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# JOHN PRINE

by Erin Osmon

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## JOHN PRINE

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# John Prine

Erin Osmon

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*To my dad, family in Western Kentucky, and the City of Chicago—the hearts and homes who showed me John Prine.*

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"Prine's stuff is pure Proustian existentialism. Midwestern mindtrips to the nth degree."
*—Bob Dylan*

"Proustian existentialism? I can't even pronounce that."
*—John Prine*

# Preface

When John Prine died from complications related to Covid-19 on April 7, 2020, he took with him a section of America's heart. Since his 1971 self-titled debut galvanized fans, his profound, economical words have become a singular emblem of Middle America, its families and landscapes, trials and triumphs, progress and hypocrisy, polished into lyrical gold with striking poetic clarity. Prine was our chuckling uncle, our tender best friend, a beacon, a guide, a megaphone. He was celebrated by the likes of Bob Dylan, but he never forgot who he was. A son of Chicago. A working-class hero. A man of people and places overlooked and underestimated.

I was lucky to see Prine perform a handful of times in my life, but a brief encounter in 2019 remains the most memorable. I happened upon Prine at an event celebrating the year's Grammy Award nominees, when his *The Tree of Forgiveness* received three nominations. I'd just recovered from an ugly cold when, the morning of the soirée, I was stricken with laryngitis. After weighing the absurdity of being unable to speak at such a social affair, my fear of missing out prevailed. The spectacle, and promise of free food, was too enticing. Plus, I had a great dress. By the time I

arrived, and stepped into the glittering banquet hall, a wave of hunger hit me like a car-wash sprayer, soaking my being, leaving me light-headed and wobbly. So I made a beeline for the raw bar, and heaped one plate with many, many oysters.

As I backed away from the spread, lemon wedges in one hand, bivalves in the other, I spotted him. Seated in the middle of the room, as if presiding over his court, was Prine, in a sharp black suit, his wife Fiona reclining Botticelli-esque by his side. In some mystical act of mind-melding, Prine and I locked eyes. It has long been my experience that Midwestern people find one another in the most far flung places—the rainforest of Costa Rica, the Louvre, a plane flying from Taiwan to Thailand—and this psychic connection only furthered the theory. In that brief instance of me, unable to speak, and Prine, in a chair six feet away, I mouthed, "You're my hero." He grinned and then mouthed "Thank you," nodding at my plate with a swift thumbs-up. If I'd known I'd never see him again, I might've made more of a fuss, with makeshift hand signals and embarrassing selfie requests. But somehow, the exchange feels more valuable than any conversation we might've had. My appetite had impressed him—perhaps the greatest compliment bestowed between Midwesterners.

As an Indiana native with family spread across Western Kentucky, and a fifteen-year Chicago resident, I've always understood Prine through the lens of our Middle American provenance, and admired his singular ability to convey our commonplace happenings to universal effect. Only Prine could make a city slicker care for a rural grandma, and turn pedestrian life in a Chicago suburb into an arresting image.

When Prine sang "Paradise," a whole world became known outside of itself. Prine used the Kentucky town's real-life events to evoke an abiding sense of bucolic nostalgia, and a loss of innocence, that appeals to anyone with a modicum of conscience, crafting one of America's most enduring protests in the process. He championed the people and places of flyover country—a pejorative for Middle American states that has been subverted as a badge of honor—without a hint of bitterness. Instead, he left the front door wide open, inviting listeners to look closer, feel deeper, laugh harder, to genuinely connect with those who've been overlooked and discarded, to understand them as friends and neighbors, not the worthless backdrop of the country's midsection. Prine's unfussy acoustic guitar playing fit perfectly within Chicago's folk music revival of the 1970s, but his masterly lyrics marked him a star. His words are so potent, so important to the artistic legacy of the region that Illinois governor J.B. Pritzker named Prine the state's first honorary poet laureate in 2020.

And it all began with *John Prine*, his extraordinary debut. Prine wrote from inside a very specific world, defined by Chicago, its suburbs, and his ancestral roots in Western Kentucky. The album didn't break any sales records upon its release in 1971, but rose to the rank of American icon, like the man himself, an unassuming titan who touched lives around the globe. *John Prine* is a gripping statement on love, loss, loneliness, and family fleshed out by one of America's most prestigious backing bands, The Memphis Boys. "Illegal Smile," "Hello in There," "Sam Stone," "Paradise," "Your Flag Decal Won't Get You Into Heaven Anymore," "Far from Me," "Donald and Lydia," and "Angel from Montgomery" are now

standards in the American songbook, covered by icons such as Johnny Cash, Bonnie Raitt, John Denver, Joan Baez, Dwight Yoakam, and countless others. Beyond his music, Prine's greatest legacy is that of an underdog champion, and the America of his understanding is a better, more vibrant, and well-respected place because of his generosity and uncommon gift. Middle America gave to Prine in abundance, and he reflected those treasures tenfold, with poetic words and a knowing grin. Prine may be gone, but his influence lives eternal.

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# 1
# Ten Miles West

The Chicago worker's cottage is a symbol of prosperity. Built throughout the city and suburbs near the turn of the twentieth century, these modest homes look like a child drew the plans: three sides with a triangle on top, a classic *idea* of a house manifested in wood and brick. As wealthier residents rented apartments or hotel rooms downtown, Chicago's working class socked away wages for one of these single-family dwellings, which were affordable, easy to build, and a symbol of success and security to laborers in an ever-changing city, pride of ownership tantamount to a gold star, the passing of one of life's greatest tests. The characters of *John Prine* live in these types of homes, regular working folks whose everyday pleasure and pain is invisible to the world outside of themselves, to everyone but John Prine.

He was raised in a 1,500-square-foot worker's cottage on First Avenue in suburban Maywood, Illinois, with two parents, three brothers and, for a time, both of his paternal grandparents. They were part of a long tradition of families forming multigenerational households during the Great Depression, in quarters that bonded them together, creating a unique language of love, exchange, and understanding,

where Prine's enduring affection for family was born. His father, William "Bill" Prine, was a burly man who left his home in rural Muhlenberg County, Kentucky, with his parents and sister in 1923, when he was eight years old. Empson Prine, Bill's father, was a roving carpenter who moved his family north to escape Kentucky's coal mines. Such migration was common. By 1930, twelve percent of all people born in Kentucky lived in Illinois, Indiana, or Ohio, crossing rivers and highways in search of honest work for honest pay.[1]

The family landed in suburban Wheaton, Illinois, before settling in Maywood, about ten miles west of downtown Chicago as the crow flies. Prine's grandfather Empson—who died when Prine was six years old—worked at a rapid clip among construction booms in downtown and the suburbs. He built for a Century of Progress, better known as the Chicago World's Fair, held in 1933, and constructed the First National Bank branch at Fourth Avenue and Madison Street in Maywood, as well as area homes. After graduating from the public school system in Maywood, Prine's father Bill thought he'd join the Navy, but he was flat-footed. So he signed on with the Civilian Conservation Corps, part of President Roosevelt's New Deal. He worked on the shores of Lake Superior in rural Wisconsin before becoming a tool and die maker for the Maywood arm of the American Can Company, which manufactured the first beer can in 1935. The following year he returned to Muhlenberg County to marry Verna Hamm, one of four sisters, a daughter of his beloved ancestral land. Their first son, David (Dave), was born a year later, in 1937, followed by Douglas (Doug) in

1942, John in 1946, and William (Billy) in 1953, far enough apart that Verna didn't have to care for multiple babies at the same time.

The western suburbs of Chicago are mostly middle-class, pro-labor enclaves where schools are free from the budget deficits and ongoing turmoil of the Chicago Public Schools system, and life intersects at the very livable corner of walkable and drivable. It's a sleepier, more easygoing existence a stone's throw from one of the nation's busiest city centers, one where residents are not exiled but connected to Chicago by green and blue line city trains, and the suburban Metra railway. Unlike the North Shore, where affluent suburbanites flock to flashy homes along Lake Michigan's coastline, the western suburbs are filled with everyday laborers and their cottages, bungalows, and three-flats, who deliver the mail, assist customers, work the line, build and fix homes, teach children, cut hair, and drive public transportation.

Maywood borders the more famous suburb of Oak Park, birthplace of Ernest Hemingway and home of lauded Prairie School architect Frank Lloyd Wright, whose earliest works are scattered throughout the polished, tree-lined village. Oak Park was a dry area and thus antithetical to the workingman's wind down that begins with the crack of an Old Style lager. The difference between it and Maywood back then was like the difference between regular and extra virgin olive oil: one had fancier branding, but they served the same function and were born of the same fruit. Maywood was less chic, more utilitarian, built along one of the city's oldest railway lines with a scrappier spirit and a sturdier backbone. But it wasn't without its own unique history. Maywood was settled as

an integrated suburb and safe space for those who'd escaped slavery in the South. Its Ten Mile Freedom House, situated on what became Lake Street near the Des Plaines River, was a stop on the Underground Railroad. The writer Carl Sandburg composed his iconic ode "Chicago" while living on the north side of the city, but moved his young family to Maywood after the poem was published in *Poetry* magazine in 1914. The last line of its opening stanza became one of the city's most beloved nicknames, a tribute to Chicago's laborers and brawny spirit, a celebration of Empson and Bill Prine before they ever traveled north:

"Hog Butcher for the World,
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,
Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;
Stormy, husky, brawling,
City of the Big Shoulders. . ."

The Berger sisters, Norma and Barbara, stars of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, depicted in Penny Marshall's 1992 film *A League of Their Own*, were also born and raised in Maywood. Fred Hampton, civil rights activist and chairman of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party, was two years behind Prine at Proviso East High School. Prine and all three of his brothers graduated from Proviso East, which sat about two blocks away from the Prine family home, providing the kids with the increasingly rare experience of being able to walk to school on their own.

Prine was a quiet kid. "He didn't have a lot to say," his oldest brother Dave remembered. "That's because he was too busy observing and recording in his head." The people and

places of Maywood and its neighboring suburbs inspired Prine, many scenes appearing throughout his self-titled debut. "We spent the whole summer just breaking glass every possible way we could: slingshots, sitting in trees, dropping bombs on them, you know?" Prine said of a junkyard near his childhood home that helped inspire the chorus in "Far From Me," where he compares the glint of shattered bottles to the sparkle of a diamond ring. "That, and there was a suburb next to us in Maywood: Broadwood, Illinois. When they redid their sidewalks, something that they put in the concrete looked like diamonds shining in the sidewalk when the sun would hit it."[2] The song's main characters, a couple unraveling in a storm of deafening silence, were sourced from Prine and his first high-school girlfriend. The tectonic breakup rattled his foundation, and the feeling later fueled some of Prine's most incisive and devastating lyrics, heard throughout "Far From Me" (originally titled "The Closing of the Café"). This is particularly true when he describes the change in the Cathy character's laughter—her inattentive delay like a sledgehammer to the heart.

Prine often approached his songs with the distinct wonder and glee of a child who's just been given a lollipop, recasting boyhood memories with a wisdom that belied his twenty or so years. But he could just as easily tap into his background to write stories from outside perspectives, of generations, genders, and experiences other than his own. His affection for older people began in his multigenerational household and with extended kin in Kentucky, but it was strengthened during a Maywood newspaper route he worked as a boy. "I delivered to a Baptist old people's home where we'd have to

go room-to-room," he said. "And some of the patients would kind of pretend that you were a grandchild or nephew that had come to visit, instead of the guy delivering papers. That always stuck in my head."[3] The memory fueled his meditation "Hello in There," originally titled "Old People," a sagely ode to America's aging population left in the shadows of the passing of time, hidden in homes and by the invisibility of loneliness, Prine's voice weary with sorrow over finger-picked acoustic guitar. He was just twenty-two years old when he wrote of the alienation of aging, and was able to do so because of his upbringing among elders who were not cast out but invited in. In choosing the names for his characters, Prine reached into that same place of empathy for older generations. "I wanted to pick a name that could be an old person's name, but I didn't want it to stick out so much," he said of Loretta, from "Hello in There." "People go through phases one year where a lot of them will name their kids the same, so I was just thinking that it was very possible that the kind of person I had in mind could be called Loretta. And it's not so strange that it puts her in a complete time period."[4]

Prine sings "Hello in there, hello" in the chorus, as if he's knocking on a lonely elder's door, and mentions the strength of old trees and rivers. Though it makes sense to connect this to his ancestral lands in the South, it may also be traced to Maywood. Here, the plodding Des Plaines River runs directly behind Proviso East High School, near an old-growth forest whose grounds are also home to a 250-year-old ash tree, the oldest in northern Illinois. Prine often said that he wrote around a distinct mood or feeling, using carefully chosen words to evoke a deep and abiding sense of loneliness,

nostalgia, hypocrisy, or absurdity. "Hello in There" reveals the empathy Prine felt for his elders, and the children they lost to war, but also his sense of province, laces woven between the city and the country.

Inside the Prine family home, the walls reverberated with music. Prine's father Bill loved traditional country, western swing, and jazz, and collected records by Hank Williams, Roy Acuff, Louis Armstrong, Ernest Tubb and his Texas Troubadours, Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, and many others. After clocking out from a shift, he'd return home, crack open a beer, and turn on the local country music station WJJD. "It was Webb Pierce, Hank Williams, Lefty Frizzell, and Ray Price back-to-back all night long on the radio," Prine said.[5] The image of Bill at the kitchen table, a beer in one hand and a cigar in an ashtray, his radio positioned in the window for better reception, lingered in the brothers' memories like a Norman Rockwell painting, a kind of homespun Americana. It's no surprise that the radio appeared in many of Prine's songs, like "Sam Stone" and "Far From Me"—period-appropriate, but also a symbol of his father's soul.

Bill also brought the boys along to his favorite watering holes, no-frills dive bars with plenty of country music on the jukebox. "He used to teach us to order two beers, one to drink, the other to hit somebody over the head with if the fight came over your way," Prine recalled.[6] After knocking back a few, Bill was known to belt out "Wabash Cannonball" atop a chair, a table, on a train, or any other place he damn well pleased. Once, at a union event downtown, Bill disappeared only to resurface on stage with the band, slapping

an upright bass he didn't know how to play as the group fell into the song.

Bill was what Southern folks call "a character"—boisterous, charming, a great storyteller, and showman. But he could also be measured, holding his emotions close to the vest, a thinker and skilled negotiator who rose through the local steelworkers' union to become its president. It was a role he executed with pride. American Can cut his checks, but he found his people and purpose at the union. "He really stressed that no matter who you are, no matter who you work for, you have the right to be treated fairly," Billy said. He was a living embodiment of what local broadcasting personality, folk music fan, and future Pulitzer Prize-winning author Studs Terkel meant when he wrote, "Work is about a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday-through-Friday sort of dying."[7] Bill was also a diehard Roosevelt Democrat, a pariah among a long line of Republicans who originated with Lincoln (famously depicted in Prine's "Grandpa was a Carpenter"). Outside of his principled union organizing, he raised his boys with broader progressive values of equality and working-class rights.

As Bill worked, Verna stayed at home with the boys, ensuring they were well loved and cared for. They couldn't afford the nicest clothes, but Verna prided herself on the compliments she received about their good looks and behavior. She was a skilled home cook, whipping up the boys' favorite meals, like pot roast hash and chili. Verna always made a separate, smaller pan of the latter for John. "He

wouldn't touch a bean with a ten-foot pole," Billy explained. She was funny, too, an adept storyteller with a dry wit that spilled out as if by impulse. "Me, my mom, and Doug would just blurt out whatever we had to say, and say it," Billy recalled. "John, Dave, and my dad were more calculated. They would listen. There might be a conversation going on for five minutes before they'd say anything." John also took after Bill in his plainspokenness, a frank and often humorous style built on the idea that words should not be wasted. "Quiet Man," from *John Prine*, is a buoyant meditation on this characteristic. "Strolling down the highway with my shoes in my hand/I don't talk much, I'm a quiet man," Prine sings with a rhythmic pulse over loping instrumentation.

Bill Prine grew up attending a Methodist church in Maywood with his parents, while Verna was raised in a Baptist church in Paradise, Kentucky. Her father, Luther Hamm, was a part-time preacher and if she didn't feel like attending services, she was forced to stay home in bed and drink castor oil. For that reason, the Prines didn't force their children to attend services, but were pleased when they did go. John's tenderness for Christian figures—Jesus, God, heaven, and angels—stemmed from his grandparents and the unwavering faith of his Kentucky kin, but also his personal relationship with God, which evolved over time. "I can't really sit around and talk with people who believe that the Bible is the way it happened, because that's man-made," he said. "I'm a writer, too; that's how I look at the Bible. Like, 'I could've written a better version than that,' you know? At least a more interesting one, and then maybe more people would go to church. I could definitely do a revamp."[8]

As Bill played country music, young John became enamored with rock n' roll. Prine's parents surprised him with a blue arch-top guitar one Christmas, an instrument he'd found in a Sears catalog. Before he learned to play, Prine posed with it in the mirror, mimicking Elvis Presley and Duane Eddy, his hair molded with pomade and a pocket comb. And any time he came by some pocket change, Prine hit the local hardware store for 45s by Presley, Fats Domino, Little Richard, and Chuck Berry, the latter a lyrical inspiration. "Of all the rock n' roll guys, his lyrics were the most like Dylan or Kristofferson, he told a story in three minutes and what got me was he had a syllable for every beat," Prine explained.[9] Though *John Prine* drew numerous comparisons to Dylan, the rhythmic precision of its lyrics suggest a studious attention to writers like Berry and Roger Miller, sonically disparate but skilled at the kind of compact, pulsating story-songs that would become Prine's signature. The link between "Johnny B. Goode" and "Spanish Pipedream" isn't terribly obvious, but it also isn't too far-fetched.

Throughout the 1960s, as the so-called beatniks and, later on, hippies established counter-cultural movements on the coasts, Prine leaned into the rough-and-ready posturing of 1950s greasers, a streetwise, blue-collar form of rebellion. He and his buddies hung out in Maywood Park, playing poker, breaking glass, and chasing girls. They formed a little gang they called The Parts Brothers, to rival The Jets, the Melrose Park gang headed by a weaselly kid dubbed Herbie the Rat. "They weren't looking for trouble but they could stand their ground," Billy recalled. When they weren't in the park, Prine and company gathered around the tables at the local pool

hall, and he became a skilled player, often hustling other kids for money. One time, when his oldest brother came home from college, he noticed his coin collection was missing. "John eventually confessed," Dave said. His little brother had used it to pay off a pool hall debt.

