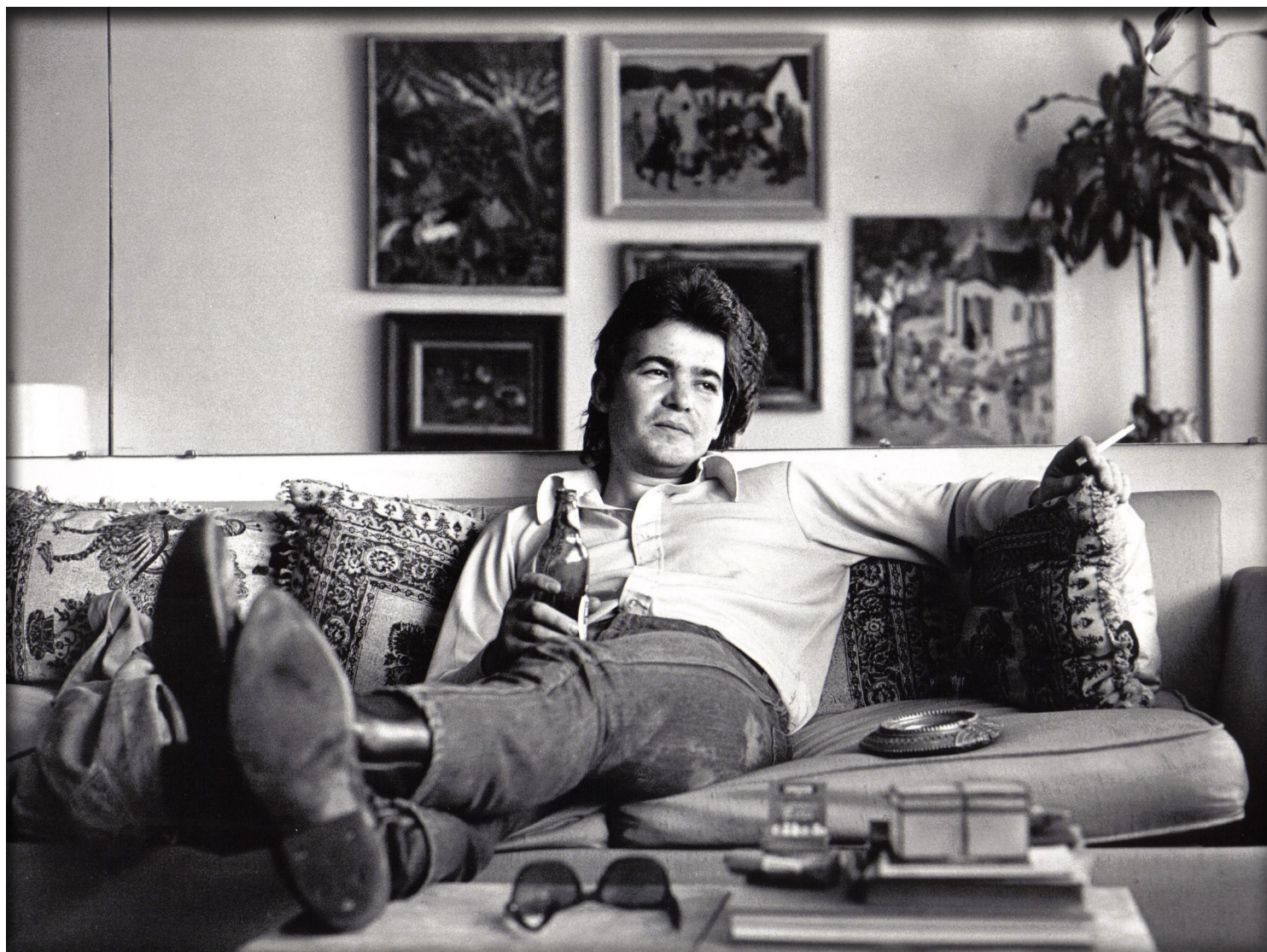


email for talking

presents
a listening guide to:

JOHN PRINE



by Reid Belew | edited by John Phillip Baker

TABLE OF CONTENTS

origin story

key records

15 essential prine songs

if you only had to listen to one thing...

in praise of every day: john prine and being lucky

an essay!

How the **hell** can a person go to work in the morning, and come home in the evening and **have nothing to say?**



ORIGIN STORY



John Prine was born in 1946 in Maywood, Illinois after his mother and father moved from West Kentucky's Muhlenberg County, a place Prine would consider a key part of his heritage. Prine took after his guitar-playing grandfather at a young age, taking lessons from his older brother. John's grandfather played with Ike Everly and Merle Travis.

