

Broken Hearts & Dirty Windows: Songs of John Prine

In the songs of John Prine, there exists a near-perfect intersection of understatement and insight. Prine does not trumpet his truths: they just emerge, crawling out of sparse, carefully arrayed and encapsulated moments, presented with unflinching, unsentimental clarity. Assumptions are neatly overturned with a disarming, almost casual turn of phrase, while long-accepted aspects of human nature are brought to light in unexpected contexts that only reinforce their universal nature. It's devastating stuff, yet strangely uplifting. The contrasts and paradoxes Prine uncovers – combined with his unquestionable abilities as a craftsman – have insured that his music continually influences generation after generation of maverick artists.

Among Prine's earliest supporters were controversial, innovative figures such as Bob Dylan, Kris Kristofferson, and Johnny Cash. Today's avant-roots renaissance owes a great debt to Prine's laconic, ever-questioning poetic quality – a debt that is warmly repaid by *Broken Hearts and Dirty Windows: Songs of John Prine*, available June 22nd on Oh Boy Records. Featuring twelve newly-recorded versions of classic Prine songs, *Broken Hearts and Dirty Windows* boasts an enviable roll call of lauded, inventive musicians and songwriters, including My Morning Jacket, The Avett Brothers, Conor Oberst and The Mystic Valley Band, Old Crow Medicine Show, Lambchop, Josh Ritter, the Drive By Truckers, Nickel Creek's Sara Watkins, Deer Tick featuring Liz Isenburg, Justin Townes Earle, Those Darlins, and Bon Iver's Justin Vernon. That Prine's perspective flourishes so vividly in these modern recastings is testament to not only the sheer power of his songs, but to the subtly defiant undercurrent that runs throughout Prine's oeuvre.

Since his first, self-titled album was released in 1971, former Illinois letter carrier Prine has been slowly distancing himself from musical movements and institutions: simultaneously defining and defying the post-Dylan singer-songwriter movement from which he sprang. Bolder and stranger than the rest, yet beguilingly old-fashioned, Prine functions on his own timetable and by his own rules, going so far as to found his own label with longtime manager Al Bunetta, Oh Boy Records, and thus liberating himself from the cat-and-mouse pressures of major label recording. *Broken Hearts and Dirty Windows* was born in the Oh Boy offices, as a group of staffers at the five-person company were discussing their favorite artists and wondering how some of these newer acts would go about interpreting John Prine's music. From there, inquiries began to be made...

"We took a fair amount of time putting this thing together," said Oh Boy staff member and compilation producer Josh Talley. "We left the album in the hands of the artists. Each artist picked the song they wanted to do, and we made no suggestions or demands as to how they should make it sound. We also didn't give many of them a due-date – we felt like if we put a deadline on it, the artists wouldn't have a chance to really get inside the songs. Consequently, this took over two years to all come together."

Astonishingly, despite the various perspectives, studios, personnel, and voices, *Broken*

Hearts and Dirty Windows holds together as a compelling unified statement. More of a heartfelt thank-you note than a tribute (after all, Prine is still creating some of the best music of his career), Prine's irreverent spirit permeates every note here, while the range of textures and styles reflects Prine's own wide-ranging influences, which encompass everything from vintage country and stringband music to stinging, snarling R&B.

Justin Vernon of the underground sensation Bon Iver opens the set with an expansive version of the title track to Prine's 1978 classic *Bruise Orange* that preserves the original's gentle sway, yet embroiders it with rich harmonies, swelling organ, and thick, cavernous reverb. The song's bittersweet core persists, shimmering through the undulating waltz rhythm and glassy electric guitars. From there, Conor Oberst and The Mystic Valley Band's take on "Wedding Day in Funeralville" (from 1975's *Common Sense*) arrives like a headlong rush: a compact country-rock joy ride clocking in at barely over two minutes yet resoundingly complete. Those first two cuts immediately set up the range of possibilities – from hauntingly sparse to rollickingly thick and ragged.

Steel guitar and glimmering synthesizer make for unlikely bedfellows on My Morning Jacket's winsome, wining stroll through "All the Best," which hails from Prine's 1991 Grammy-winning disk *The Missing Years*. Similar in its respectful revisionism, Nashville country-soul iconoclasts Lambchop reconstruct 1971's haunting "Six O'Clock News" with a gently propulsive backbeat laced with gurgling synth loops, topped by Kurt Wagner's chillingly distressed vocal. Tennessee punk/pop/country alchemists Those Darlins provide a dose of humor and sly insouciance with their swaggering, throbbing turn on "Let's Talk Dirty in Hawaiian." Equally rousing is the Avett Brother's "Spanish Pipe dream," resurrected from Prine's seismic 1971 self-titled debut.

Even Prine's most familiar material is reborn with visceral, aching intensity. The gritty, punk-inflected stringband Old Crow Medicine Show approach "Angel from Montgomery" with clearheaded resolution and deliver a stunning performance that captures the song's inherent weariness and wistful destitution with immediacy and soul. "Far From Me," cited by Prine as one of his own personal favorites of the songs he's written, is rendered equally plain and pure by Justin Townes Earl, with just thumping finger-picked guitar, upright bass, mandolin, and wheezing reed organ for accompaniment.

Broken Hearts and Dirty Windows echoes with both appreciation and adventure, implying that – above all – the confidence and freedom to play by your own rules is Prine's most precious lesson. "After all the years gone, you wonder if John Prine feels a distance between the songs and the listeners. If these old songs seem folded over by now," writes Justin Vernon and author Michael Perry in a perceptive sleeve-note. "But then it's back to another element of Prine songs – humility. A delicate humility, not to be confused with weakness. And that is how we offer these songs, Mister Prine: humbly, with gratitude, our tuppence to honor you and your life's works. Your songs are still here, John, beautifully breathing and beating us up."