To complete his image, on the morning of his fourteenth birthday Prine woke up early and tore across the street to a gas station to buy a pack of smokes. Billy figured he'd bust John on this one, and rushed to tattle. But John came from a long line of tobacco enthusiasts and had struck a deal with his father: He would wait until he turned fourteen, and clean out his ashtrays. "I came back across the street, went upstairs to the bathroom, and stood in front of the mirror smoking cigarettes, trying to look cool," Prine said. "Me and cigarettes, we had a romance."[10]

In school, Prine struggled. His mind drifted to blank spaces of imagination that he filled with daydreams and after-school plans, peering out the window in math class and spacing out during science lessons. But he uncovered an innate talent for gymnastics, following in the footsteps of his brother Doug, who'd also been on the Proviso East team. And he found creative respite in language arts, where he applied his gift for imagining the thoughts of everyday people. "In school, the only thing I used to be able to do at all was when they gave me a free hand at writing dialogue," he said. "Everybody else, all these kids who were straight-A students, would just bang their heads against the wall, and I'd just go, *whoosh*, and hand it in."[11] Prine was also enamored with the books of John Steinbeck, inspired by the depth of his characters and descriptions of landscapes. The connection

between the roving laborers of *Of Mice and Men* and Prine's grandfather Empson is plain, and the tragedy of Steinbeck's workingman tales appeared throughout *John Prine*. Sam Stone and the dispirited characters of *The Grapes of Wrath* are fingers of the same glove, though Prine never read the book. "I read just about everything except *The Grapes of Wrath* because I liked the movie so much I didn't think the book could be better than the movie," he said.[12]

After graduating from college, Dave Prine returned to Maywood and immersed himself in the folk music revival happening in and around Chicago. He enrolled in guitar lessons at the Old Town School of Folk Music in the early '60s, and picked it up quickly before moving on to banjo. Soon, Dave could play guitar, banjo, fiddle, and mandolin. He turned his younger brother John on to folk music via records by the Carter Family and the New Lost City Ramblers, and took him to his first folk music festival, hosted by the University of Chicago. "You got to see Doc Watson, a couple of bluegrass bands, and some really good stuff," Prine remembered.[13] Doug, the second-oldest Prine son, didn't have the natural playing ability that Dave and John and Billy did, but he was a great dancer, loved music, and took his kid brothers to era-defining concerts. Billy recalled Doug buying Rolling Stones tickets for his twelfth birthday. And he took John to see Ray Charles, touring in support of his 1962 album *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*, performing with a singular gusto that left a lasting impression, fusing country and folk with rock n' roll swagger and cosmopolitan sophistication. "It was fantastic. What a showman," Prine recalled.[14]

When John was fourteen years old, Dave taught him a few guitar chords and they began to perform folk and country songs by the Carter Family, Hank Williams, Ernest Tubb, and others to a living room audience. The New Lost City Ramblers' "Didn't He Ramble" was a particular favorite. "It had really silly verses and was a big hit—that was one of our hot numbers," Dave recalled. He and his wife lived next door to the family home on First Avenue, and Dave, nine years John's senior, became a de facto father figure to the young greaser. "He was hanging out with a few not great guys there for a while in high school," Dave remembered. He figured music would give John something more constructive than shooting pool and carousing. And so folk music became a unifier among the brothers, which pleased their dad, particularly when they played his favorite Hank Williams tunes.

Folk music, and the simplistic musical structures of Hank Williams and Ernest Tubb, proved easy access points for Prine's skill level, less intimidating than the fast-paced, full-band sounds of his rock n' roll records. After learning a few chords, Prine took his first stab at songwriting, which resulted in an unknowing rip-off of "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," revealed when his mother began to sing along. After that, channeling the sorrow of Hank Williams, and his comedic muse Roger Miller, Prine wrote "The Frying Pan" and "Sour Grapes." The former, like many of Prine's early songs, embodied country music's "three chords and the truth" maxim, while the latter added a fourth, minor chord for an air of melancholy. Their witty, mature insights about relationships belied the fact that Prine had barely been in

one. And each song foretold his unique ability to write from outside perspectives with compassion and authenticity. "I wanted to get down to earth and just relate like one-to-one," he said.[15]

In September of 1963, Prine started dating Ann Carole Menaloscino, a Melrose Park native from a tight Italian family who also attended Proviso East. Just five feet tall with thick, black hair, Menaloscino was drawn to Prine's sharp sense of humor and big heart. "When I was a freshman learning to play baseball, I saw this cute guy walking around," she said. "This person I met two years later was that guy, John Prine." At a dance at a neighboring Catholic school, he confessed his feelings, after downing a few nips of liquid courage. "You're more beautiful than Elizabeth Taylor," Menaloscino recalled him saying, as she danced and he tried to keep up. And they clicked almost instantly. "Once I came along, it was just the two of us. We spent a lot of time together," she said.

To try to impress her, Prine made a recording of his songs. Menaloscino's father was a school janitor and an electronics enthusiast who'd repaired a broken reel-to-reel cassette recorder salvaged from a classroom. It was a rare and expensive commodity back then, and he allowed Prine to use it to record a gift for Menaloscino, working in her family's unfinished basement. The tape, consisting of a cover of The Beatles' "Twist and Shout," as well as "The Frying Pan" and "Sour Grapes," marked Prine's earliest recording. It resurfaced years later, after he and Menaloscino were married, and inspired Prine to add the early originals to his second album *Diamonds in the Rough*.

Between working odd jobs for pocket change, chasing girls, hanging out with his buddies, and jamming with his brothers, it took Prine nearly five years to finish high school. "Gymnastics, that's what kept him in school really," Menaloscino recalled. "He was phenomenal. His form and poses were beautiful." When Prine finally did graduate, one frozen day in January, he was met with little fanfare. "The custodian was there and he said 'Hey, you got your diploma?'" Prine recalled. "And that was my ceremony."[16] With no plans for college, Prine followed Dave's advice and put his name in for a job at the post office. "It was perfect for him," Dave said. "He could spend a whole lot of time thinking and singing to himself and inventing while he's just walking around out there."

# 2
# Down by the Green River

Where you're from and where you grew up are often separate places. For the Prines of Maywood, Western Kentucky was home, and Bill made sure the kids knew it. "In second or third grade we were supposed to go home and ask our parents where we were from, what our heritage was. The kind of thing where kids in class would stand up and say they were Irish-German or Scandinavian or whatever," Prine said. "My dad, after he had a couple beers, said, 'Remember, son: you're pure Kentuckian, the last of a dyin' breed.'"[1]

The Green River is a tributary of the Ohio River that was once a busy artery for rural coal shipped to urban areas, a symbol of deliverance that's also an emblem of home. On its banks sat Paradise, an old-fashioned, picturesque town once home to both sides of John Prine's family. In Paradise, the river was a source of food and freedom, an arcadian playground where Prine's grandfather Luther Hamm and his friend Bubby Short netted catfish, and where Prine's boyhood adventures began. A giant rope swing flew the bravest of kids halfway out over the water, where they could drop off and then swim, a reprieve on a hot summer day. Throughout the summer and over Labor Day weekends, the Prines packed

into the family vehicle and drove seven hours south from Maywood to Muhlenberg County for a homecoming in their ancestral land, filled with Smiths, Hamms, and Prines, who were related by blood, by marriage, or by the implicit code that friends are tantamount to kin. The area was so small that everyone knew each other, nobody locked their doors, and kids were free to adventure in bare feet, capping their explorations with a five-cent ice cream at the general store, safe and secure under the loving, watchful eye of the town.

His cousins shot BB guns and wore floral dresses fashioned from old flour sacks. Great aunts and uncles and other extended kin raised their own hogs and vegetables. Preserving peaches, pears, green beans, beets, tomatoes, and other produce for winter—a particular art known as canning—was an act born of survival, not of artisanal fancy. Farm-to-table dining was de facto, and nothing was wasted or taken for granted. The area wasn't wired to the power grid until the late '50s, and outhouses were commonplace. "Every one I ever went in had spider webs or a wasp nest, and I had ornery cousins who'd throw rocks at them while I was in there," Dave remembered. These families, some of whom dated to Daniel Boone's trail-building in 1775, formed a long tradition of pioneering and self-sufficient soldiers, farmers, miners, and shopkeepers who married and sired a vast familial network of homemakers and laborers who remained in Muhlenberg County, or traveled elsewhere to work with their hands, organizing unions and crafting some of America's most vital goods.

Music was a tradition in the Kentucky family. After a hearty lunch, reunions were capped with hours of picking and singing traditional gospel and country tunes, generations

with their guitars, fiddles, and mandolins. The ritual left a lasting impression on Prine, even if his city life didn't perfectly align with these folks' rural faith. The magnitude of his extended family's old-time religion was mighty. Their belief was unwavering and his affection for these gatherings and their guideposts became a particular faith in itself. Family is why he loved Christmas. Over the years, he developed a relationship with a God of his understanding, where angels guide and protect, Jesus is a friend, and heaven is a place where families see one another again. Once Prine was established, he too would bring his guitar and perform for the family, the revelry sometimes extending until eight or nine o'clock in the evening. The elder Hamms and Smiths shared their memories of performances by fellow Muhlenberg County native Ike Everly, The Everly Brothers' patriarch. Prine's grandfather Luther Hamm even joined him from time to time, on guitar and fiddle, and also played on a local radio station. Prine took after his father in personality, but his natural talent came down through his mother's side.

Paradise was the closest town to the Smith and Hamm farms that dotted the rolling hills of the county, and its rustic streets also featured modest homes where they lived. Verna Prine was educated in a one-room schoolhouse in town. Her father Luther was a part-time preacher who also ran the ferry crossing at Paradise, which had two general stores, one post office, one baptist church, and zero traffic lights. It was a small town frozen in time, cared for by an aging population and their relatives, like the Prines, who sojourned for holidays and family reunions. "I go back to other places and a lot of them don't look how I remembered them to be," Prine said.

"That's why I always got a kick out of Paradise. It was always, as soon as I got there, it was just like I remembered it."[2] Prine often likened it to something from Walt Disney, meaning that it was old-timey and folksy. It was untouched by industrialization. That is, until it was.

In 1963 the Tennessee Valley Authority commissioned a new power plant, after building two of the world's largest coal-burning units on the banks of the Green River in Paradise. The move brought much-needed jobs to the area. But it also created unprecedented mining of the coal that lined its land. TVA contracted numerous companies to begin strip-mining Paradise, removing immense swaths of surface soil and rock with heavy machinery to excavate the coal, as opposed to tunneling to it. Most famously, TVA enlisted the Peabody Coal Company, whose so-called Big Hog shovel, a Bucyrus-Erie 3850, was the world's largest, with a bucket size of more than 100 cubic yards. It could pick up 300 tons of dirt and rock in one swoop, and drop it 450 feet away. The Big Hog was efficient but wreaked unmitigated havoc on Paradise's landscape, digging out its hills and replacing them with pits and piles. The water TVA used to cool its turbines ran straight into the river, too, killing its fish and creating a harrowing scene. TVA eventually bought up all the land and quite literally tore down Paradise, leaving a metaphor almost too perfect, a devastation too visceral. Prine often joked that the farmers and townspeople who sold their property did so knowing that underneath it was nothing but unusable, sulfur-filled coal. But it was TVA who got the last laugh, leaving the area all but unrecognizable to those who knew and loved it.

But the Prines created enduring memories in Paradise before it was dug up and destroyed. And John memorialized them in a song he wrote for his father, who loved the place like family and mourned its passing as if it were kin. What many don't realize is that Prine's "Paradise" is not a metaphor but a true, detailed retelling of his childhood and the events that took down the town. Its chorus is so poetic and devastating, so relatable to the many areas of Middle America that have been shattered by the rise and fall of industrialization, that it's become a standard. Johnny Cash, The Everly Brothers, John Fogerty, John Denver, Dwight Yoakam, Roger Waters, and legions more have all covered the tune. And bluegrass pickers and local folkies have too, often changing its location to suit their particular grief. When Prine met Bill Monroe in the '70s, the bluegrass figurehead praised the song's timelessness. "Bill said, 'Oh, yeah, I thought that was a song I overlooked from the '20s,'" Prine recalled. "What a compliment."[3]

Billy recalled one trip to Paradise where he, John, their father Bill, and a great-uncle set out by boat to explore Airdrie, the site of a former iron works, about a mile downstream from Paradise. Airdrie was like something out of a Hardy Boys mystery. The hulking walls of the failed foundry, rumored to have been used as a prison during the Civil War, and a large brick chimney protruded from long-forgotten forest like hovering spectres. Airdrie Hill, reached by scaling 60 or so moss-covered steps, was home to a long-demolished town, where a mansion and beautiful park once sat. Prine's mother Verna always said it was haunted. "Aunt Margaret, before we left, said, 'You don't hear snakes. But if you smell

cucumbers that means there's water moccasins or cottonmouths,'" Billy recalled. "So we're walking up these steps, they're all overgrown, and everything started to smell like cucumbers."[4] Prine remembered the smell as cantaloupe, not cucumbers, but recalled the same fear as they arrived on the banks of Airdrie after floating downriver. "Just about everything started to smell like cantaloupe, and that really scared us," he said.[5] Bill carried a rifle, John carried a pistol, and young Billy carried a BB gun, protection in case they crossed any belligerent reptiles. The brothers didn't find any snakes, but made sure to shoot any old bottle they saw. "John took the gun and put it on his forearm—he'd seen Dodge City [*Gunsmoke*] too many times on TV—and he got a powder burn," Billy remembered.[6] John later recounted the adventure in the second verse of "Paradise," crystalizing a moment in time.

Muhlenberg County native Merle Travis may have been the first local to sing of the drudgery of coal mining, his 1946 song "Dark as a Dungeon" a sympathetic workingman's anthem. But "Paradise" was the area's first explicit protest, a salient cautionary tale. As recently as 2015, environmental activists quoted "Paradise" in a federal lawsuit against the Peabody Energy Corp., its chorus long a thorn in the energy concern's side. In 1973, two years after the release of *John Prine*, Peabody even issued a pamphlet titled "Facts vs. John Prine." "We probably helped supply the energy to make that recording that falsely names us as 'hauling away' Paradise, Kentucky," it stated.[7]

After Prine wrote "Paradise," he returned home to play it for Bill, a larger-than-life man who could also be

undemonstrative. Though he was proud of his son, the budding songwriter, he often preferred that he, Dave, and Billy perform his favorite country songs rather than John's originals. "He'd go, 'Yeah, I like that, John, but play that Hank Williams song again,'" Billy said. But when John debuted "Paradise," explaining he'd written it for Bill, his reaction was different, and entirely out of character. "My father just had this look on his face like he could have died," Billy recalled. "He said it was one of the most beautiful songs he'd ever heard." From then on, "Paradise" was known among the Prines as "Bill's song," "Dad's song," or "your song," a moving throughline from father to son, from the county to the rest of the world.

Twenty-three years after it upended Paradise, Peabody's Big Hog shovel dug its own grave, after the company had destroyed nearly 50,000 acres of land. In April of 1986, the Peabody corporation buried the Big Hog in a massive pit, in the Sinclair strip mine in Paradise. According to the Kentucky Energy and Environment Cabinet, ". . . most of this property has been altered by surface mining to a degree that makes restoration to its original habitat impractical."[8] But since the 1980s the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources has worked to create a sprawling conservation area. Its many ponds and lakes are home to copperbelly water snakes and more than ninety species of birds. It is a paradise made from a Paradise lost, not the place of Prine's remembrance, but a beloved byproduct of his enduring protest.

# 3
# We Come for to Sing

In *Inside Llewyn Davis*, the curmudgeonly namesake of Joel and Ethan Coen's 2013 film walks into an empty club after a tiresome cross-country journey, guitar in hand and patience waning. He's there to audition for Bud Grossman, a formidable man with outsized influence in the folk music scene as owner of Chicago's biggest nightclub, The Gate of Horn. It's named for a passage in Homer's *Odyssey*, in which the mythical Gate of Horn grants crossing to true dreams exclusively, those of an uncorrupted, honest heart, a metaphor that underscores the earnestness of folk music and the Coen brothers' love of Greek mythology. But it also signals a turn in the folk music scene during the 1960s. After Llewyn Davis performs one song, Grossman meets him with ear-splitting silence. "I don't see a lot of money here," he finally says, banishing Davis' dream to the realm of the unfulfilled, and highlighting the hypocrisy of a capitalist venture cloaked in puritanical imagery.

Bud Grossman, a tidy bald man in a goatee and turtleneck, is the fictionalized version of Albert Grossman, a pudgy, tousled man with a fountain of grey hair, who co-founded the real Gate of Horn in March of 1956. The 100-seat club in the basement of the old Rice Hotel, at the corner of Dearborn

Street and Chicago Avenue, was one of the first folk music clubs in America and instantly became the heart of the city's scene, providing an anchor for locals Bob Gibson, Ginni Clemmens, and Roger McGuinn, and a guaranteed full house for touring musicians Joan Baez, Judy Collins, Odetta, and more. Grossman, a hustler by nature, conceived of the idea after seeing Gibson perform at a downtown supper club, captivating audiences with his banjo and twelve-string guitar. Grossman was impressed with Gibson, who was at the forefront of the commercialization of folk music—well educated, well showered, and well dressed. But Grossman was also dialed in to the momentum of the folk music revival in New York City's Greenwich Village and accurately predicted that, like with most things, it would soon make its way to Chicago, where the city could add its own twist. In 1961, Gibson released his seminal album *Gibson & Camp at the Gate of Horn*, cementing the club and Chicago as an important hub of the revival. Grossman parted ways with the club the same year, to engineer the folk ensemble Peter, Paul and Mary and become Bob Dylan's manager, taking an unprecedented twenty-five percent cut for the bloodthirsty maneuvering that made him one of the most controversial men in the music industry.

But before Grossman almost single-handedly transformed folk music from an activist's platform and a niche circuit to big business with massive payouts, he made Chicago one of the hottest spots for its artists, spurring an entire local network of support and inspiring a fleet of like-minded clubs. Other downtown nightclubs like the Fickle Pickle and Mother Blues began hosting folk music. Terkel interviewed many of its musicians on his radio show, *The Studs Terkel*

*Wax Museum* on 98.7 WFMT, most famously a 1963 broadcast with an up-and-coming folkie who was about to release his second album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*. WFMT began broadcasting *The Midnight Special* a decade prior, named after the popular folk song and dedicated to "folk music & farce, show tunes & satire, madness & escape," which evolved into a platform for established and up-and-coming folk singers, and the go-to for local listeners amid the boom of America's folk music revival. It was a favorite of John Prine, who'd tune in on the family radio on Saturday nights, eager to hear what hosts Norman Pellegrini and Ray Nordstrand had in store, which great new folk singers might perform live or via recording. It was where Prine first heard his future best friend and champion, Steve Goodman, whose melancholic train song "City of New Orleans" captivated listeners in the early '70s.

