

# JOHN PRINE IN PERSON & ON STAGE

The first time he got onstage to perform – at a Chicago open mic night – there was absolute silence. Here comes a guy nobody had ever seen, a mailman from nearby Maywood, and the very first songs he ever sings are miracles, songs like “Hello In There” and “Angel from Montgomery.” But this stunned silence spelled disaster to Prine. “They just sat there,” he said. “They didn’t even applaud, they just *looked* at me. I thought, ‘Uh oh. This is pretty bad.’ I started shuffling my feet and looking around. And then they started applauding and it was a really great feeling. It was like I found out all of a sudden that I could communicate deep feelings and emotions. And to find that out all at once was amazing.”

That one night changed his life. The club-owner offered him a gig, and from that moment on he quickly became one of Chicago’s most beloved local heroes, a guy who would honor the Windy City with as much love and grace as Studs Terkel and Carl Sandburg. Prine soon befriended another local hero, Steve Goodman, and with Goodman he met the world. Kris Kristofferson heard his songs, helped him land a record deal, and soon everyone knew what Chicago already did, that Prine was the real deal. From that first album on, he came known as a genuine “songwriter’s songwriter,” one of the rare ones who writes the songs other songwriters would sell their souls for. Evidence of this is the long list of songwriters who have recorded his songs, including Johnny Cash, Bonnie Raitt, the Everly Brothers, John Denver, Kris Kristofferson, Carly Simon, Ben Harper, Joan Baez, and many others. Even Bob Dylan was stunned. “His stuff is pure Proustian existentialism,” said Bob Dylan. . “He’s so good,” said Kristofferson, “we’re gonna have to break his fingers.”

Dylan and the rest were simply recognizing that which we have all come to know, that Prine’s songs are so hauntingly evocative of the laughter and tears inherent in the human condition, so purely precise and finely etched, that lines from them linger in our hearts and minds like dreams, separate from the songs. There’s the rodeo poster from “Angel from Montgomery,” the hole in daddy’s arm and the broken radio (from “Sam Stone”), the old trees that just grow stronger (from “Hello In There.”) The kinds of lines you carry around in your pocket, knowing they’re in there when you need them. With a staggering penchant for detail, a proclivity to be both hilarious and deeply serious (and often in the same song), and a visceral embrace of roots music, he’s made the kinds of songs nobody ever dreamed of before, or since.

Born on October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1946 in Maywood, he grew up spinning Roy Acuff and Hank Williams 78s in his dad’s collection, as well as tuning into WJJD to hear Webb Pierce, Lefty Frizell and others

“back to back, all night long.” And then a new kind of music arrived: “I was coming of age just as rock and roll was invented,” he said, and along with his country heroes he added Elvis, Little Richard, Fats Domino, and the one he loved the most, Chuck Berry: “Because he told a story in less than three minutes.”

At 14 he started playing guitar and never stopped, starting with old folk tunes taught to him by his brother Dave. After high school he enlisted in the army, and was happy to be stationed in Germany, far from Viet Nam. He spent most of his time in the barracks playing guitar and singing Lefty Frizzell and Hank Williams songs with a friend.

After the army, he became a mailman, which he loved because he could write songs while walking his familiar route. “It was like a library with no books,” he said.

He haunted the fringes of Chicago open mic nights, mostly at the old Fifth Peg on Armitage in Old Town. Once he summoned up the courage to perform, although terrified, he knew he was home. The rest is singer-songwriter history. It was 1971, the dream of the Sixties was over and Goodman and Prine emerged with a new kind of song, eschewing abstractions to write story songs about real people: “Midwestern mindtrips to the nth degree,” as Dylan put it. Songs with the concrete details and imagery of a novel, but compounded, like Prine’s hero Chuck Berry’s songs, into mini-masterpieces.

After landing his first gig, he went home and wrote more masterpieces that made up his first self-titled debut, released in 1971. It was received with near-unanimous raves: “... absolutely one of the greatest albums ever made,” wrote a hometown paper, “by one of the most creative and evocative songwriters of our time.” There was the recognition then, which has been confirmed by the passage of time, that even among the best, he stood out. “Good songwriters are on the rise,” wrote *Rolling Stone*, “but John is differently good.”

Fans hungry for meaningful new music discovered him, unconcerned if he was the “new Dylan” or not, as he was often labeled, but drawn to the complex simplicity of his songs, the heady amalgam of sorrow and whimsy. Always seeking to strike a balance in his work, Prine said he wrote funny songs so as to get back to the tragic ones.

He made eight albums on two major labels, including *Sweet Revenge*, *Common Sense*, and *Bruised Orange*. In 1980 he moved to Nashville, and with longtime manager Al Bunetta, formed his own label, Oh Boy Records in 1981. They’ve since released a chain of great records, including 1991’s Grammy-winning *The Missing Years*, which featured cameos by Bruce Springsteen and Tom Petty. In 2000 he recaptured his own legacy by recording *Souvenirs*, new recordings of many of his classic songs.

In 1998 he was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer centered in his neck. The removal of a tumor and subsequent radiation seems to have eradicated it completely. Although his singing voice was lowered significantly, he faced his illness with the same blend of wistful humor he

instills in his songs. In a post-surgery letter to his fans, he wrote, "Hopefully my neck is looking forward to its job of holding my head up above my shoulders."

Now he's back with a brand new live album, *John Prine: In Person & On Stage*, which contains both solo and duet renditions of some of early songs such as "Angel From Montgomery" (here in a breathtaking duet with Emmylou Harris) as well as later classics such as "Unwed Fathers" (with Iris DeMent) and one of the most poignant songs ever from a husband to a wife, "She Is My Everything."

"If he's this good this young," wrote *Rolling Stone* in 1971, "time should be on his side." Truer words have rarely been written. Some four decades since his remarkable debut, Prine has stayed at the top of his game, both as a performer and songwriter. Recently honored at the Library of Congress, he has been elevated from the annals of songwriters into the realm of bonafide American treasures. Poet Laureate Ted Kooser introduced him at the Library of Congress by likening him to Raymond Carver for making "monuments of ordinary lives." But the greatest testaments to his lasting legacy are the songs themselves. Unlike so many which belong only to the time in which they emerged, his, like the old trees in "Hello In There," seem to just grow stronger with the passing years.

*Words by Paul Zollo.*