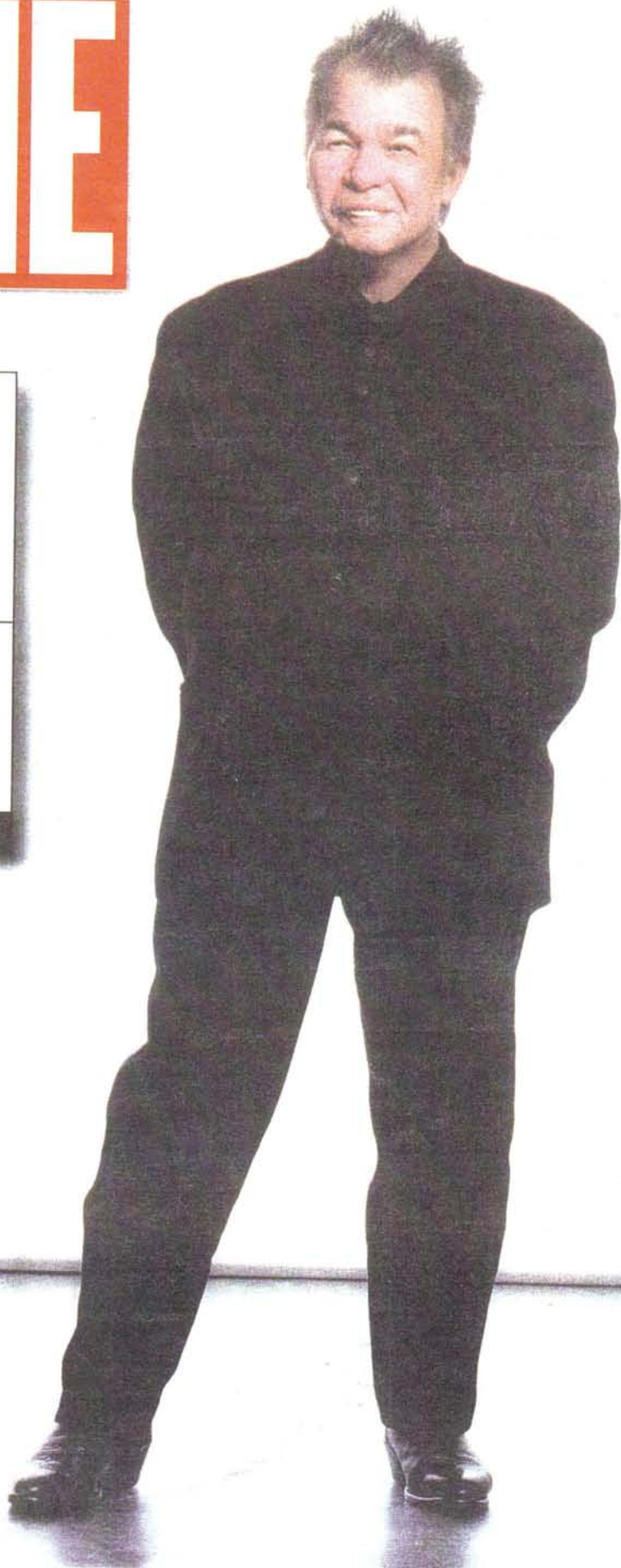
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JOHN PRINE'S
first album of new material in nearly a decade
takes up with cancer, kids and true love

BY MICHAEL MCCALL
PHOTOS BY JOHN CHIASSON

Leave it to John Prine to find a silver lining amid life-changing adversity. Having a section of your neck and throat cut out during surgery for cancer would be traumatic for anyone. For it to happen to Prine, one of the most celebrated singer-songwriters of the post-Dylan era, was earth-shattering. Because he also makes his living performing around the world, and because he'd finally found marital and domestic bliss, it could have been the stuff of Greek tragedy.

Just as Prine's songs consider the reprehensible and the glorious as inevitable aspects of life, he's come to see the humor and humanity in what he's endured. "I'm singing in a lower key than before," he says. "I really didn't realize it until recently, but this is a good thing. When I sing, it's so much easier and more natural. I can't believe I didn't figure this out until the surgery sort of forced me to do it. I feel like this is the voice I should've always had. To me, it sounds more like the way I talk."