Folk music in Chicago originated with the city's Irish, Polish, Romanian, and other immigrant communities, its blues and gospel traditions born of the Great Migration, labor union songbooks, and hillbilly music broadcast on *National Barn Dance* from the studios of local radio station WLS. A catch-all term for the historical songs of everyday working people, folk music is a broad umbrella, encompassing a wide swath of tradition. Louis Armstrong may have put it best when he said, "All music is folk music; I ain't never heard no horse sing a song."[1]

From the turn of the twentieth century, as the city rebuilt itself out of the ashes of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, all manner of traditional songs were revived, reinterpreted, recorded, pressed, printed, published, broadcast, and

performed throughout the city, codifying its abundance of diverse and vital voices and traditions living under one sprawling Midwestern roof. Chicago has always been a city of neighborhoods, each representative of a particular race, ethnicity, industry, or ethos, disparate patches stitched to form a rough-hewn technicolor quilt born of everyday people, the promise of the American Dream on the banks of Lake Michigan. Folk music soundtracked each area with a specific flair. It also provided grist for the mill of the emerging Chicago music industry, those earliest recording studios, sheet music printers, and publishing impresarios, the hardworking hustlers, like Grossman, who've helped define the city's resilience and innovative spirit, operating at the precipice between now and future, outside of the major label music industrial complex.

Mark Twain wrote in 1883, "It is hopeless for the occasional visitor to try to keep up with Chicago—she outgrows his prophecies faster than he can make them. She is always a novelty; for she is never the Chicago you saw when you passed through the last time."[2] Indeed, Chicago's folk music revival evolved quickly. Ignited by Pete Seeger-affiliated groups like The Weavers and the Almanac Singers, as well as People's Songs, an organization dedicated to reviving, performing, and distributing America's labor music and traditional folk songs of Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, the Dust Bowl, and elsewhere, soon folk songs were being performed by a spectrum of locals, professional and amateur. They were energized by the prospect of learning about and participating in musical tradition through a simple, approachable, story-centric form. Like New York, San

Francisco, and Boston, Chicago became a center of the folk music revival throughout the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, for its location at the crossroads of America, an easy stopping point for touring musicians, and also for its thriving network of clubs, radio broadcasts, and festivals. A regular gig in the Chicago club scene was enough to sustain a long and fruitful career, even if you never had a hit record. This was also true of the city's vibrant jazz and electric blues scenes, whose clubs dotted the Southside and the downtown Loop. Homegrown gospel music and rock n' roll were also important to the fabric of Chicago, filling churches and dry suburban teen clubs.

By the mid '60s the heart of the folk music scene moved from downtown Chicago to the north side, where divey saloons and couthier clubs in the Old Town and Lincoln Park neighborhoods hosted local and touring folk artists, picking up where Grossman left off. The Hungry Eye, The Saddle Club, The Fifth Peg, The Quiet Knight (and its predecessor Poor Richard's), the Old Town Pump, the Blind Pig, and the Earl of Old Town were sure bets for open mics with attentive audiences, and packed gigs by the era's most popular local and itinerant folk musicians. In line with its working-class spirit, Chicago is also a drinking town, its no-frills taverns and numerous street festivals a hub of neighborhood social activity after clocking out from a factory shift or a downtown job. Wading to the corner dive bar in a foot of snow, or walking leisurely to a street festival on a dripping summer day, is part and parcel of the Chicago experience, the clank of pint glasses filled with Old Style lager its social contract. As neighborhoods change amid gentrification, tech bubbles, and

character-killing urban development, Chicago bars stay just as they are: dark, unfussy, and reliable, with beer-and-a-shot specials and a host of faces spanning backgrounds and generations, cutting loose after a long one, celebrating a week well-worked.

Chicago's vibrant network of clubs and watering holes not only provides gigs for its local musicians, but also steady employment behind the bar or in the kitchen. In Chicago's music community, these jobs aren't viewed as a last resort but roles gifted with great cultural capital, the chance to know and network with like-minded peers with a friendly, natural intimacy. This trend began in the folk music clubs, whose taps and grills were manned by local musicians, happy to exchange hard work for a living wage. "You didn't scuffle here because you were always working, even if you didn't have a career in mind," said Ed Holstein, a Chicago singer-songwriter and banjo player with a soft singing voice, who worked the folk clubs in the '60s and '70s before opening his own. "Bartending was something everyone wanted to do."

Soon, folk music made its way through the city's universities. On the Southside, the University of Chicago's Folklore Society began hosting its annual folk festival, which showcases traditional musicians and emerging songwriters, in 1961. Terkel was the master of ceremonies for the inaugural event, which saw performances by Elizabeth Cotten, Memphis Slim, the New Lost City Ramblers, and locals Frank Hamilton and Fleming Brown, among others. In the far north suburbs, the campus of Lake Forest College incubated a different crop of hopeful pickers, like young Steve Goodman, who would emerge as one of the city's most beloved

singer-songwriters, and cut his teeth at its campus coffee house, the Dangling Conversation, named for the Paul Simon tune. Meanwhile, the campus of Northwestern University in suburban Evanston also formed its own micro scene, centered at the Amazingrace Coffeehouse, which was founded from the progressive Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam movement.

By the time Prine came on the scene, it had split into two distinct prongs. On one hand, the traditionalists, motivated by reviving and evangelizing historical folk songs and sounds, those playing in old-time string bands and klezmer ensembles, as well as solo artists singing historic songs of workers and everyday people. On the other hand were the emerging singer-songwriters, a new kind of folkie inspired by the plain, profound architecture of traditional folk songs, but driven by a desire for individual expression, those writing original songs with poetic lyrics and simple melodies and chord structures, acolytes of Woody Guthrie, Phil Ochs, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, and Bob Dylan. John Prine was part of a burgeoning wave of Chicago musicians driven by individual expression, though he often attributed his songwriting salad days to his faulty memory, something that may have been an exaggeration, an easy answer for a pushy journalist. "I guess the reason I first started writing my own songs was because I had so much trouble remembering other people's lyrics," he said. "To me, it just seemed rather easy to rhyme the words."[3]

Like his peers Steve Goodman, Fred Holstein, Ed Holstein, Bonnie Koloc, Jim Post, and others, Prine became a leader in the Chicago singer-songwriter movement, which saved folk music from near-certain death in the late '60s amid the

growing popularity of rock n' roll. While respectful of folk music's past, they looked toward the future, illuminating character-driven and imagery-laden stories of everyday people and landscapes with all the love, adoration, and down-and-out feelings that come with work, family, and relationships. Goodman's "Somebody Else's Troubles" and "City of New Orleans," a nostalgic missive about a ride on the Illinois Central Railroad's train of the same name, would become crown jewels of the Chicago scene, as would Prine's "Sam Stone," "Donald and Lydia," "Paradise," "Hello in There," and "Angel from Montgomery," and Ed Holstein's "Fat Stuff" and "Jazzman." Prine and company paved the path for folk music's future in Chicago, filling the Earl of Old Town, The Quiet Knight, and other spaces with original music born of a uniquely Midwestern identity: warm, welcoming, plain and profound, nothing fancy but something magical, born of a working person's mind. By 1973, the entire nation had turned its eyes on Chicago's folk music scene via extensive national news coverage, including a lengthy segment on CBS's Saturday evening newscast hosted by Walter Cronkite.

The popularity of such acts might have been curious to outsiders but was second nature to Chicagoans, who live by an unspoken code: work hard and look after your own. Since its emergence as a world-class city in so-called flyover country, Chicago has been largely ambivalent or even hostile to coastal fashions, choosing instead to move at its own pace, plainly situated at the intersections of tradition and innovation, reverence and audacity. "We're terminally middle-class, we're not avant-garde," Ed Holstein said. "Andy Warhol would have bombed here." Instead, Chicago followed

its instincts, cultivating distinct strains of culture that are beloved locally and then appropriated elsewhere. From gospel to electric blues and free jazz, the folk revival, Black house music, white industrial music, pop-punk, emo and others, Chicago has always been inspired by itself, creating new versions of genres. Chicago is such a fan of itself that it recast an insult hurled by New York writer A.J. Liebling, adopting the nickname The Second City, now synonymous with the lauded improv comedy enterprise. "I don't care what they say about the coasts—let's stay backward here in Chicago," said Earl Pionke, proprietor of the Earl of Old Town. "Let the crazy rockers stay out in L.A., smoking their mysticism or whatever. Let the fast-paced New Yorkers be back there, knowing they're Number One. Let's just be what we are, and let them be what they are."[4]

Amid the changes in the Chicago music scene, there was one constant, a community music school rooted in folk music's past, present, and future. A place where Dave and John Prine, Steve Goodman, Roger McGuinn, the Holstein brothers, and countless others took guitar classes and mingled with peers. The heart of the north side folk music scene, pumping blood through its vast network of arteries. It's where Prine would take his next steps.

# 4
# A Winning Hunch

Today, most anyone can learn to play guitar by watching YouTube videos. But in the 1960s, when John Prine came of age, the informal classrooms of the Old Town School of Folk Music were his teachers, elevating Prine's living-room strumming to a profound mode of expression. Learning an instrument then could be a daunting task. Many instructors and institutions were rooted in classical training, and required students to learn to read music as they navigated the mechanics of stringed instruments. "I'm sure I never would have learned to play if I had to go that route," Prine said.[1] Instead, Prine's musical education was formed in a community environment where students learned by doing, a gift that Prine would return in abundance, writing and recording simple songs that most anyone could play. But first, he was a teenager just looking for a place to land. And like most good things in Chicago at the time, he found it in Old Town.

Chicago's blue-collar, pro-labor persuasion fed the bold, plainspoken imagery of Prine's self-titled debut, but it was also key to his guitar playing. Growing up in suburban Maywood, Prine was aware of the folk music scene in

Chicago, regularly tuning in to the popular folk radio program *The Midnight Special* and attending folk music festivals and concerts with his brothers. The city's enthusiasm for folk music also begat the nation's premier folk music school. Founded in the fall of 1957, the Old Town School of Folk Music (OTS) nurtured John and Dave Prine in their salad days, providing guitar lessons and a community of peers. Rooted in socially progressive, egalitarian principles and intuitive, participatory learning, the school helped mature Prine from living room tinkerer. "It's a great place for people to learn how to play a stringed instrument," he said.[2]

As it happened, the school began a stone's throw from his family home in Maywood. About four miles east in Oak Park, guitars and banjos rang out from Lombard Avenue. Dawn Greening's living room was packed with students, picking and singing with gusto, unencumbered by their lack of experience. All were welcome at her modest home on an orderly tree-lined street. Here, judgement was nonexistent and joy filled the room to its corners.

Taught by Frank Hamilton, a folk music scholar and house performer at The Gate of Horn, Greening learned guitar and her husband, Nate, picked up the banjo. Their young daughters, Lauren and Leslie, and son, Lance, learned too, along with a coterie of neighbors, friends, and acquaintances. "Folk music is not for the beatnik and bop crowd," Greening told a *Chicago Tribune* reporter in 1960. "It has substance and aesthetic value. The folk music of other countries all over the world is much more appreciated than in our own country. I think our present resurgence of interest in it is a wholesome thing—and certainly a fascinating family hobby."[3]

When John Prine was eleven years old, the school that fostered him from rhythm strummer to capable fingerpicker was formed. The Old Town School of Folk Music would become America's preeminent community music school, but it was born here, in sleepy Oak Park, in the Greening family living room, from the passion of three folkies.

In the 1950s Dawn Greening was known as Chicago's premier folk music fan and den mother to the movement's figureheads. A tidy woman with dark, cropped hair and a wide smile, she opened her home to most any wandering troubadour who passed through town. She hosted the folk musician and civil rights activist Odetta, Jose Feliciano, Peggy Seeger, half-sister of Pete, and others at no cost and with evident warmth. In a career rife with rambling and stretched dollars, Greening was a welcome combination of stability and camaraderie. "She was the bed and breakfast for folk singers," Hamilton said.

He'd connected with Greening through Odetta, a mutual friend. A Los Angeles native, Hamilton was introduced to folk music through monthly hootenannies at the Laurel Canyon home of a man who'd fought against Francisco Franco in the Spanish Civil War as part of the communist-backed Lincoln Battalion. "I had a Silvertone Sears guitar and would go up to these meetings where I met a lot of people," Hamilton said. Eventually, he and Odetta orbited the same sun in the City of Angels, gathering with other left-leaning folkies like Woody Guthrie and Cisco Houston. Hamilton was mentored by Bess Lomax Hawes, sister of the folklorist Alan Lomax, who taught guitar, banjo, mandolin, and folk singing through UCLA extension courses and at her home.

"I learned a lot about teaching from her, sitting at the feet of the maestro," he said.

The American folk music revival gained traction in the early 1940s with the Almanac Singers, formed in New York by folk musicians Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Lee Hays, and Millard Lampell. The group wrote and performed original songs of anti-racist, anti-war, and pro-labor sentiment, and revived historic traditional tunes in the same vein. Soon, their folk songs and leftist intellectual thought spread to the West Coast, energizing Hamilton, who took it upon himself to hit the books at the UCLA library, researching traditional folk songs of America and beyond. He soon traveled through the South to learn folk songs from their originators, and to the scene in Greenwich Village, on the promise of work. There, he connected with the Chicago folk singer Bob Gibson, who regularly headlined The Gate of Horn. Impressed with Hamilton's playing, Gibson promised his new friend steady gigs if he came to Chicago. "He said I could become his accompanist, and I jumped at the chance," Hamilton recalled. After becoming the go-to backup guitarist and singer at The Gate of Horn, Hamilton and Greening, an audience regular, hatched a plan for group lessons at Greening's home. Greening wanted to learn, and Hamilton needed the extra shekels. Soon, their little home experiment attracted dozens of students, one of whom could not be missed.

Win Stracke was a Chicago broadcasting personality with a booming baritone voice and a commanding lumberjack's frame. The son of German immigrants, he grew up in the Old Town neighborhood and became a classically trained singer and figurehead of the Chicago School of Television, which

favored an informal, unscripted style. Stracke was cast as the resident balladeer, Win, on his friend Terkel's drama, *Stud's Place*, filmed at a mythical cafe. He also appeared on locally produced shows such as *Hawkins Falls* as well as in commercials. In the early '50s, Stracke broke out with a children's program, *Animal Playtime*, which was nationally syndicated. He later hosted its follow-up, *Time for Uncle Win*. Both shows were canceled amid rampant McCarthyism, when he and Terkel were blacklisted.

Stracke was an advocate for the era's labor movement, which highlighted the inequities between everyday workers and their bosses, and supported Chicago's unions. He and Terkel met in the progressive Chicago Repertory Group, whose plays often centered on labor songs and anti-war sentiment. They became active in the Chicago branch of People's Songs, the organization founded by Pete Seeger, Alan Lomax, and others in Greenwich Village, to promote songs of laborers and progressive entertainers. People's Songs held its first convention in Chicago in 1947, where Stracke and Terkel formed many invaluable friendships, including with the traditional blues singer Big Bill Broonzy. From there they formed *I Come for to Sing*, a folk music review with Stracke, Broonzy, Larry Lane, and Fleming Brown singing and playing. Terkel served as the narrator and MC.

By the time The Gate of Horn opened in 1956, Stracke was a known quantity with a built-in audience. He booked a three-week run of solo performances at the club in the spring of 1957, where he first heard Hamilton. Impressed with his playing, Stracke trekked west to Oak Park for lessons that autumn, explaining to Hamilton that he wanted to, "learn

chords on the neck of the guitar." "[We] represented all degrees of competence and incompetence on the guitar and banjo," Stracke said. "But here was lanky, wraithlike, mercurial Frank with a word here, and a finger adjustment there, teaching us simultaneously, and involving us in the pleasure of singing and playing folk songs."[4]

The classes at Greening's home became so popular that Hamilton and Stracke decided to open a proper school, a hunch that proved winning. Stracke made a good living on television and funded the lease for the second floor of the former Immigrant Bank building at 333 W. North Avenue in Old Town. On November 29, 1957, about 150 people of varying races, ethnicities, and backgrounds navigated the stairs, passing the laundromat on the ground floor, to christen the operation. Black folks mixed with immigrants, blue-collar laborers and all manner of women, all free to express themselves here, a visual rendering of the school's family-oriented, progressive, and inclusive foundation. The scene wasn't dissimilar from John Prine's youth in integrated Maywood. Media, musicians, prospective students, and even Old Town alderman Mathias "Paddy" Bauler, the fist of the 43rd Ward, watched as Stracke led the opening ceremonies, kicked off by traditional bagpipe playing by local George Armstrong. Hamilton led his living room students through the Bahamian folk song "Sloop John B." Broonzy, who'd lost his ability to sing after an operation, played blues guitar at the opening and dedicated the last year of his life to the school.

OTS soon incorporated as a nonprofit, with Stracke as president, Hamilton as vice president and head of the

teaching program, and Stracke's neighbor, Gertrude Soltker, as head of finances. Dawn Greening served as the school's unofficial social representative before taking over from Soltker a few years later. Rooted in egalitarian principles, OTS welcomed people from all walks of life to form a musical democracy in a safe space where camaraderie was just as important as lessons. Tuition was affordable and prospective students didn't have to know how to read music or have any previous experience. At first, Hamilton was the only instructor, flying between guitar and banjo classes with swift instruction, like a bee spreading pollen.

Hamilton believed musical ability lived inside of every human being, and a participatory environment was the best means for bringing it out, one where everyone learned from each other in some form or fashion, upending the master-and-disciple dynamic that comprises a lot of classical music training. "I was ideologically a socialist," Hamilton said. "I didn't believe in the employer-employee relationship as being wholesome, and that carried over into my teaching." As part of this ethos, Hamilton conceived of a tradition that endures today at OTS, called the "second half." After students meet in individual classes, they are invited for a coffee break, where they may chat with instructors and with one another. After that, students and teachers band together to perform songs, melding players of all skill levels. "It turned out everybody was delighted to be able to play along with other people," Hamilton said. "We really wanted to emphasize that music was a social experience, not the individual experience as taught in the academies of music, where people are isolated in practice rooms."

A year later, OTS enrolled more than 150 students. Hamilton hired Ted Johnson, who'd participated in classes in Oak Park, to help teach guitar, along with local folk singer Ginni Clemmens. Fleming Brown, the city's preeminent picker, taught banjo classes while Nate Lofton taught folk dancing, becoming one of few Black men to do so. Many of the folk, blues, and traditional musicians who stayed with Greening, or knew Hamilton and Stracke, came through the building for guest lectures or performances, such as Pete Seeger, Doc Watson, Mahalia Jackson, and Odetta. The school also developed a fruitful relationship with the University of Chicago Folklore Society, hosting many of its guests for performances. "It's an adult rebellion against today's level of pop music," Stracke said. ". . .people want to get back to the good old days around the piano, but the piano is uneconomical sometimes, so the guitar is a logical replacement."[5]

By 1962 OTS was flourishing, but Hamilton, a roving musician at his core, left to join The Weavers, America's most popular folk music collective. He was replaced by Ray Tate, a recent graduate of Northern Illinois University who performed folk music at a downtown club called the Fickle Pickle. "I was kind of shy about it at first," Tate said. "But my degree in education meant that I knew how to teach and I could identify who would be a good teacher." Tate felt that the school needed more professional leadership, and brought in a number of working musicians who had extensive training to teach, adding new, more advanced levels of guitar classes. He also introduced newer folk songs into the curriculum, written by popular singer-songwriters of the era, in addition to the blues, country, cowboy, and Appalachian standards

the school was founded on. "I was kind of pedantic about it," he said. "It caused a bit of tension." Tate was emblematic of the wave of singer-songwriters that swept Chicago, whose commercial ambitions were viewed as less pure by traditionalists but celebrated by music fans across the region, reinvigorating the scene and opening access points for the less studious.

