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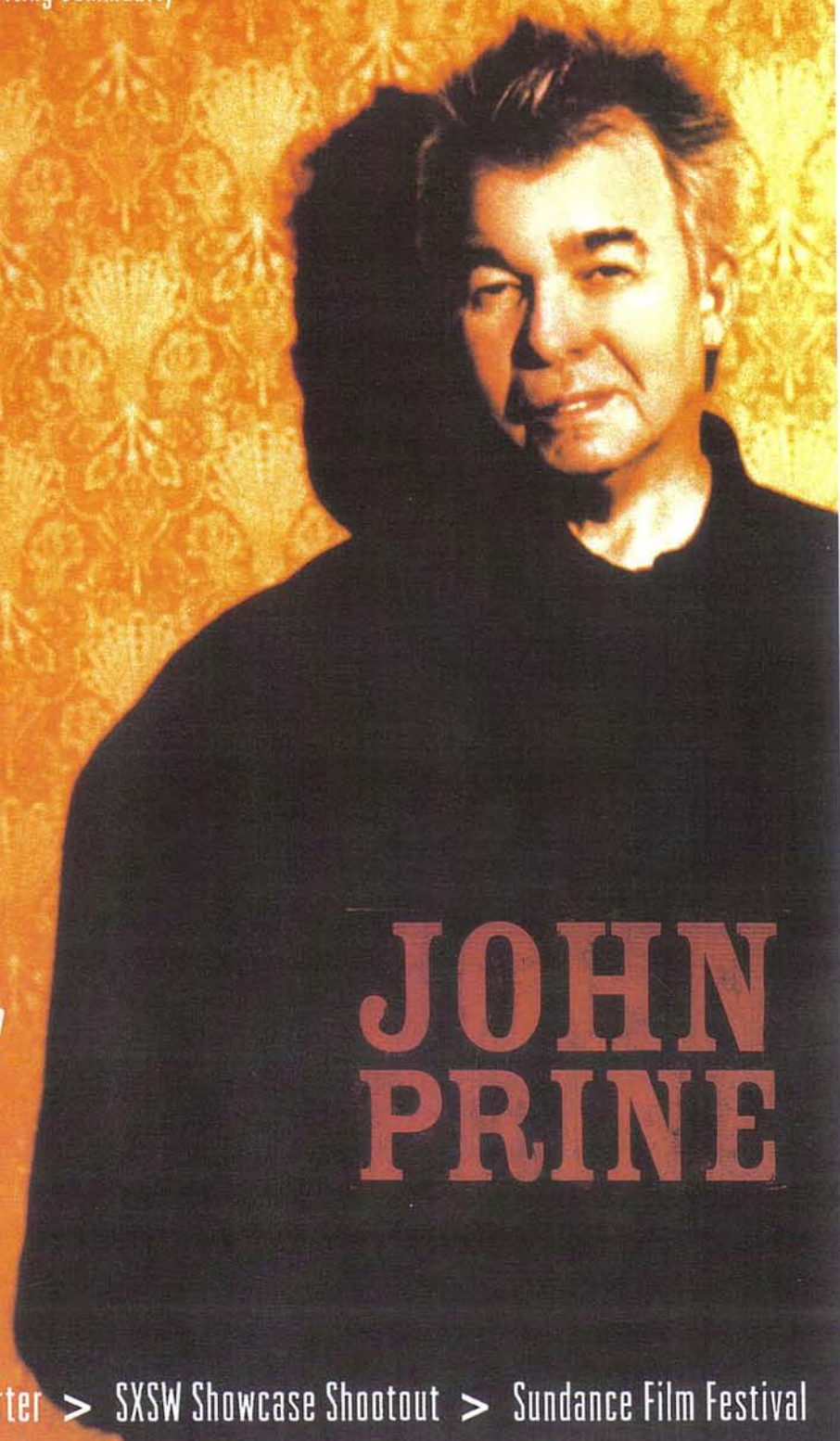
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**JOHN
 PRINE**

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AMERICAN SONGWRITER

→ PRESENTS ←

JOHN PRINE

A LIVING LEGEND


BY PAUL V. GRIFFITH



PHOTO BY DANIEL R. PATMORE







“WHEN I WAS A MAILMAN, WRITING WAS A TOTAL ESCAPE, BUT IT HAS INCREASINGLY BECOME MORE OF A JOB TO GET IT DONE,”

says former civil servant and Grammy-winning songwriter John Prine in a recent interview with *American Songwriter* in Nashville. He's explaining the lapse (nine years) between his last all-original recording, *Lost Dogs and Mixed Blessings*, and his new release, *Fair & Square*. In many ways the new record is classic Prine—wry, compassionate, good-natured and a little absurd—but it was sometimes hard in the making. In a sense it's a relief to know that, just like all songwriters, John Prine occasionally finds it difficult to get to the bottom of the page.