Then he laughs, letting out a raspy, staccato chuckle. "Of course, I don't sound so good when I talk, either," he cracks.

Like many singer-songwriters in the wake of Bob Dylan, John Prine emerged in the 1970s with sharply observed songs and a quirky voice. Like the best of them, Prine's craggy intonation added to the charms of his material. His calling card has always been writing about everyday characters with wisdom, insight and humor, and his wry phrasing and hoarse, husky tone brought a warmth to his folksy sagacity and wit. Like many great songwriters—Dylan, Townes Van Zandt, Tom Waits, Guy Clark—Prine's peculiar voice suits what he has to say. "I guess if you keep making the same mistake long enough, it becomes your style," he says.

Being who he is, Prine can't help but finding funny stories in his brush with mortality. He likes to tell of the Houston radiologist, who professed that he was a fan and said he could shield Prine's vocal cords during the six weeks of radiation treatments the singer underwent following his radical neck dissection. "I asked him, 'You've heard me sing, right?'" Prine recalls with another laugh. "I told him not to worry about my voice because I never really have. I told him I'd rather make sure we got all the cancerous cells out of there."

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As a cancer survivor, Prine didn't at first notice how his voice changed; he was just glad to be able to sing again. "You know, the other great thing is that all my old songs seem new to me again, because I sing them differently," he says. "They're fresh because they sound different, and I do think they sound better now. It was kind of a gift: after singing them for 20 or 30 years, it's like I get to rediscover them."

Prine's lower, more relaxed tone brings to life *Fair & Square*, his first album of new material in nine years. As whimsical as ever, his new work reflects other changes in his life, too. There are more love songs, and his observant takes of the quotidian seem less sardonic and at times more deeply blue. He can still get across his anger. While he's always woven social commentary into his work—he even was tagged a protest singer early in his career—the album's anti-Bush track "Some Humans Ain't Human" is his most pointed political blast since 1972's "Your Flag Decal Won't Get You Into Heaven Anymore."

"I felt like I had to write something about how I feel about the way things are in this country right now," Prine says of the song, a harangue aimed at callous individuals and calculated, lying leaders. "Some Humans Ain't Human" compares heartless people to a neglected home freezer full of old frozen pizzas, to "ice cubes with hair" in them and to "a broken Popsicle." The song further asserts that jealousy and stupidity don't equal harmony.

But the zinger that's creating controversy, and causing some to walk out at his shows, comes in the last stanza. "Have you ever noticed / When you're feeling really good / There's always a pigeon / That'll come shit on your hood," Prine asks, speaking rather than singing at this point. "Or [when] you're feeling your freedom / And the world's off your back / Some cowboy from Texas / Starts his own war in Iraq."

"What bothers me the most is the way this administration is toward people who are dissenting, the way they're coming down on people," Prine says. "They act as if you're not supporting the troops if you have anything negative to say about Bush or any of his people. That seems totally un-American to me. It's the total flipside of what this country is supposed to be about."

Prine acknowledges that his commentary usually comes from character sketches or story songs. "Some Humans Ain't Human" has its humorous side, especially its carnival-sideshow arrangement, but the songwriter wanted to make his sentiments clear.

"I just got to a point where I didn't want to be silent about it," he goes on. "I thought if I didn't say anything, then people might take it that I was supporting what is going on. If I went out and got hit by a car tomorrow, I wouldn't want anyone to think I was a Republican."

Prine is seated behind the desk of Al Bunetta, his manager of several decades, and the physical changes wrought by his surgery are evident. His neck is disproportionately smaller than it was before he contracted cancer, and the changes in his jaw have caused his lower bite to recede. Yet he's not self-conscious about the changes, which marks another way he departs from most artists. Never vain, Prine has always accepted his disheveled appearance, looking like the everyman who could have lived on the same block as the offbeat characters who populate his songs.