Dave Prine enrolled in OTS in 1960 and quickly became an adept guitar player. He then moved on to Brown's banjo class, and taught himself fiddle and mandolin. He began mentoring his younger brother, showing him basic chords—G-C-D, A-D-E—and teaching him folk songs, including Carter Family tunes. "I always told people that if my brother had been into Chuck Berry, I might have written those [early] songs as shuffles, rock n' roll shuffles," Prine said.[6] John looked up to Dave, who paid special attention to his baby brother, who was falling into teenage delinquency, and unable to focus on anything but gymnastics and the occasional English class. But there was also the competitive spirit that drives all sibling relationships, which motivated young John to catch up. The pair became a two-man living room band, with the younger Prine playing rhythm guitar along to the elder's fiddling, a format used in the traditional country and old-time string music Dave enjoyed. "He learned how to play pretty well and I learned to keep time," Prine said.[7]

After jamming with his brother for a couple of years, Prine, a junior at Proviso East High School, enrolled at OTS on September 12, 1963, when he was sixteen years old. The relaxed environment was a perfect match. Tate recalled that Prine started as an advanced beginner and eventually

graduated to his advanced guitar class. "I was way behind the guys in Ray's class, but I was hooked," Prine said.[8] "He was shy, very quiet," Tate recalled. "He didn't care about playing arpeggios or other nuances of the instrument. He only wanted to learn how to play fingerstyle guitar."

Prine's background was rooted in country music, the songs of Hank Williams and the Carter Family, but he was also attracted to the individualistic picking style of greats like Elizabeth Cotten and Mississippi John Hurt. Cotten was famous for playing a right-handed guitar upside down (she was left-handed), picking the bass line with her fingers and the melody with her thumb, opposite of most guitarists. Hurt played right-side up but tended to keep his third and fourth picking fingers on the soundboard, providing a strong anchor, singular timing, and a distinct timbre that's difficult to replicate. After studying with Tate, Prine eased into a two-finger form of Travis picking—a fingerstyle named for Muhlenberg County legend Merle Travis—using a thumbpick for the bass string patterns and his forefinger for the treble strings. Prine also often used his thumb to fret the sixth string, a no-no in classical training but perfectly acceptable in folk music. Like his lyrics, Prine's finger-picking and flat-picking styles weren't flashy or even technically correct. But they were spartan enough to allow enough space for his words to resonate, eliciting a valuable emotional connection from simple patterns. "It's really a terrible accident, the way that I play," he joked.[9]

By 1965, Dave Prine was a banjo instructor at OTS, taking over for Fleming Brown. "In his class one day he said, 'OK, I'm done with this,'" Dave recalled. "He looked at me and

said, 'Prine, you take the class.'" Dave also formed the first in-house old-time string band at the school, dedicated to the traditional acoustic music of Appalachia, the Midwest, and other American regions, with fellow student Tyler Wilson, a guitarist and banjo player who'd jam with Prine well into the new millennium, forming the BluEagle String Band in 2015.

When John was enrolled at OTS, no one knew the chubby-cheeked student, best known as Dave Prine's little brother, was writing songs or had any motivation to be center-stage as a solo artist. There was no inkling of the profoundness of "Sam Stone" and "Hello in There" that would delineate Prine as a young man wise beyond his years. The younger Prine was all but invisible. "I don't think any of my friends even knew I wrote songs. I just did it as a hobby," Prine said.[10] But Tate recalled one event that provides a clue about Prine's perhaps hidden desire to be seen. "We were on television one day, demonstrating how the Old Town School worked in a classroom guitar situation," he said. "John went on there wearing the wildest blue shirt. It was lamé or satin or something. He stood out quite well."

By 1967, OTS's home on North Avenue was slated for demolition as part of an urban renewal initiative—to pave folk paradise and put up a parking lot. The Old Town neighborhood had fallen prey to white flight to the suburbs, and the city was sinking dollars into the area's commercial infrastructure, tidying those spaces with potential for shops, restaurants, and bars, and demolishing those without. Stracke and Greening had until August to vacate. "Many years ago I had attended an Italian wedding reception at Aldine Hall," Stracke said. "Whether it was the vino or the beef sandwiches,

I recalled the atmosphere as being congenial, and it was for sale at a moderate price."[11] The historic two-story brick building at 909 W. Armitage Avenue in the Lincoln Park neighborhood was in varying stages of disrepair, but had an adorable turret adorned with carved decorative wreaths. OTS re-opened there in the fall of 1968, a mile north from its original home. The school opened its first store, the Folklore Center, on the ground floor of the building, selling everything from stringed instruments to songbooks, and employing students and local musicians. They named the school's new performance space Broonzy Hall, after Big Bill, who died a decade prior from lung cancer.

The changes at OTS occurred just before Prine returned home from the service in January of 1968. "Drafted 1/31/66, Do Not Send" his original attendance card read, a reminder for the school to stop mailing printed materials to him until he returned from Germany. Before his departure, Prine attended ninety guitar classes between September 12, 1963 and January 6, 1966, clearly dedicated to strengthening his playing. He returned to the school's new location on Armitage Avenue on February 13, 1969, enrolling in Tate's advanced guitar class.

The following spring, of 1969, Tate became part owner in a new club down the street with a few other folks from OTS. The Fifth Peg, located at 858 W. Armitage Avenue, was a small but proper nightclub built for music, not a coffee house or divey saloon, with a back room that seated about 80 people. Named for the specific part on the banjo neck used for tuning the drone string, it was a stone's throw from the heart of Old Town's rough and tumble folkie culture. But it became the

go-to spot for OTS students, particularly after the Thursday night advanced guitar class. Students and instructors convened at the club over beers, liquid courage for playing and enduring open mic performances. "What happened there after school was as important as what happened in the school," Prine said.[12] Soon, a night at The Fifth Peg would change Prine's life forever.

# 5
# The Singing Mailman

After high school, Prine lived at home and worked for a local pharmacy, delivering booze and prescriptions. "The guy actually asked me if I was going to make a career out of the drugstore," he said. "I was getting like $1.10 an hour and I said, 'Oh, sure.' The whole time I was just waiting for the post office to call me."[1] When the call came, in mid-1964, he happily obliged, earning about two dollars an hour to start. Prine began his career with the United States Postal Service as a substitute letter carrier, and was given his own route about a year later. He joined the American Postal Workers Union immediately, at the behest of his father, who'd long championed workers' rights to his boys.

Prine worked a park-and-loop route out of the brand new Westchester branch of the Maywood post office. The village was a ten-minute drive from the Prine family home, close enough to roll out of bed and be there in an instant. On Prine's particular route, he transported all classes of mail, driving to predetermined parking points. He then distributed it on foot, walking in looped segments, in sweltering summer heat and blistering winter cold, navigating each suburban yard without leaving a trace. "I whittled that thing down to

about 450 [homes]," he said. "It took me about four years to do that."[2] Prine was issued a Scout postal vehicle, a larger, short-lived model that predated the more compact Grumman trucks driven today, which had a blue body, a white top, automatic transmission, and right-side driving. Its two doors provided some protection from formidable Chicago winters. But they didn't save him from the dogs. "I got bit on the backside once, and dragged a dog about half a block," Prine remembered.[3] The work was hard, but the quiet solitude of driving, walking, and depositing proved fertile ground for his imagination. In school he'd been chastised for spacing out, but as a postman, his reveries were an asset. Prine's ability to amuse himself was a weapon against boredom. And in the truck, he could sing. When his mind and throat weren't traveling, he had plenty of reading material. "If there was ketchup on page fifty-seven of your *Time* magazine, it was me," he joked.[4]

But just as he'd gotten settled into his new job, Uncle Sam came a-knockin'. In January of 1966, Prine and his buddies registered for the draft, as the war in Vietnam escalated. "They said it was still a conflict, with half a million troops over there protecting things," Prine recalled.[5] Hoping to be stationed together, Prine and his friends shifted their numbers to be one right after the other, volunteering for the inevitable rather than waiting for it to happen to them. When they were called, Prine's father drove him and his best friend, Mickey Buie, to the induction site where they received their assignments. "John was very matter-of-fact about it," Menaloscino recalled. "His attitude was, 'I'm going to get drafted anyway so I might as well do it.'"

Their strategy was unsuccessful. Prine shipped to Fort Polk, Louisiana, for bootcamp while Buie and some of his other friends went to Fort Hood, Texas. It was Prine's first time away from family, and the homesickness he felt was unprecedented. He also came down with the flu, making matters worse. When he wasn't sleeping in a bivouac shelter, watching armadillos cruise by, or running and crawling through swamps meant to mimic the landscape of Vietnam, training that transformed his physique from slight and boyish to taught and muscular, like a figure carved from wood, he wrote letters to Menaloscino from the barracks. "After about four weeks, I could tell he was struggling," she remembered. In one missive, Prine proposed. She didn't have a driver's license, so her father drove her to a local jewelry store to buy their rings, two gold bands and a modest diamond.

After basic training, Prine was sent to Stuttgart, evading increasingly grim statistics in Southeast Asia. "My dad was really happy that I got orders for Germany, and actually so was I," he recalled.[6] An aptitude test he'd filled out blindly said he'd make a good mechanic, and so Prine was placed in the motor pool, where he worked on vehicles and other machinery. He was a car guy who didn't know the first thing about fixing cars. "I didn't even open the booklet," he said. "I just filled in abcd, abcd."[7] But he eventually learned. On hungover mornings, he crawled into one of the hulking beasts, rigged up a hammock, and slept. That December, he returned to Maywood for a four-week break. He and Ann Carole married December 26, 1966, the day after Christmas, Prine's favorite holiday, at a Catholic church she had attended

as a girl, surrounded by poinsettias and other red-and-white decorations. Prine wore a rented tuxedo and his bride a voluminous veil. "The poor guy was a nervous wreck," she remembered. The whirlwind of travel and preparations had got the best of him. Prine then shipped back out to Germany, a husband. A new man.

Amid life's changes, Prine's guitar playing and songwriting had fallen by the wayside, a childhood hobby that didn't fit into his busy adult life in the service. But in Germany, time was all he had. So Bill shipped Prine's acoustic guitar to him. He'd purchased the Gibson Hummingbird with a cherry sunburst finish with his postal earnings, and by working Sundays at a local Episcopal church, cleaning pews and dusting crosses, a job he'd gotten through his brother Dave's wife. "My dad didn't know to remove the strings and it arrived with a crack in the neck," Billy remembered. But it still played, and Prine made friends overseas with it, singing for the boys after nights out carousing, Hank Williams, Lefty Frizell, and old folk songs filling their bunks. It fostered a connection and a much-needed morale boost amid Prine's service, a sense of belonging that was key to his survival. Though his picking was largely a communal act, a social offering, it also motivated Prine to begin writing again. Inspired by one of his pals from Louisiana, who proclaimed "aw heck!," after reading some of Prine's new lyrics, Prine wrote a song of the same name for Menaloscino, declaring he could survive most any situation, "Long as I got my woman."

When he was released from active duty, in January of '68, Prine returned to the post office, trading his ASU for blue trousers with a stripe running down the leg. His reassimilation

to civilian life proved seamless, save for one respect. "He'd been drinking all this German beer," Dave recalled. "So when he came home and my dad handed him one, he said, 'Jesus, who watered this down?'" Ann Carole had saved the allotment check they received from the Army, and the pair rented a tiny four-room apartment on Nineteenth Avenue in Melrose Park, near her parents, for eighty dollars a month. When they weren't working, he at the post office and she for a local furniture store, they passed the time laughing. She recalled that their senses of humor were so similar they would accidentally buy one another the same gifts, including Mr. Potato Heads, Slinkys, and a magic kit advertised on television. "John was so much fun to play games with, like Scrabble and Monopoly," she recalled. "He was always a kid at heart."

Prine often described his time in the service as an exercise in futility, two lost years. "I really thought it was worthless, and the only good thing about it was that it gave me a lot of time to just think, because there was nothing else to do. . . although you are supposed to look busy all the time," he said.[8] But many of the friends he'd sign on with were never the same. "I had a buddy come home from Germany and a month after he got out I called his house and he was at the veterans' hospital having shock treatments," Prine recalled. "He just went bananas. I knew when I saw him, and he had all his shoes pointed the same way under his bed, that he wasn't really out of the Army. He had those hangers going the right way and I thought, 'Oh no he's in trouble. If somebody blew 'Reveille' right now he'd run out the window.'"[9]

Some other friends developed drug problems and, in general, Prine felt an implicit sense of ignominy surrounding

their return, different from the pomp and circumstance he'd heard about and seen on television related to the second World War. "When our war comes along, all of a sudden they just want to be ashamed of it, ain't got no parades or nothing," he said.[10] One day while working his mail route, he channeled this complex mix of emotions into a song he titled "Great Society Conflict Veteran's Blues," a nod to President Lyndon B. Johnson's domestic agenda, whose main goal was to eliminate poverty through major spending programs, similar to Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. His line about broken radios, inspired by a coworker whose radio was wrapped in duct tape, came first, along with "There's a hole in daddy's arm where all the money goes." "I was kind of thinking of the humor they use in political cartoons," Prine said. "I had just kind of a picture of a fellow shooting money into his arm. Like a rainbow of money falling down into his arm."[11] The rest poured out like a fountain, a creative surge that Prine considered the best way to work, if not the most elusive.

After his shift, Prine hurried home to write it down. The first thing he saw was a cardboard insert from a pack of pantyhose Ann Carole had opened earlier in the day, and he scribbled on it furiously, desperate not to lose anything. The song eventually became "Sam Stone," now one of the American songbook's finest ruminations on the overlooked and downtrodden, stunning dissent riddled with plain, profound imagery. Prine didn't set out to write about a veteran addicted to heroin, but instead channeled his own experience in the service, its isolation, pointlessness, and unceremonious conclusion, into a character who happened to develop a habit, one of the saddest things Prine could

imagine. His mention of Jesus Christ in "Sam Stone" was also born of those same feelings, drawing upon his extended family's deep-rooted faith, and how hopeless it would feel to lose it, binding his sentimentality to the listlessness of war. Its bite proved effective. Johnny Cash was so uncomfortable with the assertion that Jesus Christ died for nothing that he worked with Prine to alter it, for his cover, to "Daddy must have hurt a lot back then, I suppose."

"Sam Stone" wasn't the only song Prine summoned on his mail route. "Donald and Lydia" was inspired by Prine's time in bootcamp in Louisiana, by the barracks and the nearest little town, which had a few bars, a salon, and little else. He imagined a scenario between two people who never meet, but who dream of falling in love. Donald's a soldier, drifting in a sea of "bunk beds, shaved heads," stationed among strangers in an unfamiliar landscape, struggling to connect. Lydia's an overweight loner who works at the nearest town's arcade, making change for those less pensive and outcast. Prine details the loneliness of these two outsiders, two individuals from very different backgrounds with all but the same feelings. "It's partially about masturbation, too, because I thought both these people were alone," Prine explained.[12]

"Your Flag Decal Won't Get You Into Heaven Anymore" came to Prine when he noticed American flag stickers in the copies of *Reader's Digest* on his mail route, a magazine already loathed by postal workers for its thickness. "You could only fit about three of them in your hand, and you'd end up with about 300 bundles of mail the day *Reader's Digest* came in," he said.[13] Soon after he delivered them, those same stickers appeared on windows, mailboxes, and car bumpers all over

the western suburbs, an act of patriotism Prine viewed as hollow, particularly in the era of Tricky Dicky Nixon. So he wrote the buoyant tune, which channeled both his childlike and serious sides. It begins with reading the family-oriented magazine in an adult bookstore and then declares, "But your flag decal won't get you into heaven anymore/They're already overcrowded from your dirty little war." All three songs are now considered standards, covered by legions of Prine's contemporaries and fans.

Having just been a soldier, patriotism, war, and the fruitfulness of such things, were at the top of Prine's mind, and youth-led demonstrations against the Vietnam War gripped the nation. In Chicago, the social and political landscape was equally turbulent. The day after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, riots broke out in more than 100 cities, Chicago included, where nine people were killed and much of the Westside was destroyed by fires. "Shoot to kill arsonists," and "shoot to maim looters," Mayor Richard J. Daley proclaimed in response (this after he oversaw the construction of highways that leveled historically Black and immigrant housing, and further segregated these populations from white residents, intentional acts of environmental racism). The 1968 Democratic National Convention, held at the International Amphitheater on the Southside, prompted widespread anti-war protests and worsening police brutality, which culminated in a riot on August 28, and the subsequent trial of the Chicago 7. Following in his father's footsteps, Dave Prine was briefly a Democratic precinct captain that year, but quit soon after the hypocrisy he witnessed. "I still voted Democrat but I certainly wasn't going to go around

parroting Daley and all the crap that went on surrounding the convention," he said. The following year, Fred Hampton, Prine's former classmate at Proviso East, was murdered by the FBI and Chicago police after being marked by J. Edgar Hoover. Though the Prines lived ten miles west of the city, its tensions and impact were palpable. Prine couldn't escape the politics and social issues of the time, nor did he want to.

For the next two years, Prine would burst in the front door after work, eager to write something down, or he'd tuck himself away in a tiny closet, to revise or practice what he'd just written, respite from the television. He had plenty of time to think on his mail route, to be sure. But this surge in his creative output may also be traced to the meaninglessness he'd felt in the service: two years of his life gone and for what? Songwriting gave him a renewed sense of purpose. And Prine even took his quest for meaning a step further. After returning home from Germany, he ordered a correspondence course in radio broadcasting, hoping to be closer to music and the lives of everyday people. Billy recalled Prine interviewing the family for his assignments, particularly their father, who loved to talk politics. "There were seventy-two lessons and my tape recorder broke four lessons before I was to finish," Prine said. "I should have finished just for the hell of it, even though I don't think that diploma was going to mean much. I never yet met anyone who graduated from that school."[14]

Menaloscino recalled Prine comparing songwriting to taking the roof off of someone's house. "You just kind of look down and see how they live," she said, relaying his sentiment. And so that's what he did, cruising through the suburbs in his

Scout, imagining people and places he didn't know, but who'd become familiar through his compassionate and incisive ponderings. "Spanish Pipedream" poured out of Prine after the first two lines suddenly materialized: "She was a level-headed dancer on the road to alcohol/And I was just a soldier on my way to Montreal." After that, he sought to blend politics and romance with three chords and a bouncing country-fried beat. He satirized the hippie movement that had swept up his younger brother Billy, who sported long hair and loved rock n' roll and the city's electric blues, and the programs Menaloscino loved to watch (enough to make you want to blow up your TV). "I actually went and got him a Nerf ball so he could throw it at the television when he was annoyed," she said. Later in life, Prine would insist that he wasn't terribly invested in politics, but in '68 and '69 it was unavoidable. "John was political," Dave remembered. "But just more subtle with it."