John graduated high school and joined the army. After his 2-year tour in the army ended, John moved to downtown Chicago and began working as a mail carrier. During the day, he'd walk his route and write songs in his head. After work, he'd spend time in the bars and cafes of Chicago's Old Town district.

One night, Prine made a snide comment about one of the open mic performers at the Fifth Peg bar. Prine's version of the story is that after his 3rd

or 4th beer, he had the gusto to say out loud, "Man, this sucks." A performer responded to John's comment with "You think you could do better?" Prine grabbed a guitar and played "Sam Stone."

John played his songs, and afterward, no one clapped—all of them momentarily struck by his songwriting. The bar's owner offered him a job, and John said "Doing what?" The bar manager said, "Playing songs." Prine accepted. To get a sense of these shows and how John commanded the crowd, listen to the second disc of his compilation *The Singing Mailman Delivers*, a live recording of one of his sets during this period.

Not long after, famed Chicago movie critic Roger Ebert entered the Fifth Peg on a night John was performing. Ebert wrote this the next day in the *Chicago Sun-Tribune*:

He appears on stage with such modesty he almost seems to be backing into the spotlight. He sings rather quietly, and his guitar work is good, but he doesn't show off. He starts slow. But after a song or two, even the drunks in the room begin to listen to his lyrics. And then he has you.

By word of mouth, Prine grew famous amidst the Chicago folk-revival scene. Soon, bars had to turn people away at the door. In early 1971, after watching Prine play a set, Kris Kristofferson joked that Prine was so good that "we may have to break his thumbs." Kristofferson asked Prine to open for him at New York City's *The Bitter End*. In the audience that night was a record executive from Atlantic records. He signed John to a record contract the morning after his performance.

For the next 50 years, not much would change. Prine's words, his trademark mix of humor and piercing insight into the human condition—sometimes so layered you can't tell one from the other—would garner him affection from peers and fans alike.

Key Records

John Prine (1971) - Prine's self-titled record is perhaps the most complete representation of Prine the artist. Recorded in 1971 in Memphis, Tennessee (except "Paradise"), the record captures Prine's ability to make you laugh and cry all at once, using only everyday vernacular and compositions. His songs sound as if they were written by your neighbor in their spare time.

Prine was thrown into the fire during the recording of this album. Remember, he had only been playing in public for about a year. Prine wrote in the liner notes: "I was terrified. I went straight from playing by myself, still learning how to sing, to playing with Elvis Presley's rhythm section." The feeling was mutual. Drummer Heywood Bishop said of the sessions: "There was no evidence of groove whatever [sic], and I was hungry for groove. Prine came off like a folk poet. This guy was really nasally, he didn't have any tone to his voice, and all his songs were in the same key! I thought, 'This is gonna be like milking a dag-blasted dog!'"

The record features future genre standards such as "Paradise," "Illegal Smile," "Spanish Pipedream," "Your Flag Decal Won't Get You Into Heaven Anymore," "Angel from Montgomery," and "Sam Stone."

These songs touch on nostalgia for a home that is no longer where and how you left it, the pain of a loved one with dementia, hippy communes, marijuana, false patriotism, and the veteran's experience. All at age 25. Jesus.

Tree of Forgiveness (2018) - Prine had one of those storybook careers. He was found by chance, was adored by his peers, and bookended his career with two incredible records. Where some of Prine's records wavered from his trademark potency, "Tree of Forgiveness" is a masterwork ribbon on a career. Prine's "Tree of Forgiveness" was Prine flexing his mastery, available to him now in the form of years of experience.

"Tree of Forgiveness" was Prine's first record of original material since 2005's "Fair and Square." Perhaps he knew this might be his last record—many of the songs wrestle with death. This record showcases the power of age and its subsequent wisdom, especially

I guess I just process death differently than some folks. Realizing you're not going to see that person again is always the most difficult part about it. But that feeling settles, and then you are glad you had that person in your life, and then the happiness and the sadness get all swirled up inside you.

If you listen to people talk, when people actually talk, they talk in melodies. If they get angry, their voice rises, and it's more of a staccato thing. When they ask for something, they're real sweet. It's all music.



pertaining to the craft of music and songwriting. All of the excess is cut out. What remains is precise, clear songwriting that packs a punch.