Prine and Bunetta founded Oh Boy Records in 1984, four years after John moved to Nashville. The label has maintained a quiet presence on Music Row over the years, issuing recent albums by Todd Snider, Janis Ian, Kris Kristofferson and Shawn Camp while reissuing vintage country recordings and tending Prine's weighty catalog, as well as that of his old friend, the late Steve Goodman.

As he sits, Prine's hands frequently move along the desk, as if looking for something to do. A chain-smoker since his teens, Prine nearly always had a cigarette between his fingers until he was diagnosed with cancer in 1998. Most of his publicity photos dating back to the '70s even include a partially smoked cigarette. Seven years on, he's still not sure what to do with his fingers.

At age 58, Prine, who grew up in Maywood, Ill., talks about how nearly everything in his life has turned upside down in the last decade—and how he's just fine with that. "You know, I don't really sit and think about it a whole lot, but my life is completely different from what it once was," he says. "I don't want to say it's one thing. Certainly, being a dad is a big part of it. Having the cancer, that made some things change, too. They weren't really subtle changes. Some things had to change real fast."

For one, he's given up his nightlife, which was legendary among his close-knit friends but little-known beyond that. Through the first 25 years of his career, Prine maintained such a humorous, approachable quality that only those close to him knew how much he liked to party. A friendly imbibor, he didn't burn destructively like his peer Townes Van Zandt or recklessly like Steve Earle, but he'd hold court well into the night and into the morning, spinning stories and playing music with small groups of friends.

"All of a sudden, and for the first time ever, I'm leading a normal life," Prine says. "Especially now that my boys are in school, I'm at up at 6:30, and I'm in bed by 11. It's a total flip-flop."



Prine married his third wife, Fiona, in 1990; their oldest son, Jack, is 10 years old, and his brother Tommy is a year younger. Fiona's 23-year-old son Jody lives at the family's home in Green Hills as well. Despite his health scare, Prine figures having children late in life was just right for him.

"If I'd had children earlier in my life, I think I would have had a tendency to see what my limits were, and that wouldn't have been good," he says. "I didn't realize it, but I was all ready for children to come into my life at the time they did. I didn't know I was looking for anything, but it sure came along at the right time."

Prine now attends the boys' sporting events and often is home when they come in from school, which makes him more of a hands-on father than most of the lawyers and businessmen in his neighborhood. "I've got a good home life," he says. "It's about as steady of a home life as I've ever had. I'm there with the boys a lot, and Fiona is just a really good person. I'm lucky to have her. She's brought order to my life, which is a good thing, because if she hadn't, I probably wouldn't be here. I guess the magic of that comes out in the music."

Indeed, *Fair & Square* features more love songs than Prine has ever put on an album. He started in that direction shortly after marrying Fiona. "You Got Gold" and "I Want to Be With You Always" were standout tracks on 1991's *The Missing Years*. The new "Glory of True Love," with its chiming melody and unabashed celebration of just how precious it is to find someone to share your life with, comes across like a follow-up to "You Got Gold" written a decade after the joy has settled in and deepened.

Similarly, the new "She Is My Everything" brims with playful toasts to the woman he adores, while "Long Monday," written with Prine's friend Keith Sykes, bemoans the fact that, after a weekend of making love and music together, it's time to go back to work. As he drives off, he's still high on love, humming "You and me / Sittin' in the back of my memory / Like a honeybee / Buzzin' round a glass of sweet Chablis."

Oddly enough, Prine's best work often follows periods when he's considered retiring from making records. *Bruised Orange* came after he left Atlantic Records, where he made his first four albums, three of them with producer Arif Mardin. (Mardin now works with Norah Jones, who recently covered "That's the Way That the World Goes Round," a song from *Bruised Orange*.)

Prine left Atlantic in 1976 as the commercial crest of the singer-songwriter movement waned. Jerry Wexler, the famed talent scout who had brought Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin and Wilson Pickett to Atlantic, had given Prine his first record deal as well. But Wexler had left the company, and Ahmet Ertegun had recently signed Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones to lucrative deals. The record industry had evolved, focusing on hard rock, dance music, funk and the emerging punk movement. The acoustic singer-songwriters who had risen in the early '70s no longer received the airplay or the record company promotion they once had.