The idea for "Hello in There" appeared after Prine heard The Beatles' "Across the Universe," from *Let it Be*, written and sung by John Lennon. "I played that song over and over again," Prine said. "It sounded to me like someone talking through a hollow log or a pipe or something."[15] So he envisioned trying to communicate with someone that way, how it might sound, a *helllooo* echoing through a cylindrical medium. And he combined that with his reverence for the elderly, sparked by his Maywood newspaper route and extended family, and deepened by the compassion he felt for their lives and memories. "These people have their entire lives, and they're not writers but they have a story to tell," he said. "Some of them bury it deeper than others, so you have

to dig."[16] He wrote part of the song from inside a postal relay box, an oversized storage container that looks like a public mailbox without a slot. "I hopped in there to eat my ham sandwich for lunch and to hide from the Chicago wind," he said.[17] Rudy from "Hello in There" was a dog that lived across the street from his apartment in Melrose Park. "The lady used to come out at five o'clock every night and go 'Ru-dee! Ru-dee!' and I was sitting there writing and suddenly I go, 'Rudy! Yeah! I got that,'" Prine said.[17]

Though many of the songs he'd written addressed war, hypocrisy, a loss of innocence, and the outcast, overlooked, and marginalized, his sense of humor remained intact, vital to his disposition and to his marriage. Prine knew his oblique tendency to laugh or smile in most any situation struck the outside world as odd, and so he channeled that alien feeling into "Illegal Smile." Composed at home one day in 1969, while Menaloscino was asleep in the next room, Prine celebrated his most valuable weapon in the face of loneliness and hardship. "Ah, but fortunately I have the key to escape reality/And you may see me tonight with an illegal smile," he sings over G, D and C, his smile illegal for its tendency to make folks uncomfortable. As it happened, the song also works as a fitting celebration of cannabis and its far-out effects. Prine always denied the connection, though he also didn't begrudge it. And it's impossible to believe that a guy so perceptive, so adept at double entendre, couldn't have planned it or at the very least pieced it together. He was hanging out in Old Town, after all, ground zero for head shops and hippies.

By 1970, Prine had more than a handful of original songs. He'd also upgraded his Gibson Hummingbird to a Martin

D-28, a ’68 model, purchased at Guitar Gallery in downtown Chicago, a bygone shop the Prine brothers loved to explore. Now, he needed a place to test drive his tunes, someplace outside the confines of home, someplace small and welcoming. A new club, opened by some folks from the Old Town School, proved to be just the right spot. He just didn’t know it yet.

# 6
# And Then He Has You

The story of Prine's first nightclub performance and subsequent discovery has been recounted so many times that it seems apocryphal, a plot point whose details have been softened and molded into an enticing soundbite. As with many oral traditions, it's difficult to tell the difference between the truth and the tale. But music's best storyteller was in fact launched by this great story, a mirror between life and art whose poetic underpinnings are a perfect reflection of Prine's inimitable work. And it all happened one warm summer night in 1970, at a little Chicago folk music club, when John Prine was just twenty-three years old.

As Prine told it, he was one of a handful of guitar students in the audience at The Fifth Peg one night after class, kvetching over a couple of beers. "I made a remark about the people who were getting up to sing: 'This is awful,'" he said. "So the people I was sitting with said, 'You get up and try.' And I did."[1] But Ray Tate remembered it differently. He recalled that Prine came into the club one night when the house and the open-mic schedule was packed. "He waited around for a while and he wasn't too happy about it," Tate said. Unable to put him up, Tate invited Prine to come back

the following week, and promised to give him a spot. "I felt terrible having to send him home without putting him on the stage," he said. When Prine returned, he didn't have to wait too long.

This is where Prine and Tate's memories converge. After performing "Sam Stone" (then titled "Great Society Conflict Veteran's Blues"), the audience of about ten or so fell mute. It was the kind of awkward silence that makes seconds feel like centuries. "I thought, 'Uh-oh, I'm in trouble," Prine said.[2] But then the entire room, including Prine's teacher, erupted in applause, unsure what they'd just witnessed but confident it was important. "I was really impressed by how beautiful the songs were, how well written and clever," Tate said. Prine also performed "Paradise" and "Old People" (later "Hello in There"), shaky but determined to get through it.

Whether Prine reluctantly took to the stage or, as Tate remembered, vied for a spot, one thing is certain: He was nervous. John and Dave had performed covers at the dedication of the Fred Hampton Pool during the 1969 Maywood Folk Festival, a short-lived suburban fête founded by a neighborhood friend. "We were the only white folks there," Dave recalled. Prine had given plenty of living-room performances, but he hadn't tested any of his original songs on a live audience that wasn't his family. "I was writing these songs totally for myself, not thinking anyone was ever going to hear them," Prine said. "And I went from that to being a very nervous public performer who had no voice whatsoever. . .to sing for other people was really painful."[3] Prine explained that in his earliest days he spoke the words to his songs, fast or slow depending on the melody, and held

certain notes to let the audience know he was transitioning to a new idea. "That's how limited I was," he said.[4] Eventually, he settled into a nasal, twang-infused delivery that would elicit a million comparisons to Bob Dylan. But for now, he was a mailman at the crossroads of a curious proposition.

According to Prine, someone who worked at the club offered him a regular gig on the spot, but that may be an exaggeration. The offer may have come after a few open mic gigs, as others have remembered. What's certain is the popularity of his appearances happened with unbelievable speed. Prine began playing Sunday nights, earning half of the door, in June and July of 1970. He was then promoted to Friday and Saturday nights in the fall. "When they started charging people to get in, we would get a cut of that," Menaloscino recalled. "So I would stand by the door and collect something like two dollars and fifty cents from each person." Ed Holstein, who worked at OTS's store across the street, had also become a part-time bartender at The Fifth Peg, and took in one of Prine's earliest performances, wandering in on a night off work. "He played 'Illegal Smile,' 'Paradise,' 'Hello in There,' and 'Sam Stone,' and it was pretty amazing, the songs were so powerful, I knew right away that something was going on," he said. "I immediately told my brother Fred and Steve Goodman about him."

As momentum began to build, Prine worried that he didn't have enough songs, that his set was becoming redundant for repeat patrons. So he wrote "Souvenirs" (included on his second album *Diamonds in the Rough*) in his '65 Chevelle while driving to The Fifth Peg. Prine explained that he set out to write the most sophisticated

melody he could muster, and it's more complex than the songs that comprise *John Prine*, twinkling like a constellation. "I thought I'd written a jazz melody!" he explained. ". . .I was surprised to find out it had the same three chords all my other songs have."[5]

Its imagery and emotion originates from a carnival Prine attended with his brothers when they were young. Amid the festivities, his oldest brother Dave wandered off, and Prine was convinced he'd never find him again, an unprecedented, overwhelming fear that burned in his memory. "I kept that emotion buried somewhere, and it came out in 'Souvenirs,'" he said.[6] Prine also recalled the image of Dave, after they'd reunited, holding small plastic horses, souvenirs from the carnival but also of Prine's memory, a crystalized moment of relief.

As the months wore on, more and more faces from the Chicago folk scene wandered in to catch Prine, on word-of-mouth recommendation. Steve Goodman came in a couple of times, first with the Holstein brothers, Fred and Ed, and later with the rising local singer Bonnie Koloc, whose glassy voice was the perfect instrument for bare folk songs, but dynamic enough for jazz sophistication and emotive blues, which she often incorporated in her sets. She'd come to Chicago from Iowa in late 1968, hoping to break into the thriving north side club scene, and almost immediately landed a gig as a house performer at The Quiet Knight. "The first time I saw John play I walked up to him and I said, 'You don't have to worry about a thing because your gift will carry you through,'" Koloc recalled. "He had this wry way and this interesting way of looking at the world and could project that in his writing. He had no pretense."

Prine and the Holsteins became buddies, jamming together in the brothers' apartments or commiserating over beers. Fred was older, a scholar of folk music, and Ed shared in Prine's love of a good hard laugh. Both brothers had worked in the Old Town School's store, selling strings and other accoutrements. "Eddie and me, we used to go to lunch together because I used to like to watch Eddie eat," Prine said. "He'd eat for hours. And he was just a little skinny guy then, and you'd wonder where the food was."[7] Fred Holstein was one of few people Prine knew who had a reel-to-reel recorder, and he'd track demos for Prine after he'd written a song. "He'd bring it over and then Fred would do it that night," Ed Holstein said. "People wanted to do Prine's songs right away." One day Ed shared a couple of melodies he'd written, and asked if Prine had any lyrics, thinking they could come up with a co-write. "He had one verse, 'I am an old woman,' and I was looking for something a little bit more like, 'There's a hole in daddy's arm,'" he said. That one verse soon became one of Prine's most beloved songs, "Angel from Montgomery," but Holstein just couldn't see it at the time. "It just didn't move me," he said. "It became a much better song later."

Though Ed turned down Prine's idea of a middle-aged woman who feels older than she is—a rejection that would haunt him the rest of his life—it stuck with Prine. And so he finished "Angel from Montgomery" soon after their exchange, in 1970. Prine believed the setting was inspired by Hank Williams: Montgomery, Alabama, is where the country icon's career began and where it ended when he was laid to rest. Holstein has posited that it was drawn from *The Spirit of Progress*, a bronze statue of an angelic woman on top of the

former Montgomery Ward headquarters on Chicago Avenue. Either way, the image Prine conjured when writing it was salient. "I had this really vivid picture of this woman standing over the dishwater with soap in her hands, and just walking away from it all," Prine said. "So I just kept that whole image in mind when I was writing the song and I just let it pour out of that character's heart."[8] Another example of Prine's innate ability to write empathetic, character-driven lyrics illuminating overlooked portions of American society, the song is also an early example of Prine's tacit feminism. Rather than talk over the woman, he allowed her to speak for herself, revealing the depths of her dissatisfaction and longing, rather than funneling her feelings through a man's third-party narration. Two years later, Koloc cut an excellent full-band country-rock version of "Angel from Montgomery" that's less funereal than Prine's, for the small but mighty Chicago independent label Ovation Records, cementing a fondness between the two musicians that survived well into their golden years. This was before Bonnie Raitt's cover, from *Streetlights*, which helped propel Prine on to the national stage. "With John, we felt this realness, this depth of a person," Koloc said. "That was hardly common. He connected with our humanity, with how people feel. Not everybody can write those lyrics."

The first week in October, 1970, Roger Ebert, the film critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, wandered into The Fifth Peg during one of Prine's sets, after walking out of a particularly rotten film. Ebert had been with the paper for three years, and was a familiar face in Old Town, where he downed beer-and-a-shot specials among friends new and old at O'Rourkes

Pub, the Old Town Ale House, and the Earl of Old Town. "Old Town and Lincoln Avenue in the 1960s and 1970s were where Chicago went to be young, to drink and sing all night, to live forever," Ebert said.[9]

It's not a stretch to imagine that Ebert might've heard of the buzz surrounding a new songwriter performing a mile from his Old Town stomping grounds, but Ebert attributed the encounter to "sheer blind luck." Music wasn't his beat, but after witnessing Prine's performance, Ebert was moved enough to share the news of a remarkable local talent. Great minds recognize their peers with a particular acuity. That Friday, October 9, the *Sun-Times* ran Prine's first review, written by the young film critic. "He appears on stage with such modesty he almost seems to be backing into the spotlight," Ebert wrote. "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."[10]

Ebert's article blew the door wide open, and Prine went from being celebrated by scensters to being the talk of suburbanites. Those who'd never set foot in a folk music club soon angled for a spot at the feet of the singing mailman. "After Roger's piece, things changed," Prine said. "He wrote that in place of his weekly movie review, and everybody would turn to the last page to see what the movie was. He was recognized by this time as a Chicago writer and I was a Chicago kid, and the combination there got the people of Chicago interested to come see this kid."[11] The following night, after Ebert's review, was Prine's 24th birthday. He had a gig at The Fifth Peg, so Ann Carole loaded an oversized sheet

cake into the trunk of their Chevelle, and surprised him with it at the club. Prine became so popular that a fan even made him a large quilted banner that listed favorite songs "Donald and Lydia," "Blue Umbrella," "Hello in There," "Old People" (an unwitting redundancy), "Quiet Man," and "Sam Stone," with Prine's name spelled incorrectly in the middle, "John Pryne." "We hung it in our apartment for years," Menaloscino remembered.

Overnight, Prine was no longer a neophyte, no longer a mere postal carrier. Like Ebert and Terkel and Sandburg, Nelson Algren and Gwendolyn Brooks, he had become an emblem, a living embodiment of Chicago's low-key brilliance, a friend relaying his most pressing thoughts with unfussy poetic clarity. Like these writers, he was a clarion voice of the everyman, a populist poet, a son of the Second City born of its confines and built by its people. Though Chicago issues a particular test of endurance—it will bury you in parking tickets, then bury you in snow, and then drink you under the table—it also pledges its allegiance, its brotherhood, to its true blue hearts. Prine's Midwestern parlance was unpretentious, astute, and heartrending, and with it, he'd won over the city.

Prine took a gamble on Chicago's promise. Soon after Ebert's review, he quit his job with the USPS. "I made $2.18 an hour at the post office and they didn't pay overtime, and they worked us twelve hours a day," Prine said. "When I left, the postmaster told me not to take my retirement because I'd be back. I told him, 'You don't get it. Even if this singin' thing doesn't work, I ain't ever coming back.' Most people would've kept both jobs and doubled their money, but I just quit and

slept all week."[12] As much as Prine insisted that music was a hobby in those days, that he never expected to make it a career, this cavalier move suggests otherwise. As reluctant or uncertain as he might have felt, or thought he felt, or told people he felt, no card-carrying Midwesterner leaves a steady job with a pension without confidence in what comes next. In the wake of Ebert's ink, Chicago had a new poet laureate. His name was John Prine.

# 7
# The Earl

On the ground floor of the three-story building at 1615 N. Wells Street was a room, its red brick walls alive with sound and squalor. Six inches above its hardwood floors, an eight-foot stage, adorned with a stool and a microphone, and flanked by two wood-burning fireplaces. Peanut shells lined the floor and smoke thickened the air. Swaths of denim, corduroy, and polyester. Thick sideburns and center-parts. Revelry until 4 a.m. Out front, a sign hung from an iron rod, through torrid summers and sunless frozen winters, sturdy as the backs of its barflies. The Earl of Old Town Cafe & Pub, Luncheon Served, it read in an antique script. A haven for blue collar workers, hippies, gangsters, students, and curious squares. Guys just trying to make it. A sanctuary for the songs of John Prine.

It was here Prine grew from student to master. Already an accomplished songwriter, and a promising guitarist and singer, he became a performer and a recording artist at this Old Town saloon, learning to work a room and mesmerize a rough-and-tumble crowd. It wasn't so easy at first. "I got up on the stage, and normally I was kind of a shy person," Prine said. "So when that one light hit me, I would talk my ass off,

telling stories. I was nervous about my singing and playing."[1] Prine performed songs that would comprise his self-titled debut to a cross section of Chicago nightcrawlers: blue-collar laborers, hip young artists, fellow musicians, curious suburbanites, roving mafia, cops, and the journalists who covered the scene, all of whom recognized the star in their midst, none of them fools. And Prine's success arrived swiftly.

Opened in Old Town in 1962, The Earl, as it's known, sat about two blocks east of the first Old Town School of Folk Music location on North Avenue. It was one in a series of bars, boutiques, and other retail and dining establishments that formed a vibrant scene in a formerly derelict zone, where hippies panhandled for pocket change, gay residents gathered openly, and musicians, comedians, and underground theater troupes performed. North Avenue and Wells Street offered a host of commercial storefronts, decorated in colorful signage and window displays. Old Town's residential area was filled with historic cottages and Victorian homes, now rented by young hipsters amid white flight to the suburbs. Long controlled by the unscrupulous alderman Paddy Bauler, a local saloonkeeper and figurehead in the Chicago machine, Old Town embodied a distinctive mix of old and new guards, even as Bauler famously declared, "Chicago ain't ready for a reform mayor!"

In September of 1963, *Chicago Tribune* reporter Alex Small wrote about the changes in Old Town. "Before that, this neighborhood was one of dingy, discouraged houses by day, and complete somnolence at night. Even jackrollers and juvenile delinquents shunned it."[2] Now, Young clerks peddled Kerouac, Bukowski, and Beckett at Barbara's Books, while the

fashion-conscious shilled out for corduroy bell-bottoms and paisley shirts at Man of Ease. Imported glassware and cutlery lined the humble shelves of the first Crate and Barrel store. Those of a nocturnal persuasion grabbed hamburgers and beers at The Earl, Old Town Pump, the Old Town Ale House, and other saloons. Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and the Paul Butterfield Blues Band headlined Big John's, a short-lived and much loved blues club.

The area's transformation hinged on two major developments: the explosion of folk music and electric blues in Chicago and the formation of The Second City. The famed improv comedy theater held its first performance in an abandoned laundromat on Wells Street in 1959. Seven years later the troupe had earned a Tony Award nomination, and moved into its permanent home at 1616 N. Wells Street, across from The Earl. By the time Prine was a regular on its stage, budding comedians Bill Murray, John Belushi, and Harold Ramis were members of his audience. Prine was a tender recorder of everyday absurdity, a man who found bright patches in the darkest of landscapes. And it's a particular kismet that he and some of the country's finest comedians came of age side by side, ducking in and out of one another's gigs. "We worked similar hours, but sometimes they'd go late. So we'd stumble in there after he'd manipulated the crowd completely," Murray said. "There were men that were crying and smoking and drinking, and women that were just adoring. And I'd go, 'Eh, musicians. They really work their ways on people.'"[3]

The neighborhood retained its weathered veneer in spite of revitalization. "In Old Town there has been some

disapproving wagging of heads at the change on Wells Street," the same *Tribune* reporter wrote. "They need not be too discouraged; it still looks pretty ugly and shabby to me. But it is certainly less sordid and gloomy than it used to be."[4] There is a general misunderstanding that inclement weather is what drives people from Chicago, with its April blizzards and October heatwaves. In fact, it is its underbelly—mob bosses and organized crime, corrupt police and seedy politicians, plutocrats and pinheads all vying for a piece of the pie—that has most often separated those who can and cannot hack life in the city. "Chicago is not the most corrupt of cities," Terkel wrote in his ode, *Studs Terkel's Chicago*. "The state of New Jersey has a couple. Need we mention Nevada? Chicago, though, is the Big Daddy. Not more corrupt, just more theatrical, more colorful in its shadiness."[5] Snow is a picnic where potholes line streets and tax dollars fill pockets in equal measure.