Bruised Orange (1978) - “Bruised Orange” pairs strong songwriting with some of the best production on any of his records, thanks to his longtime collaborator, Steve Goodman. Many of Prine’s records embed his songwriting among questionable instrumentation that leaves the listener scratching their heads. Records like “German Afternoons” feature unexpected and unnatural sounding electric guitars that overpower Prine’s lyrics. “Bruised Orange,” however, nails it. Arrangements are thoughtful, placing the song above everything else.

“Bruised Orange” features songs that would become Prine classics, such as “Fish and Whistle,” “The Hobo Song,” “Crooked Piece of Time,” and most notably “That’s the Way the World Goes ‘Round,” which is Prine at the peak of his powers. The devastating, the hilarious, the worldly, and the spiritual: all are tied into one, confusing where one ends and the other begins. After Prine’s debut show-stopping record, his subsequent records lacked the same authority, and his career failing to live up to the promise of its start until the release of “Bruised Orange.”

Souvenirs (2000) - It’s unorthodox to include a compilation record as an essential record for an artist (much less two of them—sorry), but I think this is important.

Often, Prine was written off as a comedic or novelty songwriter. “Souvenirs” is a collection of some of Prine’s best songs, all re-recorded and arranged more thoughtfully. “Souvenirs” offers a great experience: to listen to Prine in his older years, presenting his best once again in slow, sparse arrangements as if to ask, “Do you hear what I’m actually saying here?” Prine’s first signs of weathering in his voice give these songs a mature veneer that invites reflection. I fell in love with Prine all over again with this record.

John Prine (Live) (1990) - If “Souvenirs” properly highlights the power of Prine’s words in song, “John Prine (Live)” properly highlights his command of a room. Prine’s ability to captivate a crowd in his sheepish, humble way is an essential piece of the Prine modus operandi.

As a bonus, versions of his most famous songs from this record might be better than their studio counterparts. Don’t miss “Angel from Montgomery” with Bonnie Raitt, “Living in the Future,” which has an extremely funny intermission, and “That’s the Way the World Goes ‘Round.’”

Fifteen essential Prine songs

“Angel From Montgomery” - When all is said and done, this is probably Johnny’s most famous song. Bonnie Raitt’s version is worth your time too.

“That’s the Way the World Goes Around” - Stephen Colbert’s favorite Prine song is a helpful, funny reminder that shit happens.

“Fish and Whistle” - Being mad at God, fate, the world, etc., is a heavy cross to bear. “Fish and Whistle” provides the valuable and needed affirmation that this anger is normal.

“Lake Marie” - This is Bob Dylan’s favorite John Prine song. Our memories and the physical spaces they took place in are not eternal. The world grows and changes, and sometimes places that are important to us are destroyed or altered by their role in another history. This can be a sad and difficult web to navigate. Prine may not have an answer to his own struggle to this, but his willingness to share in this difficulty is comforting.

“Hello In There” - John Prine does not fear heavy subjects. In this instance, dementia.

“Sam Stone” - I’ll repeat, John Prine does not fear heavy subjects.

“Summer’s End” - This is a sad song about the opioid crisis, dedicated to former Nashville mayor Megan Barry after her son passed away from an accidental overdose.

“In Spite of Ourselves” - The people we love are quirky, annoying, unique, and special to us. There are not many songs that paint real portraits of love like this.

“When I Get to Heaven” - To hear death presented as a celebration is liberating. Prine died just a couple of years after he released this song, and listening to it will give you a little happy cry.

“Speed of the Sound of Loneliness” - More on this in just a second.

“Please Don’t Bury Me” - In the same vein of “When I Get to Heaven,” controlling the internal narrative of our impending deaths is taxing and scary. Prine copes with loads of humor and a lot of happiness.

“Living In the Future” - Prine is an underrated protest songwriter. This is one of his most subtle offerings, inviting the listener to evaluate closely to hear its stinging message.

“All the Best” - Got an ex on your mind? Here’s a song for you.

“Paradise” - Perhaps one of his most covered songs, “Paradise” holds the tension between love of a place and sadness at how time destroys that place.

“Illegal Smile” - It’s a clever, funny song about marijuana.