It wasn't always that way. Prine's self-titled debut, released in 1971 on Atlantic Records, wasn't a commercial success but the critics loved it—and songs like “Sam Stone,” “Angel from Montgomery” and “Hello in There” became underground staples almost overnight. *Diamonds in the Rough* and *Sweet Revenge* followed in 1972 and 1973 respectively, as did praise for songs like “Please Don't Bury Me” and “Dear Abby.” Prine threw off the “next Dylan” tag (which, at the time, was synonymous with “one-hit wonder”), and the writing came easy. “The first three or four records, I would just write 'em while walking down the street—just throw 'em over my shoulder,” Prine says. “The best way to get away from the world was to go write a song.”

Common Sense (1975), *Bruised Orange* (1978), *Pink Cadillac* (1979) and *Storm Windows* (1980) followed, as did more classic songs—“Come Back to Us Barbara Lewis,” “Hare Krishna Beaugard,” “That's the Way the World Goes 'Round” and “Crooked Piece of Time.” Eventually, Prine discovered that his escape from the world had become a world unto itself. “There comes a time when you accept that this is what you do for a living, and it's

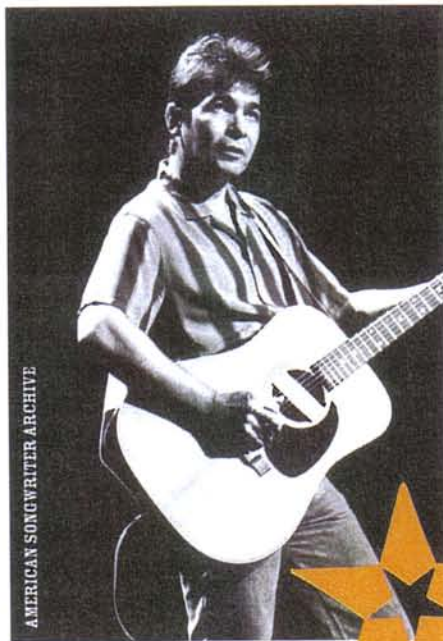
made before and keep the standards up.”

That sense of responsibility led Prine, along with his longtime manager, Al Bunetta, to form Oh Boy Records in 1980. Increasingly, the pressure to sell records for a major label—first Atlantic and then Asylum—was infringing on the creative process, and the pair positioned themselves to take back control. Under his own label, Prine turned an artistic corner. Gone were the high-profile producers and session players, as were production flourishes like horns and rockabilly guitars. Prine's first record for Oh Boy, 1984's *Aimless Love*, was stripped down and sweet, and songs like “Unwed Fathers” and “People Puttin' People Down” represented something of a return to form. In 1986, the

country-tinged *German Afternoons* earned him a Grammy nomination, and 1991 saw the release of *The Missing Years*, Prine's Grammy-winning collaboration with Tom Petty sideman Howie Epstein (who passed away in 2003). Prine and Epstein teamed up again for *Lost Dogs & Mixed Blessings*, which was also nominated for a Grammy. Unlike, for instance, the Memphis soul-influenced *Common Sense* (produced by guitar/songwriter legend Steve Cropper), Epstein's layered productions didn't interfere with Prine's ragged delivery or his left-of-center viewpoint. Eventually, Oh Boy fortunately bought the rights to the Asylum portion of Prine's catalog. His current label roster includes fellow songwriting legend Kris Kristofferson and Prine protégé Todd Snider.

Fair & Square is Prine's eighteenth career recording and his tenth for Oh Boy.

At 58-years-old, he sees the record as career defining—and as much as anything, that weighty proposition has contributed to the new album's long gestation period. Prine previously started work on the tracks several times only to put things on hold, sit back, listen and let the songs provide direction. New compositions were recorded and re-recorded at several different studios over a two-year period, both in a stripped-down full-band format. For Prine, culling all that material down to twelve final tracks was a difficult task. “No matter what we did,”



“THE SONG IS IN THERE, AND ALL I'VE GOT TO DO IS PULL AWAY THE STUFF THAT'S NOT SUPPOSED TO BE THERE. IT'S LIKE THE SONG IS THE DOG AND IT'S WAGGING ME. I JUST FOLLOW THE SONG AROUND THE ROOM OR AROUND THE BLOCK, AND FINALLY THE SONG SITS DOWN ... BUT ONLY WHEN THE SONG IS TIRED.”

kind of hard to swallow,” he admits. “You realize that, at least in the entertainment world, there's no difference between you and the monkey on the Ed Sullivan Show or Tony Orlando and Dawn. You're all just entertainers and you have to be there at 8:00, do your stuff and get paid. That's when you learn that being a writer is a responsibility. I'm trying to be responsible for the records I've

he says, “[some songs] didn't sound as good as the demos, and the demos weren't good enough to build a track. I finally had to set songs aside and eliminate a few—we had too many anyway.”