Good-humored grit is a badge of honor in such an openly crooked town, not unlike the half-cocked "illegal smile" that spread across Prine's face. When things get fancy, Chicagoans get suspicious. And The Earl was appropriately imperfect, lined with nude art, dirty chandeliers, and clocks set at varying times, along with handwritten signage hung at haphazard angles that were often misspelled. "Enterainment nightly," read an advertisement on the south wall. When the Christmas decorations went up, they rarely came back down, dusty wreaths around each chandelier. The Earl leveled the playing field across classes, races, and sexual orientations by offering any local musician its modest stage to perform to a hometown audience during open mic nights, or regular gigs.

Performer and patron were amenable to the social contract that was life in Old Town, where blue collars abutted the avant garde. All Outsiders Welcome, its neon sign would have read, had it procured one. It was a ripe setting for Prine's own spirit, nurtured in the integrated, working-class environs of Maywood, and set free in Old Town.

Proprietor Earl J.J. Pionke was a boisterous fellow with a bartender's charisma, a hustler's drive, and Chicago's famous white-working class accent that transformed "t" sounds into "d" sounds. The Southside native, of Polish heritage and the foster care system, was born to brush the cat's fur the wrong way. Among The Earl's packed house, he was often heard before he was seen. After working the line in a factory, and managing a roughneck packaged goods store, he chose The Earl's location in up-and-coming Old Town for its proximity to one of his favorite watering holes, the Old Town Ale House. Pionke drove a hard bargain for the storefront. "I figured that if we had a good year he [the landlord] would come back with a heavy rent increase, so I told him: 'I'll give you $300 a month to start, but I want a two-year lease with two and three years options—at no increase in rent.'"[6]

Pionke applied the same bargaining principle when he began booking folk music performers. Prine and Goodman signed multiple-week deals with Pionke. When Koloc was first hired in 1969, Pionke vied for a two- or three-month contract with the young singer. "But I thought, 'What if I hate this place?'" Koloc said. "So he offered me two weeks with a two-week option, which really meant four weeks." By January 1971 the *Tribune* bestowed Koloc with the award for "Most Return Engagements" of 1970, for her many repeat

performances at the Old Town saloon. "We've lost count, and so have Earl and Bonnie," nightlife reporter Will Leonard wrote.[7]

In the early, fledgling years of The Earl, Pionke booked a menagerie of entertainment, including opera singers, while also fulfilling the roles of bartender, cook, waiter, and barback. "People would ask me why I didn't hire a waitress. After all, it would only cost me a buck and a half an hour," he said. "I told them we couldn't afford one. What they didn't see was I needed the tips to pay the rent."[8] Pionke also made the rounds in the folk circuit in the early '60s, paying a dollar or two to watch locals like Fred Holstein, Willie Wright, and Ginni Clemmens. But by the mid '60s the scene had all but vanished. Boarded up and rebranded seemingly overnight, the once-vibrant roster of two-dollar gigs at area clubs now lived in the annals of near-distant history. "Folk music faded away like the hula hoop," Leonard wrote. "There wasn't a folk song to be heard at a saloon in Chicago, and this column fearlessly stated that it was gone forever."[9] Dylan going electric at the Newport Folk Festival in the summer of '65 marked the death knell of acoustic music writ large. But Pionke had other ideas.

He was convinced folk music could live on at The Earl. This was in 1966, the same year the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Herb Alpert's Tijuana Brass topped the *Billboard* 200 album charts. Locally, teens were enamored with the British Invasion, forming nascent garage bands, including The Buckinghams and The Shadows of Knight.[10] These acts filled the dry teen clubs and youth centers of the suburbs, while sprawling, horn-laden rock ensembles, show bands,

and white-boy electric blues worshippers filled the clubs in the city. In Chicago in the late '60s, there was nary an acoustic guitar to be found.

It is unclear whether Pionke ever read *The Art of War*, but in his decision to swim upstream with folk music, he embodied Sun-Tzu's decree: "In the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity." He hedged a decent bet—that folk music fans hadn't died en masse because popular music had swung in a different direction. Pionke figured that the folkies needed a new place to play, and their fans a new place to drink. After Big John's closed in 1966, Mother Blues began booking even more electric blues acts, eliminating folk musicians from its roster. So Pionke harbored its regulars. He forked over $450 in cash for an Allied Radio sound rig, mounting its two speakers on the south end of the room.[11] The first week in November 1966, Pionke favorite Fred Holstein launched folk music at the Earl of Old Town, opening for singer-guitarist Maxine Sellers, who'd recently signed to Capitol Records.

Folk scene regulars like Bob Gibson soon came aboard, along with Black folk and soul musicians like Wright and Terry Callier, who was known to throw sugar cubes at chatty patrons. Koloc landed in Old Town from Iowa in 1968, and soon oscillated between gigs at The Earl and The Quiet Knight, a club that booked a host of local and touring acts from Linda Ronstadt to Bob Marley and The Wailers. Steve Goodman started showing up for open mics in 1967 and became a house performer within months. The Earl quickly became ground zero for the Chicago scene, not because it was the nicest venue, or the one with the best acoustics. No, Chicago loved The Earl because it reflected the brambly heart

of the city, welcoming, rowdy, and unpretentious. "The place was wild; It was an incredible scene," Koloc said. "Steve and I started to get really big audiences. People would be lined around the block to get in sometimes."

After the success of The Earl's folk music nights, Pionke hired staff that were as quirky and memorable as he was. Some were longtime friends from high school. Gus Johns, the bar's longtime manager and doorman, sported a flat top, a white shirt, matching socks, and conservative politics. His no-bullshit manner hustled disruptive drunks and capacity-busting creepers out the door so efficiently that the *Chicago Tribune* once heralded him "I.D Checker of the Year." Jimmy Johnson helmed the grill, earning the nickname Ptomaine Jim. In February of 1970, Steve Goodman married Nancy Pruter, a waitress at The Earl, who'd been a classmate of Prine's at Proviso East.

Prine joined The Earl's roster in early 1971, after about six months performing at The Fifth Peg, where Ebert's review propelled him from scant audiences to packed houses. But he wasn't yet a household name. Billed "John Pine" in a March 5, 1971 gig listing in the *Chicago Tribune*, by April he was working coveted weekends, raking in $1,000 a week in wages under the table, far more than he earned as a mail carrier.

A utility closet doubled as a dressing room at The Earl, dubbed The Star Cave for the Christmas decoration that hung on its door. Though Goodman had seen Prine perform several times at The Fifth Peg, this spartan stage is where Prine and Goodman first shook hands and talked at length. In the 2007 documentary *Larger Than Life: A Celebration of Steve Goodman and His Music*, Prine said:

"It was in the back of the Earl of Old Town, in the dressing room, which was a sink and freezer. I'd heard Steve on the radio, on *The Midnight Special*, a folk music program on this station in Chicago on Saturday nights. I heard him singing "City of New Orleans." And I just got this vision that the guy singing that song wore, like, turtleneck sweaters, and had kind of a crew cut, and maybe a little beard. A really tall guy. And here comes this guy stormin' through the door looking like Edward G. Robinson. He walked up to me and says, "Hi, I'm Steve Goodman. You're alright!" Like previous to that I wasn't. Like he was solidifying it. We kind of became instant friends."

Though The Earl had its charms, it wasn't the easiest room to play. Its high ceiling and bare brick walls often pitted the patrons' conversations against the singers' voices, the most obvious sign that the onlookers weren't interested. That's not to mention the clang of the cash register and Pionke's booming telephone calls. It was noisy, smoky, and packed to the rafters. Local folk singer Jim Post recalled that a patron once hurled a french fry and hit his ex-wife Cathy on the forehead when they were performing. "That wouldn't have been so bad, except it had catsup on it and stuck," he said.[12] Koloc was a veteran of noisy hotel bars, and Goodman had natural charisma and a propensity for showmanship, giving them easy command of the audience.

But for his first performances, Prine let the chips fall where they may, allowing his songs to speak for themselves, adding little banter. In tattered denim, brown leather boots, and an overgrown haircut—the front feathered and fluffed like a

Silkie chicken—he stepped onto The Earl's stage. "I'm John Prine and these are some songs I wrote," he said quietly at a gig in May 1971, his Martin acoustic slung over one shoulder. [13]

He wasn't yet a skilled showman, but the lyrical square-shooting of "Your Flag Decal Won't Get You Into Heaven Anymore," "Hello in There," "Sam Stone," "Paradise," "Illegal Smile," and others transfixed the crowd in an instant. They were sobered by the tragic veteran who ". . .was alone when he popped his last balloon," and they chuckled at the irony of ". . .digesting *Reader's Digest* in the back of a dirty bookstore." Prine's clarion words and unpretentious playing cut immediately through the noise, ringing louder and with more clarity than any electric guitar. With an unlikely wisdom, the chubby 24-year-old held a mirror to the room, with all of its loneliness, hypocrisy, and absurdity.

For most of 1971, Prine gigged Wednesdays through Sundays at The Earl, playing until four or five in the morning. And he continued to write songs when he wasn't asleep in the tiny apartment he and his wife rented, a five-minute drive from his parents' place in Maywood. In May of 1971 he told the *Tribune*:

> "Finished a song just yesterday, about isolation and fear and stuff. It's about this guy and his girl, a waitress. He picks her up at the restaurant every night. Has to wait until she closes the place. He knows that she wants to end everything, but she won't let on at all. He's put in that kind of position throughout the whole song. Been working on that song for four months and the whole thing came together yesterday when I got the chorus."[14]

"Far From Me," originally titled "The Closing of the Cafe," would become one of many standards from *John Prine*, its four-month gestation illustrative of the rigor behind Prine's most profound and economical lines. Its particular proletariat sadness is like that of an Edward Hopper painting, rich Americana imagery superimposed over a backdrop heavy with silence, quiet tension filling its negative spaces. Its iconic chorus was not a happy accident born of a hillbilly's jottings. It was not a sudden, unexplainable burst. Prine's best lyrics were born of months of revision, mined from his memory banks, polished and polished again, jagged stones in a melodious tumbler.

Prine and Goodman developed a distinctive rapport that transcended their sets at The Earl. They saw in one another a singular talent, Prine's bold, plainspoken lyrics carrying on the tradition of great Chicago writers like Carl Sandburg, Gwendolyn Brooks, Shel Silverstein, Nelson Algren, Studs Terkel, and Roger Ebert, and Goodman's dexterous guitar-playing and soaring voice lighting a fire in Prine, inspiring his own playing and confidence. "They just clicked," Ann Carole remembered. "They spent so much time together, and I think John felt closer to Steve in some respects than he did with his blood brothers." John was a writer and Steve was a performer, and the polarity of each man's personality created an opposites-attract dynamic that bonded them closely. Goodman's positivity and performative nature lured Prine outside of himself, while Prine's shy, pensive, and generally reluctant posture anchored Goodman, gripping his feet to the ground, reminding him of everything he had even as he aimed for more. And more would soon come. Indeed, their friendship would change Prine's life forever.

# 8
# The Best Damned Songwriter

Earl Pionke provided plenty of work for Prine, Goodman, Koloc, Holstein, Post, and other locals. These gigs also helped them land spots at bigger local clubs. In March of 1971 Koloc, Queen of The Earl, made her downtown debut at the posher Rush Street nightclub Mister Kelly's. It was ground zero for famous touring comedians and singers like Woody Allen, Richard Pryor, Barbara Streisand, and Eartha Kitt, and Koloc's appearance signaled a star in the making. "She was the one destined for greatness, not Steve or me," Prine explained.[1] In April, Goodman started working as the warm-up act at The Quiet Knight, priming rowdy Chicago crowds for big-name touring artists. By now, too, Prine's draw at The Earl was substantial, and Pionke had big plans for his new leading light. In the fall, he would open a second location of the Earl of Old Town on Harlem Avenue in suburban Norridge, near O'Hare International Airport, and Prine was to be the main attraction. Prine couldn't have been more content, The Earl's Sunday matinees notwithstanding. "I was a happy camper," he said.[2]

From April 28 through May 2 Goodman opened at The Quiet Knight for a songwriter sweeping the nation, whose hits like "Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down," "Help Me Make it

Through the Night," and "Me and Bobby McGee" had been sung by Johnny Cash, Sammi Smith, and Janis Joplin. Kris Kristofferson's 1970 debut *Kristofferson* wasn't successful by industry standards, but it helped catapult him to the rank of songwriter's songwriter, a coveted position for its lucrative promise but also, for a man like Kristofferson, the ability to live and work on his own terms. "All of a sudden, Kris was hot everywhere," Goodman said. "It didn't matter which market you were talking about, everybody was cuttin' his stuff, and for good reason."[3]

Kristofferson's life was something of a far-fetched coming-of-age tale: A former military brat, celebrated college athlete, and Rhodes Scholar, he drifted between unglamorous odd jobs before becoming a commercial helicopter pilot and janitor at Columbia Recording Studios in Nashville. As the infamous story goes, after meeting June Carter Cash in the hallway of the recording studio, and handing her a demo that ended up in Johnny Cash's slush pile, Kristofferson landed a chopper on Cash's estate to get his attention. The Man in Black soon covered "Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down," and the rest was history.

By now, Kristofferson was a star but he was also stuck in the vice-grip of alcoholism and general hard livin'. He was sick throughout his five evenings playing The Quiet Knight, and relied on the strength and popularity of his songs to carry the show, rather than his increasingly wobbly state as a performer. "Even when his opening set became a little ragged—he and his sidemen were not always together—Kristofferson's songs were on target and he gave the impression of being very real," the *Tribune's* critic wrote.[4]

As their nights together wore on, Kristofferson took in Goodman's performances and was impressed by his young opener's ability, particularly his original songs "City of New Orleans" and "Learn to Dance," and a cover, "Sam Stone," written by one of his buddies. "Goddam, that's a great song," Kristofferson said.[5] "You gotta hear the guy that wrote it," Goodman replied.[6] On their last night together, Kristofferson agreed. And he brought along an unexpected guest.

Canadian crooner Paul Anka was also making his Chicago debut, headlining the regal Empire Room at the Palmer House hotel downtown. He and Kristofferson had bumped into one another on their flight to the Windy City, and so Anka popped into Kristofferson's gig on May 1, where he joined the band for "Help Me Make it Through the Night," which Anka had been incorporating into his live show, among his many hits like "Lonely Boy," "Put Your Head on My Shoulder," and "Diana." Afterward, Anka, Kristofferson, the band, Goodman, and a few faces from each star's entourage convened back downtown at the Palmer House for a twilight-hours boozy breakfast, an unprecedented setting for the scruffy local songwriter who lived in a tiny apartment in Old Town. In Anka's suite, Goodman performed a few songs and impressed Anka enough for the singer to dangle an offer: a plane ticket to New York to record a few demos.

Goodman could've taken the offer and run, but in that moment he did the unthinkable. Rather than accept, he doubled down, insisting that Anka and Kristofferson go catch his buddy, John Prine, the next night. Goodman was an upbeat, affable fellow by nature, but he had one thing working against him: time. He'd been diagnosed with leukemia in

1967. Though he experienced varying states of remission, Goodman knew that his days were numbered. The pressure of that looming deadline motivated him to pursue his music career with an unselfconscious and unusually focused force, and in that moment he thought to share it with his friend. In other words, Goodman had nothing to lose.

In turn, the implausibility of Kristofferson and Anka agreeing to such a demand cannot be overstated. Kristofferson had no doubt received his fair share of uneven demos from opening acts, and Anka was from another planet entirely, one with tuxedos, limousines, and the finest champagne. It's a testament to Goodman's enthusiasm, energy, and evident goodwill that he lured these two men to Old Town, an altruistic act that paid off for his friend. A friend who was perfectly content in his position as rising local, but who Goodman saw more for.

The following night, after Kristofferson and Goodman and Anka wrapped up their gigs at The Quiet Knight and the Palmer House, they convened at the Earl of Old Town, in the twilight hours of May 2. Prine had just finished his own gig and was hanging out in a booth, waiting to be paid. Goodman told Prine to expect Anka and Kristofferson, but the prospect still seemed unbelievable. He was excitable and a dreamer. Prine often likened him to the Golden Age film star Edward G. Robinson, a short but formidable man who commanded the screen with his larger-than-life presence. Prine didn't disbelieve what Goodman had told him, but he wasn't convinced it would really happen either.

In Prine's estimation, Kristofferson was a songwriting God, up there with Bob Dylan and Hank Williams and

Johnny Cash. Prine had only been at The Earl for a couple of months, and a break of this magnitude was inconceivable. And perhaps, in Prine's view, a bit premature. "I quit the post office and I thought, 'This is perfect,'" he explained. "I thought, 'I just want to do this for a while.'"[7] But Goodman had other plans.

It was two or three in the morning by the time Kristofferson, his bandmate Terry Paul, the British film actress Samantha Eggar, local antiques dealer and Kristofferson friend Charlene Bos, Goodman, and Anka—his guitarist and bodyguard in tow—arrived. The chairs had been stacked, so the group flipped over a few and placed them around a table. Prine unpacked his guitar, and brought his A-game, starting with "Donald and Lydia" and progressing to "Hello in There," "Paradise," and most every song he'd written up to that point. "I was tryin' my darndest to impress him so he wouldn't get up and walk out," Prine said.[8] What Prine didn't realize is that Kristofferson was blown away. "He proceeded to just destroy us, song by song," Kristofferson said. "I felt like we were at something like when somebody might have stumbled upon Bob Dylan. John Prine just scalded my brain that night. He was the best damned songwriter I'd ever seen."[9] Kristofferson was so impressed that, after offering Prine a beer, he implored him to get back up and play all of the songs again, and any others he'd written.

Prine was equally in awe of Kristofferson's presence, but couldn't have cared less about Anka, who was a celebrity outside of the country and folk music Prine saw as more authentic, less corrupted by the quest for fame and fortune that was synonymous with the pop realm Anka inhabited.

Prine had a few run-ins with record industry folks, and was suspicious of their maneuvering. Local Bob Koester, who ran the Chicago jazz and blues record label Delmark, was the first person to offer Prine a record deal. He wanted an album of covers, with a few originals thrown in, an offer Prine declined. He'd started writing original material because he didn't like the sound of his covers, after all. Representatives from the New York record label Buddah had attended his gigs at The Earl, and a few hopeful managers had shown up there too, and at The Fifth Peg, hoping to get in early with the buzzing local songwriter. "There's a lot of people ready to take advantage of you in this business," Prine explained. "I met fifteen people in the last year who said they personally knew Johnny Cash and could get him to do one of my songs."[10] Prine even turned down the chance to appear on *Gathering at the Earl of Old Town*, the 1970 compilation produced by Jim Post that congregated the best and brightest from the Chicago scene, marking the recording debut of Post, Steve Goodman, the Holstein brothers, and others.

