

Peter Cooper On Music: New album fetes John Prine's old songs

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Forty-one years ago, *Chicago Sun-Times* film critic Roger Ebert walked into a bar, which was not unusual.

The unusual part came when Ebert listened to the young fellow holding an acoustic guitar and singing songs into a cheap microphone. The songs were about old people, Vietnam veterans, broken toys, faded colors, coal companies and misunderstandings. The songs were rooted in traditional folk and country, and filtered through one of the world's most pleasingly peculiar sensibilities.

Over the past four decades, the songs and the singer have become well-known, well-sung and well-praised. But at the time, those songs' popularity was largely confined to 858 West Armitage St., the Chicago address at which Ebert found himself jotting notes for what would be the first music review he'd ever written, and the first time [John Prine](#) had ever been reviewed.

"You hear lyrics like these, perfectly fitted to Prine's quietly confident style and his ghost of a Kentucky accent, and you wonder how anyone could have so much empathy and still be looking forward to his 24th birthday," Ebert wrote of Prine's performance at a club called the Fifth Peg.

To be fair, Prine had put a lot of rumination into his 23 years. He had plenty of time to think while he delivered the mail for the U.S. Postal Service. He knew his route well, so there wasn't much heavy mental lifting involved, and he'd think of songs while on the job. In the summer of 1970, he'd come up with enough good songs that he began playing them regularly at the Fifth Peg.

Enter Roger Ebert.

“I knew from the moment I heard him how good he was,” Ebert wrote in 2004. “I wasn’t a music critic, but I wrote about him in the Sun-Times because after hearing him sing ‘Old Folks’ and ‘Sam Stone,’ how could I not?”

Actually, the “old folks” song was called “Hello in There,” and at the time, “Sam Stone” was called “Great Society Conflict Veteran’s Blues.” Prine changed that cumbersome “Great Society, etc.” title to “Sam Stone” by the time he recorded the song on his self-titled 1971 debut album — released 40 years ago this month — that announced Prine as a stunning talent whose songs appealed even beyond West Armitage Street.

“I bought John Prine’s first album on LP when it was released,” said Ted Kooser, America’s Poet Laureate, in 2005. “I played it as soon as I got home and noticed at once that here was a truly original writer, unequalled, and a genuine poet of the American people. ... He’s taken ordinary people and made monuments of them, treating them with great respect and love.”

Yeah, but what does Kooser know? Let’s see what [Bob Dylan](#) thinks:

“Prine’s stuff is pure Proustian existentialism,” Dylan said.

OK, so I still don’t know what Bob Dylan thinks. But I figure he likes it. And I’m anxious to hear something by that Proust guy.

Most of all, I’d like to hear what it was that Ebert heard when he walked into the Fifth Peg. I’d like to hear pre-fame Prine singing in front of a small and ardent crowd. I’d like to hear him do “Hello in There” and “Paradise” and “Blue Umbrella” when those songs were brand new and fresh off the mail truck. But that opportunity has passed ... hold on, it hasn’t passed.

New album, old songs

Oh Boy Records has just released *John Prine: The Singing Mailman Delivers*, a double-disc album that includes a November 1970 performance at the Fifth Peg and an August 1970 vocal-acoustic session recorded at WFMT Studios, where Prine had gone for an interview with the legendary Studs Terkel.

“I asked after the show if it were possible to stick around and tape all the songs I had written up until then,” Prine writes in the album’s liner notes. He’d written 11

songs, total, so recording all of them wouldn't require a marathon session. "I wanted a good copy of my songs to send to the Library of Congress and have them copyrighted."

Thirty-five years later, Prine himself would head to the Library of Congress, where Kooser interviewed him in front of an audience. The Poet Laureate wanted to know how he wrote all those songs, and Prine told him about the mail route, and several thousand aspiring songwriters immediately applied for jobs at the postal service. Which explains why your music magazines sometimes show up in the mailbox looking like they've already been thumbed through.

Songs endure

Anyway, the new album of old songs is as riveting and inspiring as you'd hope. Prine was a young man with an old soul, singing lines like "Just give me one good reason, and I promise I won't ask you anymore/ Just give me one extra season, so I can figure out the other four," and "Broken hearts and dirty windows make life difficult to see/ That's why last night and this morning always look the same to me."

Those lines, and the songs in which they live, have gone with Prine around the world. For the past 30 years, they've been Nashville residents, as Prine favors Middle Tennessee winters over the Illinois kind. The songs are some of Music City's most admirable citizens, displaying a warmth, humor, decency, wisdom and, as Ebert noted, empathy, that makes them the best of neighbors.

Prine's a pretty good neighbor himself, though he's often absent, off galavanting around the globe, singing about a sad soldier named Sam Stone, while people sit in sold-out auditoriums where they've paid ticket prices and service charges just to watch Prine watch them wipe tears from their eyes.

And, anyway, whatever happened to that Ebert fellow?