Prine has always had a firm hand in the sound of his records, but *Fair & Square* marks his first outing as a producer. Guided by co-producer Gary Paczosa (who's engineered records by

Mindy Smith and The Dixie Chicks), the record has a warm, roomy sound, and Prine's craggy voice is up front in the mix. That distinct voice, fans will undoubtedly recognize, is considerably craggier since Prine recovered from neck cancer, which was diagnosed in 1997. Miraculously, the radiation treatment he received left him with a deeper voice that's richer and more evocative than ever. "I never liked my voice much before," Prine once mused. "It was a bit too twangy."

Fair & Square's ongoing recording process meant that many musicians came and went. Prine and Paczosa would have them play their parts from the top of the song to the bottom, sometimes keeping only snippets of a performance. Among those who contributed to the album's mix were vocalists Allison Krauss and Mindy Smith, multi-instrumentalists Shawn Camp and Jerry Douglas, steel guitarist Dan Dugmore, accordion player Phil Parlapiano and the two members of Prine's regular road band, bassist Dave Jacques and guitarist Jason Wilbur.

Seven of *Fair & Square's* final tracks were co-written. According to Prine, he or one of his writing partners would bring an idea or a line to a writing session, but more often than not, writing was just a good excuse to hang out with friends. "I try to do everything I can to make it fun," he says. "At this point, if I don't keep it fun, I find it increasingly hard to write. If I look at it as work, then that will show up in the song. I guess that's why there's more co-writing on this record than usual, because I got with my buddies Pat McLaughlin, Roger Cook and Keith Sykes, and it was a fun day to spend together." In fact, songs like "Taking a Walk," a Prine/McLaughlin composition, sound like a relaxed conversation between buddies: "I'm taking a walk/I'm going outside/I'm watching the birds/I'm just getting by," Prine sings.

"Pat and I got on a roll where we'd write every Tuesday. With him it's like there's no subject matter...there's no story line. He's got a line and I say, 'Great, where will it go from there?' So I'll go into something—maybe I'll just go wild and write a whole verse all at once. Then Pat or I will say, 'No, that's a whole other song.' We can go back and forth like that and never discuss what the song's about, so the song might mean different things to each of us. By the end of the day, though, you'd have thought we'd just

cut an album. It was just one song, but we'd go home to our families and play it 45 times and think it was the greatest thing in the world. Sometimes it was a really good song, but sometimes it was just a fun day—like we went to the amusement park, ate too much candy and got bellyaches."

Since forming his own label, Prine has increasingly relied on collaborators such as McLaughlin, Sykes, Cook, Gary Nicholson, Shel Silverstein and Bobby Braddock. Before them, though, was songsmith crony Steve Goodman. Goodman and Prine were running buddies and staples of Chicago's hardscrabble folk scene during the late '60s and early '70s. It was Goodman who led Prine to Kris Kristofferson. An established star, Kristofferson brought the pair to New York, and on their first night in town, Prine sang three songs at *The Bitter End* in Greenwich Village. Legendary Atlantic Records producer and A&R executive Jerry Wexler was in the audience. Twenty-four hours later, he signed Prine to the famed label.

Prine's eyes still light up when he talks about Steve Good-

PHOTO BY DANIEL R. PATMORE



man, who died of leukemia in 1984. "The fact that Goodman and I got contracts within a couple months of each other and still lived in Chicago [at the time]...in the folk world...we were like conquering heroes," he laughs. "If they could've given us a tickertape parade, they would have. Steve Goodman was the most supportive friend-slash-fan I could've had. He used to corner people and sing two of my songs and one of his. That's how Kristofferson got to come over and see me—because Steve said 'you've got to come see my buddy.'"