Prine had even gone so far as to copyright his work. After the Ebert review, every hopeful local wanted to cover "Sam Stone," "Donald and Lydia," "Hello in There," and others. "We had to be careful because there were people who saw John's potential maybe before John saw it, and were going to try to capitalize on that," Ann Carole said. "There were older folk singers who were famous in the area who wanted 'Sam Stone,' like Bob Gibson, who told John he would make money from it." But Prine thought better of it, the teachings of his union-organizing father rattling around in his subconscious. "Something told John, 'I don't think that's right,'" she added.

In his memoir *I Come for to Sing*, Gibson said that he'd struck a deal with Prine to record "Sam Stone" on his self-titled album for Capitol, released in 1971, but Ann Carole disagreed. "It may have been a great deal for somebody, but not for John," she explained. A colleague at the post office mentioned that Prine could save some money by copywriting his songs as a musical, rather than individual compositions, five bucks for the whole thing instead of five bucks a pop. So he paid a professor at Northwestern University a modest fee to write out his songs as sheet music, and then Prine mailed the sheets to himself, which served as a legal copyright, as long as he didn't open the envelope. He named the imaginary musical Bruised Orange, a title that would eventually grace his fifth studio album.

After the late-night performance at The Earl, Anka made the friends a deal: Two plane tickets. One for Goodman, and one for Prine, so they could go to New York and record some demos. If it was an offer that seemed too good to be true, the two young songwriters never could've anticipated what would happen when they got there. But first, Goodman had to get Prine on the plane.

# 9
# The Bitter End

Prine wasn't having it. Raised under the wing of a hardworking unioneer, he didn't believe in something for nothing, and was well aware that "free" often meant "with strings attached." He treasured Kristofferson's enthusiasm and praise, but Prine wasn't about to get tangled in some businessman's web. And that's precisely what he thought Anka was luring him in to, some den of trickery, a deal with nefarious fine print. Why did he need to go to New York to record demos when the work and the pay were great at home? Why bet against a good thing?

Unlike Prine, Steve Goodman had worked the Greenwich Village coffeehouse scene in New York and understood the value in a big-name backer embedded in the music business, even if that big name was outside the realm of folk music. Anka had just signed with Buddah Records, which also inked deals with folk and folk-rock acts. And the label was plugged into the major label distribution system via a deal with MGM Records. A connection to a label like Buddah would mean instant exposure, much more than a deal with a Chicago indie, like Ovation Records, Delmark Records, or Alligator

Records, which had a niche or regional focus and little power outside the Windy City.

Negotiating with his suspicious friend, Goodman was unyielding. Who the hell turns down a free trip to New York? Have you ever been to New York? New York is great, are you insane? It didn't take long for Prine to realize that Goodman wasn't going to give, outmaneuvering each of Prine's reservations with a spirited retort. What ultimately changed Prine's mind was not Goodman's debate skills, but his generosity. Reflecting on the rapid-fire events of the past few days, Prine realized how far Goodman had stuck out his neck, and for no reason other than to help him. "There was nobody at the time I would have rather sang my songs for than Kris, him and Steve Goodman are the two least selfish people I've ever met, let alone people in music or show business," Prine said. "Goodman, it was his big shining moment, Kris and his band were all telling Steve how much they thought of his songs and that he oughta go to Nashville and make a record, and Goodman's going, 'No. You gotta go across town and hear my buddy.'"[1]

On May 23, 1971, Goodman and Prine landed in New York and grabbed a copy of the *Village Voice* at the airport. As it happened, Kristofferson was headlining The Bitter End, the famous Greenwich Village club whose iconic red brick wall served as the backdrop for historic performances by Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, James Taylor, Neil Young, and other famous singer-songwriters. Amazed at the coincidence, the pair hailed a cab, dropped their bags at the hotel, and headed to the Village, excited to see their new champion in such an epochal setting.

As the taxi pulled up to the club, another in a long series of improbable events occurred: Kristofferson was outside, crossing the street, headed toward them. "It was like a movie script," Prine said. "Actually, I don't think it could be a movie script. People would think it's too corny."[2] Kristofferson had finished his first show of the day, and he and the band had headed across the street to a bar called The Dugout to whet their taste for bourbon, because The Bitter End was a dry club. Goodman called out, and Kristofferson couldn't believe his eyes. After they chatted for a bit, Kristofferson inquired about Prine's whereabouts. He was standing right next to Goodman, but was somehow invisible, just another dude in a faded jean jacket and T-shirt. Goodman pointed to the quiet guy standing next to him as if to say, "He's right here, duh," and the trio had a big laugh about it later. As fate would have it, that moment might have been the last time Goodman obscured Prine. But first, they had a gig to play.

Kristofferson insisted that each of the Chicago boys take the stage during his set that night, an act of generosity greater than Goodman and Prine knew at the time. In addition to enthusiastic fans, a number of music business bigwigs were to attend Kristofferson's show, a pool of tastemakers and influencers that could change their lives forever. Goodman and Prine had no clue because Kristofferson either didn't know or did know but it didn't mention it. They were simply excited to be on the same stage as their idol. After opening the evening, Kristofferson invited each of them onstage individually, to play a couple of songs, "City of New Orleans," "Sam Stone," and others. "You're in the big city now. Couth up," Goodman recalled Kristofferson saying.[3]

Representatives from Buddah Records, Anka's label, were in the audience. So was Jerry Wexler, the music journalist-turned-record producer who made Atlantic Records an important hub of Black music. Wexler had made Aretha Franklin, Dusty Springfield, and Wilson Pickett stars, and brought national attention to the Muscle Shoals Sound and Stax Records. He'd never signed a folk music artist before. But after the night's performance, that was about to change.

# 10
# Thinking and Feeling

There is a moment in most Midwesterners' lives when our slow-going, uncomplicated, neighborly lifestyle is questioned, our meritocratic beliefs upended, when the hustle of the outside world challenges our simple, everyday pleasures—a visit on the front porch after clocking out, the crack of a domestic lager. John Prine was just twenty-four years old, but he'd already witnessed the tragedy of war and its left-behind soldiers. He'd seen the loneliness of aging and the destruction of his family's homeland in Kentucky. But like so many who'd never traveled outside of Middle America, New York is what changed him. Here, the business of recorded music permanently altered his foundation.

"Atlantic has signed singer-composer John Prine with his first single 'Sam Stone,'" *Billboard* announced in its July 3, 1971 issue, an auspicious bit of ink ahead of his first album."[1] In less than six months, Prine was swept between Chicago, New York, Memphis, and Los Angeles, for the tracking and packaging of his self-titled debut, far from the confines of Old Town, Maywood, and the people and landscapes that informed the songs of *John Prine*. It was the stuff of every songwriter's dreams, to be wined and dined by industry

honchos, to be backed by one's heroes. But the warp-speed momentum had one unintended consequence. "When I started I was innocent, and it was amazing how quickly that was gone," Prine said.[2]

It didn't diminish his gratitude for his Chicago club gigs, but it did show him the other side of things. Folks who'd made it in the record business didn't have to shut down the bar at 4 a.m. then do a twelve-hour turnaround to make the Sunday matinee. "I was never able to get back to that guy, but I never forgot him," he said. "You just can't see things that way anymore. Where I was from, how I was raised, those things never leave you, but the innocence? Once it's gone, it's gone."[3] Prine was the new voice of the people. A hometown hero. But in an instant he'd become a commodity, tethered to an institution whose first priority was not to celebrate great songs but to profit off of them. Whether or not he was the new Dylan (he wasn't), the unspoken pressure and financial prospect of that proposition rattled his low-key being, like a monarch butterfly emerging from its cocoon in a windstorm.

After seeing Prine perform at The Bitter End, Jerry Wexler summoned him to his office the next morning at 10 a.m. There, the young songwriter signed an unimaginable deal by today's standards: ten albums of original material over five years. One album every six months. He was paid $25,000, more money than he'd ever heard of. Prine and Goodman were the talk of the town.

After Prine's whirlwind signing with Atlantic, Goodman was offered a contract with rival Buddah Records in June. Paul Anka, who'd become Prine and Goodman's manager, had signed with the label for his self-titled and *Jubilation*

albums and helped seal the deal for Goodman. In the span of about six months, the two buddies went from Chicago clubs to releasing self-titled debut albums on big New York labels. "It was something to score a record contract, in Chicago," Prine said. "That was something that didn't happen unless you left town. We were treated like returning astronauts or something when we came back."[4]

Amid the excitement, Terkel invited Prine on his radio show, explaining to listeners that the hometown boy was about to have a big record out on Atlantic. "I think that's going to be a classic," Terkel proclaimed after Prine performed "Hello in There," astutely likening it to a line from *Death of a Salesman* that states "You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away—a man is not a piece of fruit," meaning that human lives are not disposable, that the elderly shouldn't be cast out. Terkel no doubt recognized a kindred spirit in Prine, a fellow chronicler of everyday people who could evoke a breadth of feeling from a few simple words. By the end, they were chatting like old friends. "He was working on his book called *Working*," Prine said. "I told him about my dad, and he wanted to interview him."[5]

On his decision to sign Prine over Goodman, Wexler obfuscated. "That's imponderable," he said. "Who the hell knows? Maybe his songs were richer at the time. I don't know."[6] In August 1971, *Billboard* reported that Prine had enrolled in the American Guild of Authors and Composers (AGAC), along with 62 others, underscoring his new role as a professional songwriter. For a heretofore unknown Chicagoan it seemed like a dream come true. "Thanks to the people at Atlantic for making good things happen fast to

someone who deserves it," Kristofferson even wrote in the sleeve notes for *John Prine*. At the time it was thrilling, but Prine changed his tune over time. "In retrospect, the whole singer-songwriter thing was mainly a way for labels to get publishing on some really great songs," Prine said in 2019. "They still have the publishing on my first album, and it's almost been 50 years."[7]

Atlantic in 1971 was a pop and R&B label, focused on hit singles and built on the success of soul singers like Aretha Franklin and Wilson Pickett, and pop singers like Lulu and Dusty Springfield. By 1970 the label had dipped its toe into hard rock, signing Led Zeppelin on Springfield's recommendation, and Iron Butterfly and Cactus to its sub-label ATCO. But there were no workingman songwriters to be found. No likeminded everyman voices. It's likely that Wexler's decision to choose one of the Chicago boys was pragmatic. Atlantic wasn't a folk label, and the signing was tantamount to an experiment, the musical equivalent of hurling a noodle at the wall. "I was super-impressed with both of them, but I knew I had to make a decision," Wexler said.[8]

Given the deal with Atlantic, it would have made sense for Prine to record in New York or Muscle Shoals, Alabama, where Wexler helped popularize the deep groove of the region and groom Franklin and others for stardom. Indeed, Prine believed he would end up recording in one of those disparate locales, but preferred the familiarity of the South. "I hope I end up down there in Muscle Shoals," he told Terkel.[9]

But Wexler and his co-producer Arif Mardin had recently worked in an unassuming storefront operation in Memphis,

American Sound Studio, where much of the music for 1969's *Dusty in Memphis* was tracked. Given the relationship between the lower Midwest and the upper South, and the Prine family's annual sojourns to Kentucky, Memphis wasn't foreign or threatening. Its accents and postures were familiar, even. But in a near-instant Prine had gone from a boy impersonating Elvis in the mirror to walking The King's hallowed grounds. It was also Prine's very first time leading a band. And these boys had soul.

Opened in 1964 by songwriter and former Stax Records house engineer Lincoln Wayne "Chips" Moman and his partner Don Crews, American Sound Studio quickly became a go-to destination for the Memphis sound: robust warmth punctuated by soulful strings and horns, and steered by a deep, intuitive, undulating groove. The Memphis Boys, the studio's house band, backed Presley on his 1969 comeback, *From Elvis in Memphis*, a near-perfect album infused with gospel-steeped country-soul that marked The King's liberation from the purgatory of movie soundtracks, producing monster singles "In the Ghetto" and "Suspicious Minds." They steered the iconic crescendo of Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline," and conceived of the mysterious, smoldering sex of Springfield's "Son of a Preacher Man," setting loins aflame, the sonic equivalent of James Dean. That's not to mention their playing on hits by The Box Tops, featuring teenage Alex Chilton, B.J. Thomas, Bobby Womack, Joe Tex, and Merrilee Rush. Between 1966 and 1972, the band appeared on more than 120 songs that hit the charts, and were regulars in the *Billboard* Hot 100. They were the Memphis equivalent of L.A.'s famed Wrecking Crew. "Thank God for this little place," declared

lauded songwriter and producer Dan Penn.[10] In a town known for small but mighty studios, American was perhaps the mightiest.

Prine had occasionally invited a bass player to join him onstage in Chicago, but he'd never navigated a drummer or pianist. The Earl's tiny stage didn't allow for much more than his Martin acoustic and voice. And if it seems like The Memphis Boys and the Memphis sound didn't have much in common with the spare, pensive story-songs of John Prine, it's because they didn't. With Prine, there was nary a groove to be found. And when he stepped into the studio in July of 1971 the contrast was quickly apparent. "We would cut blues, heavy R&B, pop, rock and roll, and our version of country," said Bobby Wood, who played piano on *John Prine*. "Folk music is really light, not heavy. We weren't good at light." The band, consisting of Mike Leech (bass), Gene Chrisman (drums), Reggie Young (lead guitar), John Christopher (rhythm guitar), Bobby Emmons (organ), and Wood (piano) worked intuitively, which helped with a record's spirit, that lightning-in-a-bottle quality that permeates their most iconic recordings.

But it didn't help when a record company had an artist outside of the immediate purview of the group's sound. "We were on totally unfamiliar ground," Wood said. Given the country quality of many of the songs on *John Prine*, and Prine's own countrified demeanor, it's plausible that Atlantic sent Prine to American Sound Studio to make a lyrically centered country-folk record in the vein of Kristofferson's 1970 debut, which featured a suite of Nashville session musicians. Bob Dylan had recently released *Nashville Skyline*,

the countriest of all Dylan albums, filled with seasoned players with a guest appearance by Johnny Cash. "...that's when I thought, 'Man, there's something there where their two paths crossed," Prine said. "My stuff belongs right in the middle."[11] Even Jack Elliott had moved to bigger Music City studios with full bands. So maybe that's where folk was headed and where Prine needed to be. American Sound Studio was certainly capable of the *country* portion of country soul. Or, perhaps, it was as Prine later believed: maybe there wasn't much of a plan. Maybe Atlantic simply wanted to own his songs.

In the world of folk music, where lyrics are king, thinking and feeling are fingers of the same glove, an essential pairing that produces memorable characters and landscapes, born of individual ideals and expression. Words are written and revised to their most affecting state, thought and thought over again, until that thinking spills over into feelings, appealing to the listener's heart and mind. Melody is important but instrumentation is often an afterthought, something built around the words, to bolster their meaning and sentiment.

But in Memphis, feeling was everything. It's how the band locked in. How the song soared from idea to icon. Thinking was antithetical to the spirit of the groove, to the soul that burst from fingers and toes, to the singer whose words soared from some unspoken emotion. "I've more or less always played by feel and groove," Chrisman said. "[We were always] trying to get a good feel on the song." What made The Memphis Boys remarkable was not their technicality, but their singular psychic connection.

The session's producer, Arif Mardin, was also new to cutting a folk record. He'd worked with the singer-songwriter Laura Nyro, an urbane pianist with a similar background to his, in jazz and R&B. But the everyman poet donning acoustic guitar was brand new territory. Mardin had been a producer with Atlantic for nearly a decade, but *John Prine* proved a pivotal moment. "There was a series of Southern, country-related artists that my father produced," his son Joe Mardin said. "I don't think he ever had a closed mind about it. He looked back on all those projects as being great moments in the journey of his career. . .ultimately he had a great time and it really informed what he wanted to do. Once it got started, it soon became clear that he knew the difference between a lap steel and a pedal steel!"[12]

Mardin was a consummate professional, and Jerry Wexler's confidence was a great motivator. "Arif is a patrician," Wexler said. "No one works better under stress."[13] So the band and the producer, green in the world of folk music, and the folkie, green in the world of record-making, gave it a go, working from early in the morning until about 6 p.m. over the course of one week. Ann Carole accompanied Prine. It was only their second time traveling together, and she recalled that his days in the studio were long and tiring. "They did things over and over and over," she said. Wood remembered Prine as quiet and respectful. There was no feeling of tension despite the oil-and-water quality of the songs and the session players. "We just went to work doing what we always do, trying to find some kind of identity," he said. And so Thinking and Feeling convened under one roof, Prine shy and in his head and The Memphis Boys sensing

their way through it. Prine later revealed his mindset. "Scared of the studio," he said. "Scared of the musicians. You can't tell guys that play 200 times better than yourself they're doing something wrong."[14]

For his part, Wood's electric piano added depth of feeling on album opener "Illegal Smile," his spare chords highlighting the solemnity of Prine's opening words, "When I woke up this morning, things were lookin' bad/Seemed like total silence was the only friend I had." Wood's playing silkened "Hello in There," like a pad of butter melting on warm toast, and he injected spirited ragtime to "Flashback Blues," the album's closer, a down-home jamboree that translates as an adult update to *The Jungle Book's* "The Bare Necessities." Its lyrics reflect Prine's signature knack for nostalgia, ruminating on bygone times and the mind's want to live in them, no matter how painful, proclaiming, "So goodbye nonbeliever/ Don't you know that I hate to leave here." The song's also a thinly-veiled reference to the psychedelic experience, not terribly dissimilar from "Illegal Smile."

Annual fishing trips in Arkansas in-part inspired "Pretty Good," a laid-back story-song that pours like molasses—Roger Miller on quaaludes. It chronicles old friends, young lust, organized religion, and the fornication of two dogs in wacky parlance that rings of an experiment, a departure from Prine's normal straight-shooting. Molly the dog belonged to a friend of the Prine family, and the events depicted in the song are true. Prine also wrote "Six O'Clock News" based on real events that surrounded a troubled childhood friend, a neighborhood kid who'd been pushed around by his brothers and largely ignored by his mom. "Years later as a teenager,

still always in trouble, he ended up in juvenile court and the prosecutor decided to tell the court and my friend that his father was his father, but his mother was his oldest sister," Prine explained. "No wonder he was always in trouble."[15] Prine bolstered the tragedy with E minor, building melancholy through the end of the song's final verse, "The whole town saw Jimmy on the six o'clock news/His brains were on the sidewalk and blood was on his shoes."

