

John Prine, Iconic Folk Singer, Takes Everything In Stride

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In the late 1960s now-legendary folk musician John Prine was living in Maywood, Illinois, and working as a mailman.

At night he would venture out to open mikes at Chicago bars, watching strangers play music, never really imagining he'd play his own songs onstage. Although he'd written a few things in his spare time, he'd only shown them to his brother, David.

But one night the secret came out.

"I remember sitting at a table and saying very quietly, so the performer singing couldn't hear, I said: This sucks," Prine remembers. "And then another guy said to me: Well why don't you get up there and play?"

Not one to back down from a dare, he reluctantly stood up, walked to the stage, and began to strum the opening to "Sam Stone," a simple five-chord song he'd written about a soldier returning home from Vietnam.

"Well, he played his last request / While the room smelled just like death / With an overdose hovering in the air."

When he was done playing, nothing happened. The room went silent.

"People just looked at me. And I thought: oh shit, I'm in deep trouble now."

But then, slowly, everyone began to applaud, like something out of a movie. "And I thought, oh maybe they want more ... so I gave 'em another one."

That one-off performance segued into other shows and then a residency at

Chicago's Fifth Peg bar on Armitage Avenue (which is now a UPS store). One night the film critic Roger Ebert just so happened to drop into one of Prine's performances. Captivated, he immediately went back to his office and provided the unknown singer/songwriter with [his very first rave review](#) -- in the *Chicago Sun Times*.

"[Prine] appears on stage with such modesty he almost seems to be backing into the spotlight," Ebert [wrote](#) in 1970. "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."

For humble simplicity and truth, Prine has always been your man, and that hasn't changed. At 65, he can still captivate a crowd of thousands, like he did at [this year's Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival](#) in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, where you could have heard a pin drop in the middle of the sunny, crowded afternoon.

On Monday, he spoke to The Huffington Post over the phone from Nashville, where he lives with his wife and three children, as he prepared to embark on [a handful of tour dates](#) in the South and Midwest -- "just a few shows," he says -- as much as he can handle these days.

And that's not half bad for a guy who [survived a serious bout of cell cancer](#) in the late 90s, when doctors removed a tumor from the side of his neck and put him through six weeks of radiation therapy. Prine's cigarettes-and-gravel voice now reflects the broken tissue near his throat.

Asked if he felt like addressing the cancer through his writing, he said it didn't quite work like that. "What would I call it? 'This Little Cancer of Mine, I'm Gonna Let it Shine?' It just bugs me when people go on TV and say 'I've got cancer,' but I don't know ... maybe it helps them."

Cancer made him look inward, gave him a long moment to reflect. He remembers how he felt immediately following his successful treatments: "It makes colors brighter, makes everything smell better, everything around you."

And as he's moved through his life since then, the way he approaches songwriting hasn't changed.

"I still have no idea where they come from, the songs. Not like I can just wake up on Tuesday at 10 a.m. and guarantee what kind will come out. It's a game of patience with me. My wife thinks I'm stalling," he laughed. "She thinks I should be down there turning out hot songs in the factory."

Though Prine might be part of the old-school regime of singer/songwriters, he was actually a sort of trailblazer in the independent record industry. Tired of dealing with major labels, he founded his own in 1984 -- [Oh Boy Records](#) -- which has since been home to his own albums as well as reissues from Kris Kristofferson, Janis Ian, Merle Haggard, and others. This way, he said, he knows where all the money goes -- a trick [other major artists](#) have picked up on in recent years.

Prine's newest compilation, "[The Singing Mailman Delivers.](#)" features the scratchy, unreleased demos of many of his classic songs, recorded at WFMT Studios in 1970. A second disc contains live versions of many of those songs recorded during his residency at the Fifth Peg. It's a worthy introduction for people who don't know his work, or might have only heard "Angel From Montgomery" or "Souvenirs" -- two of his original classics -- covered by any number of other musicians.

Does he have plans for another album of new songs? His last collection of originals, "Fair & Square," from 2005, won him a Grammy Award.

"I try and not set any borders in the first place, it's really whatever comes out, you know?" he laughed again. "I guess that's kind of a funny way to go about it. But sometimes it works."