NONE OF OUR POETS WROTE ANYTHING BETTER ABOUT VIETNAM THAN PRINE'S 'SAM STONE.' LYRIC POETRY IS CALLED THAT BECAUSE IT ONCE WAS SUNG AND ACCOMPANIED BY THE LYRE. ALL THAT'S LEFT OF THE MUSIC IN CONTEMPORARY POETRY ARE THINGS LIKE ASSONANCE AND ALLITERATION AND RHYME; PRINE'S WRITING AND MUSIC RETURNS US TO THAT EARLIER WAY OF DELIVERING POETRY." -TED KOOSER, POET LAUREATE ←

These days, co-writing with pals may feel like a day at the amusement park, but for Prine, the songs he writes alone don't come as easy. "These days there're a whole lot of things I'd rather be doing—I'd rather go get a hot dog or a doughnut than write a song," he says jokingly. Like Michelangelo, who once famously declared that sculpting was merely a matter of releasing a pre-existing form from a mass of stone, Prine chips away at his material until a finished song emerges.

"It's an unselfconscious process that's more about deciding what not to use than what to use," he claims. "I can't make myself go write on my own," Prine says. "It takes a long time these days. I wait and I wait and I wait—trying to be very patient—and when they do come along they're like a big block. The song is in there, and all I've got to do is pull away the stuff that's not supposed to be there. It's like the song is the dog and it's wagging me. I just follow the song around the room or around the block, and finally the song sits down . . . but only when the song is tired."

Prine's solo compositions on *Fair & Square* sound anything but tired. "Some Humans Ain't Human," for example, is an indictment of complacency and greed. It's a social commentary tempered with biting wit—recalling a classic like "Sam Stone"—but its targets are plainly in the here and now: "Have you ever noticed/When you're feeling really good/There's always a pigeon/That'll come shit on your hood/Or you're feeling your freedom/And the world's off your back/Some cowboy from Texas/Starts his own war in Iraq."

For Prine, not all songs present themselves as the aforementioned big block. Like a lot of writers, ideas and phrases sometimes seem to fall on him from the sky—gifts from the song gods, as it were. On these occasions, Prine will build from a song stream-of-consciousness style, often stringing together absurdities into a poignant whole. "She is My Everything" is one good example. "She knows everybody/from Muhammad Ali/to teaching Bruce Lee/how to do karate/She can lead a parade/while putting on her shades/in her Maserati/she knows everybody," he croons.

"[On that song] I just got to the point that—because of a couple of inter-rhymes in the beginning of the song—I wanted to keep building it like a house of cards," Prine suggests. "Just keep stacking them on top of one another and make them look like they're going to fall, and then they don't. I love it when it works like that. Sometimes I've done that with other songs but it was all just words, it wasn't a story. I prefer it when it stays a story and

you're actually writing about something, but you're still able to stretch words like that."

Throughout his career, Prine has had a knack for expressing deep sentiment without appearing sappy and overemotional. Songs such as "Souvenirs" and "My Darling Hometown" are whimsical and nostalgic but never rely on cliché. The latter, from *Fair & Square*, is an ode to Prine's adopted home, Ireland, where he spends much of his off time. Far away over the sea/there's a place at the table for me/where laughter and music abound/just waiting there/in my hometown."

"Life isn't a Hallmark card," Prine gathers, "but there are certain things that happen in life that are hard to relate without being corny. It's a fine line, I guess, when you're dealing with something sentimental, but I try to keep an edge on it. There are places and feelings that I want to write about, and I just have to go with it. I'm just trying to be true to myself. At the same time, I think anger in songwriting is highly overrated. You have to temper it by going back to things that you know are true, otherwise you can get into the same trouble as with sentimental songs."

Historically, some poets and songwriters, Dylan Thomas and Nick Drake for example, seem to revel in their misery. Like anger, however, Prine doesn't feel that suffering plays much of a role in his songwriting process. "Sure, it's easier to write a good sad song than a good uplifting song," he admits. "It's easier to put emotions that are really pulling at you into words. Like Steve Goodman used to say, 'When you're lucky enough that things are going really good, who wants to stop and write a song about it? But when somebody leaves you or something, you've suddenly got all the time in the world. That's about as far as I would take it though. I wouldn't want to suffer just so I could write a good song. I would rather have a nice, happy, balanced life and go, 'Sorry I don't have any good songs this year, I'm living instead.'"