Wood and organist Bobby Emmons took "Angel from Montgomery" to church. If Prine's tale of a woman lonely in her longtime marriage was a hymn, then Wood's playing anchored the congregants just before Emmons' organ flourishes called them to exaltation. "I was raised on gospel, so that was me trying to do that," Wood said. Emmons also added the somber opening notes of "Sam Stone," recalling a funeral organ that foreshadowed the tragedy to come. Young's electric sitar on the song was an unorthodox flourish that had by now become his signature. He also played it on The Box Tops' "Cry Like a Baby," B.J. Thomas' "Hooked on a Feeling," and others.

Joining Prine and The Memphis Boys for the session was pedal steel player Leo LeBlanc, a ringer who'd recently moved to Memphis from Bakersfield, California. He played a few sessions at Fame Studios and Muscle Shoals Sound Studio in Alabama before being called into American. Though he wasn't part of the house band, he fell in as if by second nature, fleshing out the group's sound by adding twangy glissandos to "Illegal Smile," "Your Flag Decal Won't Get You into Heaven Anymore," "Far From Me," "Donald and Lydia," and others, marking a distinct country accent to Prine's folk songs.

Bassist Leech and drummer Chrisman locked in an understated groove. Leech sticks to a six-note bassline on "Angel from Montgomery," "Pretty Good," and a few others, but his thuds amp up the idealists' party on "Spanish Pipedream." "I thought what I played was boring on most of that album, but I did like the overall product," Leech said.[16] "It was just like puttin' the roof on the house," Chrisman explained. "You do whatcha gotta do and then you go home."

Guitarist Reggie Young, famous for the smoldering lick in Springfield's "Son of a Preacher Man," turned out to be Prine's greatest champion among the group, spending time with his lyrics, allowing them to connect. "John was the most different writer I had ever heard in my life," Young said. "Yes sir, he really was unusual."[17] About halfway through the week-long session, he convinced some of bandmates of their worth. One night after they were done in the studio, the band went to dinner. There, Young convinced them to go back and listen to what they'd been working on. "That was the first time they heard the words," Prine said. "Reggie got 'em to sit there and listen. After that it was a different thing in the studio. About half of 'em were really into the words."[18]

What's clear is that despite the foreign material, The Memphis Boys played what they knew to the best of their ability, producing a spirited country-folk record with a soulful undercurrent. "We were always pretty hard on ourselves for everybody," Wood added. "Record companies came wanting a hit and we were supposed to supply it to them. If we didn't, then we'd missed it." The result was not Kristofferson or Dylan, but 100 percent Prine—earthy,

honest, and relatable, relaying serious themes without taking itself too seriously. During the session, Steve Goodman, Prine's Number One champion and motivator, traveled to Memphis to offer moral support. He added a spirited acoustic guitar solo on "Flashback Blues" and sang high harmony on "Paradise." Goodman later recalled the recording of "Hello in There" as a "one-take wonder." "The best record session I ever saw," Goodman said of Prine's empathetic tale of the loneliness of aging.[19]

For the album's cover, Atlantic flew Prine to San Francisco to meet with the photographer Jim Marshall, a fellow Chicagoan who, like Prine, documented his subjects in their natural environments. He'd been hand-picked by Johnny Cash to shoot his Folsom and San Quentin prison concerts. Marshall also photographed Jimi Hendrix lighting his guitar on fire at the Monterey Pop Festival, as well as the Beatles' farewell concert at Candlestick Park in 1966. Known for working spontaneously, without makeup and lighting crews, the pairing of Marshall and Prine might have seemed like a natural fit. But the experience would prove otherwise.

"I had never seen a bale of hay in my life!" Prine said. "I tried to explain that to Jim Marshall when he took the picture in his studio in San Francisco. We were making small talk when a pickup truck arrives with three bales of hay. He said, 'I'm gonna do a head shot of you and the straw will make an interesting background.' Next thing I know it's about five days before the album comes out and I'm at the record company in New York and I saw the cover photo, and there I am sitting on a bale of hay. And I pipe up that while I like country music, this looks like *Hee Haw*."[20] The image was vexing to Prine,

and only further illustrated that Atlantic really didn't know where to put him. "Here comes this guy and he's not really country and he's not really folk," Ann Carole said. "So they put him on a bale of hay? He's from Maywood, Illinois!"

*John Prine* saw a quiet release on September 23, 1971. By December, *Rolling Stone* keenly observed: "His work demands some time and thought from the listener—he's not out to write pleasant tunes, he wants to arrest the cursory listener and get attention for some important things he has to say and, thankfully, he says them without falling into the common trap of writing with overtones of self-importance or smugness."[21] As Kristofferson's *The Silver Tongued Devil and I* hung around the twentieth position on the *Billboard 200*, *John Prine* peaked at 154, though *Billboard* reported on its popularity on college radio.

Soon enough, numerous connections between Prine and Dylan were drawn. The music press was eager for a new Dylan, as the original had been around for a decade and had become a wild card. Like Dylan, Prine was not a performer but foremost a writer, a poet who happened to set his words to music, drawing upon decades of American tradition. He was not a trained singer, but a storyteller, which rings through the album's thirteen tracks. This is particularly true of "Hello in There" as his voice stretches to a graveled strain over the line, "And old rivers grow wilder every day." As in all good storytelling, Prine echoes his subject matter, in this case the rasp and friction of river rapids, before settling back into a gentle roll. "Old people just grow lonesome/Waiting for someone to say, 'Hello in there, hello,'" he explains, calming the water and catching his breath. And like Dylan, Prine's

earliest material would become lauded in the annals of great songwriting, catapulted to the rank of standard in the American Songbook, as good as or better than anything he'd write later in life.

But the similarities stopped there. Prine may have had shades of Dylan's protests, but he was far less mysterious. Unlike Dylan, there was very little mischievousness. No poet-jester, here. Prine wasn't out to fool anyone. Though they were both of Midwestern origin, Prine kept his boots planted firmly in the soil, a son of the Second City, born of its common man. "It's always been an artist's town and it's always been a torpedo's town," Nelson Algren wrote. "The most artistic characters in the strong-arm industry as well as the world's most muscular poets get that way just by growing up in Chicago."[22]

Despite the fear and pressure he may have felt, throughout *John Prine* the frontman doesn't put on airs or pretend to be someone he isn't. He channels the raw intimacy of his live show, inviting the listener to gather round to take in his Middle American tales, told in plain language and with poetic economy, with the authenticity and necessary imperfections of any memorable exchange. Prine meets us at our level. He shares what he knows and believes under the banner of brotherhood and community. He is an artist, but first he is a friend and neighbor.

Prine's reverence for his upbringing in the northland of Chicago and the southland of Muhlenberg County is most clearly heard through his singing voice, a blend of the Second City's working-class accent ("He sings like a duck," Steve Goodman once remarked.[23]) and countrified pronunciations.

Prine's "there" rhymes with "far" and "thing" with "hang." The green of Green River, is akin to "grain." Dylan later told Prine that the first time he listened to *John Prine* he thought Prine sounded as if he swallowed a jew's harp, closing in on their shared nasal twang. "I thought that was a pretty accurate description of my voice back then," Prine said.[24] Through his informal parlance we hear not only Prine's voice, but the voices of his ancestors, his circular path between the South and the Midwest, a connection that extends all the way to the making of his debut album. This is also true of the fingerpicking Prine mastered at the Old Town School of Folk Music, learned in Chicago but rooted in Southern tradition. His simple accompaniments to "Illegal Smile," "Hello in There," and "Far From Me" are a reminder that amid the country touchstones, *John Prine* is a book of stories, folk songs, at heart.

After recording the album, Prine returned to Maywood, excited to play it for his father. It hadn't been pressed yet. He didn't even have an acetate. So he borrowed a reel-to-reel player, one that could amplify his copy on quarter-inch tape. As "Paradise" started, Bill Prine stepped into the next room, the dining room, which was dark. He told Prine he wanted to imagine he was listening to it on a jukebox, picturing his son the recording artist, a star on some dive bar's machine. "But I think he just didn't want to see me see him with tears in his eyes," Prine said.[25] Bill had but one bit of feedback for his son: The violinist contracted for the session, first chair of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra, didn't sound authentic to the spirit of Paradise. Dave should play on it instead. Prine took his father's feedback to heart, and convinced Mardin of the

re-record. For the session, held at a studio in downtown Chicago, Dave had to join the musicians' union, which meant an audition. "I went down there with my crappy fiddle, played them a few old-time hoedowns, and they sort of looked at me like, 'What the hell?'" he said. Dave then stepped into a booth with headphones to play along to the track, the first time he'd ever done such a thing. "It took a few takes because that's a huge difference from just sitting in a chair and picking up a fiddle and playing it," he said. But his part, played with greater heart than technicality, was effective, driving home the traditional spirit of Prine's cautionary tale.

With "Paradise," Prine's ancestral homeland had become a symbol outside of itself, an anthem for the overlooked and exploited, an emblem of the heart and hardships of rural life. But his father wouldn't see the album's release. Bill Prine suffered a fatal heart attack amid a favorite recreation: lounging on the front porch with a cigar and a beer, watching the traffic go by.

# 11
# Midwestern Mindtrips

A couple of weeks after the release of his debut album, Prine was back in New York with Goodman, itinerant Chicagoans lured east for record label business. As part of a promotional push behind *John Prine* and Goodman's self-titled debut, Anka booked them a series of co-headlining gigs at The Bitter End, ground zero for the pair's foray in the world of recorded music, November 3–8, 1971. Atlantic even created an ad for Prine's record, which ran in the *Village Voice* ahead of the gig. While they didn't exactly nail it, its effusive quality was no doubt attention-grabbing, framing Prine's Middle American uniqueness for the downtown coffeehouse crowd. "He writes songs," it read. "Probably the most intelligent and well-written songs you've heard in a long time. He writes soft songs about his country childhood memories. And hard songs condemning the wrongs of the city. John Prine writes songs which poetically examine our unpoetic everyday lives and expose the irony, humor, and pathos of them."

Kristofferson was in town for the big debut of his Chicago discoveries, and he invited Prine and Goodman over to Carly Simon's place ahead of opening night. Simon had just scored her first hit with "That's the Way I've Always Heard It Should

Be" and was actively seeking connections with new songwriters. She teased the idea of tracking some of Goodman's songs, which never came to fruition, and she recorded a cover of Prine's "Angel from Montgomery." Shortly after the two friends arrived and said hellos, there was a knock on the door. It was Bob Dylan. "You could have sent a Martian down and that wouldn't have surprised us as much as seeing Bob Dylan," Prine exclaimed.[1]

For all of the comparisons Prine had elicited, he'd never expected to meet Dylan, especially not in that moment. Dylan had just made his first public appearance in two years at George Harrison's Concert for Bangladesh, but had been keeping a low profile otherwise. Turns out he'd gotten his hands on an advanced copy of *John Prine* and was a fan. It wasn't long before a guitar was passed around—a Southern tradition known as a guitar pull, the opposite of a hootenanny—and Dylan sang along to "Donald and Lydia" and "Far From Me." "I'm going, 'My god. . .I know all your songs, but how do you know mine?'" Prine said.[2] Goodman offered "City of New Orleans," and was nervous, which might explain his reaction to Dylan's new protest song "George Jackson." "That great, Bob, but it's no 'Masters of War,'" Goodman purportedly said, a detail Prine loved to retell with a chuckle.

The exchange wasn't dissimilar from the pair's spontaneous performance during their first trip to New York, also instigated by Kristofferson; his generosity toward the pair was by now a trademark of their success. The star's benevolence wasn't lost on Prine. "Kris probably hadn't asked Bob Dylan for one favor, and he decides to use his big favor

by calling him up and tellin' him to come on over and listen to these guys," he observed.[3] And it didn't stop there. Kristofferson co-produced Goodman's debut in Nashville with his buddy Norbert Putnam, the famed Muscle Shoals session musician. And for Prine's debut he penned glowing praise for the sleeve notes, including an oft-repeated line about Prine's songwriting ability. "Twenty-four years old and writes like he's two-hundred and twenty," Kristofferson observed, a sentiment he relayed with the authority of experience.

Kristofferson would have bestowed the same level of praise on Goodman, had he penned the notes for his debut. Instead, Goodman sought words from his poetic buddy, whose fortunes were now inextricably linked with his own and who had a close familiarity with Goodman's journey. In his sleeve notes, Prine recounted the pair's history at the Earl of Old Town before proclaiming "City of New Orleans" ". . .the best train song I ever heard." Goodman also covered Prine's "Donald and Lydia" on the album, in a characteristic demonstration of support.

Thirty-eight years later, Dylan told the rock critic Bill Flanagan that Prine was one of his favorite songwriters. "Prine's stuff is pure Proustian existentialism," he declared. "Midwestern mindtrips to the nth degree. And he writes beautiful songs. I remember when Kris Kristofferson first brought him on the scene. All that stuff about 'Sam Stone' the soldier junky daddy and 'Donald and Lydia,' where people make love from ten miles away. Nobody but Prine could write like that."[4] After the chance encounter at Simon's apartment, the four men didn't become best friends. But they

formed a mutual appreciation society, a rare compassion in an often cut-throat industry. Kristofferson and Dylan saw a bit of themselves in the two men from Chicago, whose talent arrived at the same rare intersection of raw, fully formed, and hot, like radishes just pulled from the soil.

Prine and Goodman's coming out at The Bitter End elicited attention, drawing Kristofferson and Anka but also Dylan, Carly Simon, Mary Travers, and Bette Midler, who had been performing Prine's "Hello in There" and Ed Holstein's "Fat Stuff" in her live show. Pionke also flew in for opening night, bringing Holstein and Goodman's wife Nancy with him. "It was amazing seeing our two friends up there with Dylan and Bette Midler and these people watching," Holstein remembered. Pionke had just opened a second location of the Earl of Old Town on Harlem Avenue, where Prine was the featured performer. But he happily released Prine from his ten-week contract so he could make the New York dates. "They're my kids, my pals, I love 'em," Pionke was known to say of his house performers, and there's no doubt he beamed with fatherly pride that night. "You just don't find club owners like that," Prine said.[5]

The gig also secured Prine and Goodman their first live reviews outside of Chicago's friendly borders. *Billboard* keenly observed that Prine was a quiet, almost reluctant performer and rougher singer compared to Goodman, but that Prine's songs, "...are exceptional, enabling him to put over some strong ideas in a simple format usually taking refuge in humor." But in yet another humbling act of negligence, the magazine got Prine's name wrong, calling him "Tom Prine" in the article's headline.

The week in New York also kickstarted a relationship between Prine, Goodman, and Al Bunetta, who'd become each artist's longtime manager, after a legal battle with Anka. In the ramp up to their album releases, Anka had reached out to the firm Creative Management Associates for booking assistance, where young Bunetta was employed. The twenty-nine year old agent soon secured Prine as the opener for the popular folk-rock duo Brewer & Shipley (of "One Toke Over the Line" fame) in late November, where he'd play clubs like The Troubadour in Los Angeles and even Carnegie Hall. But the frenzy of the last year finally caught up with Prine. He bowed out of the tour, debilitated by stomach pain and frazzled nerves, and Goodman stepped in, glad to help out his friend. Prine recovered by mid-December, and played the opening slot for singer-songwriter Dan Hicks back at The Troubadour. The *L.A. Times* called Prine's performance, ". . .the best opening act The Troubadour has seen since Kris Kristofferson occupied a similar role in the summer of 1970."

Prine's debut wasn't a commercial juggernaut, but it did endear him to a host of critics, a connection that would endure through his last studio album, *The Tree of Forgiveness*. Ira Mayer of the *Village Voice* proclaimed *John Prine* album of the year while Robert Hilburn of the *L.A. Times* called Prine, ". . .the most important country/folk-oriented artist of this year." Peter Altman of *The Minneapolis Star* declared, ". . .the disc is almost a masterpiece." "This is a debut album that will set many heads turning," wrote Al Rudis for the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Peer recognition also poured in, positioning Prine in the coveted rank of songwriter's songwriter. In a matter of months, Bob Dylan ("Donald and Lydia"), Kris Kristofferson

("Hello in There," "Sam Stone"), Carly Simon ("Angel from Montgomery"), Joan Baez ("Hello in There"), Bob Gibson ("Sam Stone"), Bonnie Koloc ("Angel from Montgomery"), and John Denver ("Paradise") were recording covers of Prine's songs or incorporating them into their live shows. "No way somebody this young can be writing so heavy," Kristofferson famously told a reporter for *Rolling Stone*. "John Prine is so good, we just may have to break his thumbs."

Dylan was so enthusiastic about Prine that he even joined him onstage at The Bitter End about a year later, in September of 1972, playing harmonica and singing backup on "Donald and Lydia" and "Sam Stone," without any fuss or fanfare. A few weeks later, he popped into Atlantic's studio while Steve Goodman was cutting "Somebody's Else's Troubles" for his sophomore LP. Dylan played piano and sang harmony under the name Robert Milkwood Thomas.

Over the years Prine's debut would become canon, an album on which nearly every song is a standard, beloved in the hearts and minds of Americans for its plainly poetic depictions of loneliness and loss of innocence, and the overlooked and marginalized. The dissent coursing through "Sam Stone," "Paradise," "Hello in There," and "Your Flag Decal Won't Get You Into Heaven Anymore, marked Prine a protest singer in the minds of some fans and critics, but Prine never liked the label. "A lot of people when I started out thought I was singing protest songs, only because I was singing about social issues, but it just so happened that was what was going on," he said. "At the time, things around were very political. It's not that I was trying to be political, but that was what people were talking about and that's what the songs

were about."[6] Between Prine's debut, and Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, released in May of '71, American music listeners had a lot to reflect on, each a remarkable statement on the ruinous effects of war and industrialization.

By December of '71, the two friends had returned to their posts, Prine at The Earl on Harlem Avenue by the O'Hare airport, and Goodman at the club's original location in Old Town. That Christmas, the four Prine boys gathered at their mother's new apartment, where she fled after Bill's fatal heart attack. The house in Maywood was teeming with lovely memories, but also too many ghosts. "It was kind of glum," Prine remembered. "My first album had come out in October [sic] and I was twisted around the world."[7] After their respective gigs on New Year's Eve, Prine and Goodman hoofed it through the snow in the twilight hours to the studio of 98.7 WFMT, home of the *The Midnight Special*, which had debuted Goodman and his train song, and where young Prine first heard him perform it. The show was running its annual eight-hour end-of-year special where listeners could call in and request a favorite folk song, performed by a favorite artist, between the hours of 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. "You can't beat live radio," Goodman said. "Especially when the performers are having a good time."[8] Studs Terkel and Win Stracke had performed the previous year. This time around, Ray Tate, Prine's guitar teacher, and fellow Earl regular Fred Holstein joined Prine and Goodman, among others. For all of the changes of the last year, Prine was content at home, where he wasn't viewed as a reluctant performer, but a celebrated son of the Midwestern city that raised him—hardworking, plainspoken, and mindful of his blessings.

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