*if you only had
to listen to one
thing...*

Speed of the Sound of Loneliness

Most will consider Prine a novelty or humorous songwriter. Perhaps he usually falls into that category, but his catalog is far too varied to be placed in a box. Often, there is a great deal beneath the surface of Prine's humor and cleverness. "Speed of the Sound of Loneliness" is Prine's best songwriting on full display, and no humor is involved. It's destitute. But Prine's midwestern good 'ol boy shines just as bright. This sadness and heartfelt writing paired with his home-grown sensibility create a more robust picture of Prine than other songs do. Listeners can peek behind his cheerful, good-hearted demeanor and see the emotional range that inspires all his work.

***So what in the world's
come over you?***

***And what in heaven's
name have you done?***

***I think if you write from
your own gut, you'll come up
with something interesting,
whereas if you sit around
guessing what people want,
you end up with the kind of
same schlock that everybody
else has got.***

***I'd rather get a hot dog or a
doughnut than write a song.***

in praise of every day: John Prine and how to wake up

*How the hell can a person
Go to work in the morning
Then come home in the evening
And have nothing to say?*

- John Prine, 'Angel from Montgomery'

*You say: all of life, the highs and the lows,
is grist for the mill of going home. I will eat it all.*

- Ram Dass

For some reason, we were put here. As to what we do with that, this is best left to philosophers and theologians. There may not be an answer. All our wonderings are ladders to false summits. Beautiful, bare, lonely false summits. Often the only option is to climb down and scout it out again, hoping the next answer to our purpose is manifest elsewhere.

As for how we carry the weight of existence, John Prine has something to say.

— — — — —

“Angel From Montgomery” was the first John Prine song I loved. 2 minutes and 31 seconds into this love I was being asked why I lived in a way that allowed me to come home empty-handed. Imagine being on a first date and before the appetizer hits the table, you’re asked “Why are you here?” Prine’s implication is that the world is far too big to be left with nothing after 18 hours of being awake.

We are tempted to think that our lives are unremarkable. We wake up, have our coffee, go to work and do the same thing we did yesterday, coming home just in time to fix dinner and rest before we do the same thing we did today. On our worst days, no one can blame anyone for assessing this situation as little more than a petri dish for insignificance. Living this way can be painful, and many of us don’t escape this cycle of negative thoughts.

In his unique way, Prine reminds us that we have agency. We have the choice to recognize the good within the bad, the bad within the good, the white within the black, the black within the white, and that everything offers us something. All our annoyances, sources of anger, and saddening circumstances can be injected with healthy optimism when we choose to do so. Conversely, all of our happiness, good fortune, and hopes can be grounded in a hopeful realism. Everything in our lives offers us something to learn or grow from. As Ram Dass said, “You say: all of life, the highs and the lows, is grist for the mill of going home. I will eat it all.”

Time and time again, Prine makes the truth undeniable: it's up to us to see value in everything, so choose to see it all. Rejoice in the good, and resolve to not forsake the bad. Be gray. Eat it all.

Prine lays the blueprint out himself. "Paradise" juxtaposes childhood memories of a specific place with that place's exploitation for resources by greedy corporations. "In Spite of Ourselves" presents every annoying quirk of a lover against undying love, the former feeding the latter. "Fish and Whistle" pits faith in God against anger with God. "Please Don't Bury Me" toys with the teeter-totter of death and its conquering via a charitable legacy. And as if to put an exclamation point on his life's exploration of yin and yang, "That's the Way the World Goes 'Round" spells it out: that's just how life is—shit and gold are everywhere, and both are valuable.

The miracle of adopting Prine's disposition is seeing that our everyday lives are ripe with opportunities to become better—more thoughtful, more hopeful, more patient, more kind, more forgiving. Engaging with this makes it impossible to come home empty-handed. Often, we come home broken-hearted. This is the burden of those with Prine's openness. But if we can learn to accept the unfortunate with grace and without resistance, and the hopeful with humility and gratitude, a life full of wonder and appreciation waits.

We will never know why we are here. Our focus can only be on how we are here. Prine's method is compelling: do it with a wink and nod to the painful, the lonely, the mournful, the rapturous, the hopeful, the disappointing, and the uplifting. Doing so fosters appreciation, and if we appreciate our lives, then we have nothing to fear. Each day becomes another opportunity.

This is power: that we wake up knowing a whole world awaits us.



And the water **tastes funny**
When you're far from your home
But it's only **the thirsty**
That hunger to roam

*****Blow up your TV*****
Throw away your paper
Go to the country
Build you a home
Plant a little garden
Eat a lot of peaches
Try an' **find Jesus** on your own

***Lovingly prepared by Reid
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