Over the years, Prine's uncomplicated, instantly recognizable finger picking style hasn't changed much, and it remains an integral part of his songwriting. "Long Monday," for example, is framed by a rolling guitar part that's the perfect accompaniment to the song's theme: a weekend reunion. It's a simple sentiment that's enhanced by Prine's trademark playing, which is part rural blues, part old-time country. "My [guitar playing] was supposed to sound like Elizabeth Cotton (folk/blues guitarist), but I couldn't do that—not like her records. I was just starting out and thought that if I did it long enough I could learn to pick like that, but I never could. I did the same thing with Mississippi John Hurt, and





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the only thing that came out of it was that my thumb learned to keep going without me having to think about it. And, I stopped trying to pick with two or three fingers and found that just one finger and my thumb could get everything in my melodies. It was all within those seven notes. I was doing double the work—my one finger can do it all," he realized.

Prine counts Bob Dylan and Hank Williams as early influences. He finds Williams exceptional because his weighty legacy depends on a catalog compiled in such a short period of time. Currently, he also considers himself a fan of Elvis Costello, Nick Lowe and Van Morrison ("because he sticks to his guns"). Among younger songwriters, Prine is particularly fond of Ron Sexsmith. "I love his words," he says, "but it slays me that somebody can come up with new, exciting melodies like he does. He's got his head turned in a certain way and he's saying this one thing, but he's saying it differently in all these songs."

Of course, admirers see those same traits in Prine—integrity

and distinctiveness. His personality comes through in his songs. His droll wit, warmth and delight in absurdity are the same in conversation as they are on stage and in song. Prine's fans are connected to him because they feel they know the guy, whether they've met him in person or not. "People also see a lot of themselves in the songs," Prine says. "But if I thought I was writing to appeal to a certain kind of person, I'd be a terrible failure. Instead, I try not to guess. I go with what I know, and no matter how limited that is, it's still what I know to be true. At worst I'll come up with a corny song, and people will say, 'Yeah, I feel that way too...but I don't know if I'd have written a song about it.'"

Last March, Prine's reputation as the voice of the everyman brought him a remarkable honor. He became the first songwriter ever to read and perform his work at the Library of Congress—a tribute usually reserved for prize-winning authors, politicians and respected academics. It was a pretty good gig for the self-con-

“THERE WERE TIMES WHEN I WAS WRITING SO MANY SONGS THAT I WOULD GET AN IDEA IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT AND NOT WRITE IT DOWN—THEN THE NEXT MORNING IT WAS GONE. NOWADAYS, I PROBABLY WRITE AS MUCH WHILE I’M DRIVING AS I DO SITTING WITH MY GUITAR AT A DESK, BUT I’VE ALWAYS GOT IT GOING.”



fessed “so-so” student and ex-mailman who once sang, “On my very first job I said ‘thank you’ and ‘please’/They made me scrub a parking lot/down on my knees.”

The Library invitation came from America’s newest Poet Laureate, Ted Kooser, a writer who’s maintained a connection to America’s heartland despite a long career in the life insurance business. The program, titled “A Literary Evening with John Prine and Ted Kooser,” featured an animated discussion in which the pair compared the emotional appeal of contemporary song lyrics to the effectiveness of contemporary poetry. Like Prine, Kooser is a Midwesterner whose work is known for its poignancy and concern for everyday life. Kooser has said of Prine: “He did a better job of holding up the mirror of art to the ‘60s and ‘70s than any of our official literary poets. And none of our poets wrote anything better about Vietnam than Prine’s ‘Sam Stone.’ Lyric poetry is called that because it once was sung and accompanied by the lyre. All that’s left of the music in contemporary poetry are things like assonance and alliteration and rhyme; Prine’s writing and music returns us to that earlier way of delivering poetry.”

Prine and his two-piece band are to begin touring in April, upon the release of *Fair & Square*. These days he keeps the roadwork down to weekend and week long runs in order to keep up with his family and his sleep. Mostly, Prine does his writing close

to home. “I don’t normally write on the road, but I’ll stay open to it,” Prine says. “Ideas can come in the strangest places. “I’ve learned to be receptive to it and to write it down, even if it’s just another napkin that’ll be around for the next ten years. There were times when I was writing so many songs that I

would get an idea in the middle of the night and not write it down—then the next morning it was gone. Nowadays, I probably write as much while I’m driving as I do sitting with my guitar at a desk, but I’ve always got it going.”

Prine’s not one to give advice, but when pressed, he offers the following counsel to fellow songwriters, struggling or otherwise. “Keep it to what you know about, no matter how small or simple you think it is. If you stay in that box, you’re going to wind up writing something bigger than the box, but if you go outside of it, then you’re just guessing and you’re in outer space. Keep your antennas up and your gear clean because you never know when [the songs] are going to come along. I still don’t know where they come from after all these years.” ★



THE END