"Atlantic had become part of Warner Bros. and moved into Rockefeller Center," Prine told the *Scene* in a 1995 interview. "I remember when I first went into the old Atlantic, and it had all these gold records by these great R&B and jazz artists. It was a friendly place. It didn't seem like a big corporation. But by time Jerry left, that wasn't the case anymore."

The pop music industry was evolving from underground clubs, music halls and offbeat record stores to arenas, strong-armed promoters and chain stores. Prine no longer felt connected to it. He nearly left the business, considering becoming a fisherman, among other things. He traveled to Nashville because he'd met Cowboy Jack Clement, and he hung out at Clement's famed Cowboy Arms Recording Spa and Hotel, writing songs and recording stray tracks.

The recordings eventually were scrapped, but Prine seemed creatively renewed. He signed with David Geffen's Asylum Records, which still held out some hope for the commercial possibilities of acoustic music. He then set up shop with his old buddy Steve Goodman in a Chicago recording studio. Even though the sessions were marked with heated arguments between the two friends, the result, *Bruised Orange*, featured several of Prine's most enduring songs, including "Fish and Whistle," "There She Goes," "If You Don't Want My Love," "Crooked Piece of Time" and the one-of-a-kind "Sabu Visits the Twin Cities Alone."

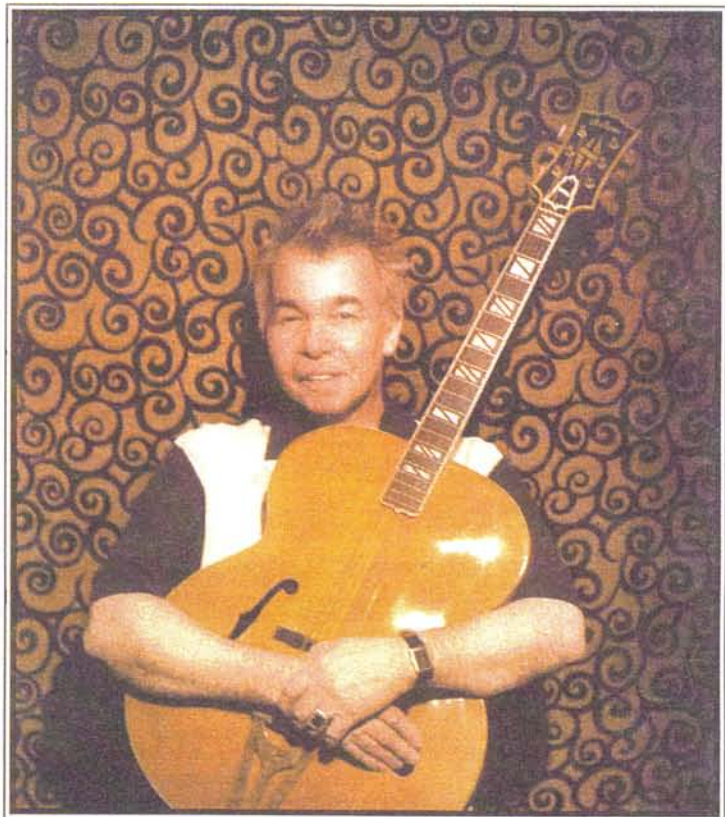
After *Bruised Orange*, Prine wanted to experiment with his sound, perhaps wanting to punch it up in the way Neil Young or Joni Mitchell altered their work as times and trends changed. Proud of the rocking band he'd been touring with, he huddled in Memphis' Sun Studio with Knox and Jerry Phillips, the sons of Sun founder Sam Phillips, who also lent his wild-eyed advice to the proceedings. The album that resulted, *Pink Cadillac*, updated its rockabilly fervor with the raw, noisy spirit of punk.

But Asylum didn't understand the album and hardly promoted it. Frustrated again with his record company, Prine went into Muscle Shoals and created *Storm Windows*, another rock-combo album whose slicker sound had the strengths of albums by Tom Petty or Bob Seger. It, too, was ignored. Prine is a better rocker than he's given credit for, and his raucous version of The Carter Family's "Bear Creek Blues" on *Fair & Square* nicely recalls that era.

For the last time, Prine severed his ties to a major label and again considered quitting. He could earn enough money touring to keep alive, he reasoned. But Bunetta, his longtime manager, brought up the idea of starting their own label. Bunetta had successfully run a mail-order label, Red Pajamas, which marketed the music of Steve Goodman, whom he also managed. Prine agreed to give it a try, and so they founded Oh Boy Records, named for the exclamation in one Buddy Holly's most famous songs.

"I don't think I would've continued doing this if I had to jump from label to label," Prine says. "There was something missing. I'm not a control freak or anything close, but what they do and what I do is two different things. They're trying to market music the same way you sell blue jeans and cars. My music's not really made for that."

Still, he never envisioned a label that would be thriving 20 years later—and that would serve



as a role model for a growing movement of artist-owned indies. "I'm completely amazed we're still here," he says, crediting Bunetta's hard work and industry expertise for keeping the label afloat despite the fact that Prine's released just six studio albums in its 21 years of existence. "I think he does it with mirrors and smoke sometimes, but thank God he has. It gives us something to talk about."

Having his own label gives Prine the freedom to operate in ways that other artists can't. He's put out two live albums and a live DVD, as well as re-recorded an album of his best-known songs (*Souvenirs*) and released another of cover songs of male-female duets (*In Spite of Ourselves*). Owing Oh Boy also encourages him to write and keep recording rather than just to rely on his income from concert touring, which is considerable.

This time around, though, between family obligations and health considerations, he had to change the manner of his writing. "I'd always just kind of wait for songs to come," he says. "They'd arrive in batches, two or three at a time. I could let it happen most any time of day. A lot of the time that would happen to be about 3 o'clock in the morning, or whatever, because I was sleeping until noon anyway."

With fatherhood, all of that changed. "When the songs weren't coming every couple months or so, I realized, 'Oh, I get it. I have to start making appointments to do this stuff,'" he says. "I have to say, 'OK, next Wednesday I'm going to write.' With the kids and the family, I have to schedule time to do other things. Otherwise, I'll just hang out with them."

Because the writing was taking longer, Prine started making demos on his own to show his songs to a potential producer. But he liked the sound of the demos, and eventually decided to record the album himself. He recruited Gary Paczosa as co-producer because he liked the sounds Paczosa got on albums by Alison Krauss and Mindy Smith.

Prine had been credited as a co-producer on *Aimless Love* and *German Afternoons*, the first two albums that he made for Oh Boy with producer Jim Rooney. This time, however, he assumed a much larger role in overseeing production than he did back then.

"I'm going to have to write a letter of apology to Jim," he says. "Apparently, he was doing the whole darn thing, and I was just tagging along for the show. Now that I've really done it, I know the difference. It's definitely the first time I've taken a hold of the reins and ridden the thing all the way down to the end of the rodeo."

Even so, Prine's new album may be the most fitting production of his career. There's a warm, natural groove to each song, and the prominence of rhythm guitar and the gentle additions of accordion and steel guitar fit perfectly with his rolling style. *Fair & Square* also reflects the full sound Prine creates onstage with just his acoustic guitar and the bass of Dave Jacques and electric guitar of Jason Wilbur, who've served as his touring unit for several years.

"It's just a really good sound for what I do," Prine says. "I love it musically, and it's a comfortable situation. I never get wore out by it; I'm always excited about doing the shows. When I had the rock bands, it always seemed like we had the acoustic segments and the band segments. But now it all flows together, and we don't have to jump from one kind of music to another."

So, after all he's been through, here Prine is, traveling the world playing his songs and getting ready to release another batch of new songs. "It's like I have a whole new romance going on with life," he says, shrugging as he smiles, as if he's as mystified as anyone with the way things turned out. "It's like there's a new shine on things. I'm feeling like I'm dug in pretty good." ■