

After all these years, John Prine is still madly in love

By **HOLLY GLEASON**
Special to The Courier-Journal

DUBLIN — It's getting late and cold, but the interviewer from the Irish national television network has one more question for John Prine.

Prine is in Dublin to tape "Sessions," an Irish television concert series, along with a group of American and Irish performers, including Joe Ely, the O'Kanes, the Chieftains, Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt.

"Tell me," the interviewer presses the slightly graying Prine, "with all the musicians in town for the show, do you think there will be any jamming back at the hotel over the next two nights?"

Prine's taken aback. Then he can't help but laugh. "If there's any more jamming," he explains to the interviewer, "you'll have to send us all home in body bags!"

Prine has never been one to sidestep overstatement in making a witty comeback. But, this time, he isn't far off. After almost two decades, countless concerts and almost as many guitar pulls, the retiring songwriter is still as in love with the music as he was when he was toting mail in Chicago.

Here he is, halfway around the world with some of America's best songwriters, and Prine is up until sunup most evenings, playing songs in the hotel lobby. To him, there's nothing better than passing the guitar, whether he's OK'ing a quiet, contemplative new song like "All the Best" or a classic like "Paradise," or enjoying someone else's work.

Mention to Prine that he and his songs are what songwriting aspirations are made of, and he almost blushes. Then he laughs,

snaps his gum and points out, "Aw, I'm really just a good buddy. I'm the guy who comes through the door, turns the kids upside down, eats all your chicken and leaves. And I make you laugh on top of it."

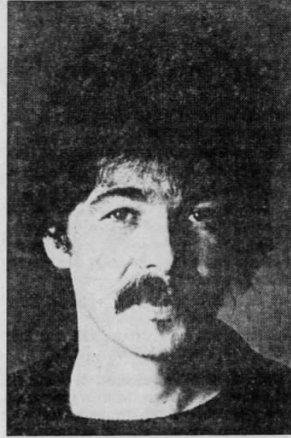
"I mean, I like to sleep late, which this job lets me do. I like to go out and have a beer with my buddies, maybe play the poker machines, tell some jokes. When the mood hits me and the weather's right, we'll go fishing. Whether or not we catch anything, I just like the idea of putting an ol' worm on a hook and dropping it into the water to see if anything bites."

Prine pauses for a moment, grins, then sums up everything he's been saying with, "And I think my audience knows that. I think they know I'm just like them, and that's what they like."

It's a nice theory. But this is the man who's written wrenching portraits of the plight of the elderly ("Hello in There"), the emptiness of middle-aged women ("Angel From Montgomery") and the grim reality of the post-traumatic shock syndrome faced by Vietnam veterans ("Sam Stone"), long before they were making movies about the affliction.

But Prine refuses to perch atop a pedestal. Instead, he offers, "I got a letter from a fan right before I left, though I don't like to call them fans, since they don't look at themselves as fans... fans of the music maybe, but they like me too. They like to think they know me, especially the ones who come to the live shows."

"So, this girl said that she enjoyed this particular performance in whatever city it was in. She said the only thing that was wrong with it was that, when it was over, she felt so close that she thought we



John Prine says his job allows him to sleep late and go fishing when he wants.

should've gone out for a beer afterwards."

The story pleases Prine no end. That kind of identification isn't unusual. There's something to Prine's theory about his audience relating to him, because they're one and the same. But there's something even greater to it. There's a common bond he forges, where alienation becomes a universal rallying point.

"I'm a very traditional person, and I believe in traditional sorts of things. That's the way I was raised, and those things are

inherent to my family. We were raised with basic values, and our parents didn't have to tell us what these values were. We could just feel 'em around us."

"I remember the first time I ever played my songs for anybody. It was just some people in a room. And they could've done nothing, just sat there and looked at me. But seeing those people nodding, watching them identify with the feelings I was singing about, well, suddenly I didn't feel quite so alone with those feelings."

Prine grew up the son of a union boss in Maywood, Ill. He has been through two marriages, moved to Nashville in between and has written songs that make some people positively manic in their devotion. He says all he wants to do is maintain his balance and keep making music.

"I've absorbed everything that's ever happened to me, good or bad. That's who I am. That's why I walk the way I walk. Mostly, I write about people... And that's why performing live has always been a bit easier for me. There's something about getting up there and looking people in the face, having that contact, that makes what I'm singing about stronger."

"There's just something about sharing these songs that makes it all worthwhile. You want to be real good to 'em because they're a lot like little babies. Now, though, they're growing up, and they're real pretty ones too."

Prine appears in concert with David Bromberg Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. at Memorial Auditorium. Tickets are \$16.50 and are available at Memorial Auditorium, Vine Records, Disc Jockey Records and Mother's Records.

TRACKS

BULLETINS, BLASTS AND NEWS BITS

■ The arena is dark when the unmistakable voice comes over the speakers: "Hello, darlin'..."

Tonight Louisville, or a small corner of it, becomes Twitty City, as the Con Man, Mr. "It's Only Make Believe," the only **Conway Twitty** you'll ever need, appears at Louisville Gardens.

Twitty appears with one of country's most enduring, and impressive, stars — let's hear it for the one and only **Merle Haggard!** **Skip Ewing** rounds out the bill.

The show starts at 8 p.m.; tickets are \$16.50 reserved.

■ Warm, Touching Warm Department: There are still tickets available for Friday's appearance by **Neil Diamond** at Market Square Arena in Indianapolis, but the only seats available are behind the stage. So if you want a view of where Neil parks it, tickets are \$16.50 and are available from Ticketmaster outlets; the show starts at 8 p.m.

■ Garage bands live! Billboard reports that the Universal Amphitheatre in Los Angeles is mounting a concert Friday called "The Psychedelic Summer of Love," featuring the **Seeds**, the **Strawberry Alarm Clock**, **Arthur Lee and Love**, **Big Brother & the Holding Company** and the **Music Machine** ("Talk Talk"). Unfortunately, **Moby Grape** canceled.

Los Angeles must be in the grip of '60s fever: Three-fifths of the original **Byrds** —



Gene Simmons, in his disguise, and Liza Minnelli: Kiss and makeup?

Roger McGuinn, **Chris Hillman** and rocking walrus **David Crosby** — played three recent club dates in Southern California. And although they'd only rehearsed one day, reports say they sounded pretty good.

Reports also have it that the intention behind the shows was less nostalgic and more financial: The three were trying to



(It's generally agreed that McGuinn was the soul of the group.)

■ Twenty-one-year-old pianist and singer **Harry Connick Jr.** is developing a name as a jazz purist in the same vein as his mentor, **Wynton Marsalis**.

But purist isn't the same as Puritan. The guy recorded "If I Only Had a Brain" and works "On the Good Ship Lollipop" into his stage act. And his nickname for his current engagement at New York's Algonquin Hotel shows he's got a spirit that usually gets shown only in rock 'n' roll.

"I'm calling it 'Mud on the Mink,'" he told The New York Times. "Jazz music may be complex, but who said it can't have joy? Look at **Louis Armstrong**. Rhythmically, harmonically and melodically, he was so advanced, but what he gave out was pure joy. He made you get down and dance. He made you want to get some mud on the mink."

■ I never thought **KISS** was evil until I read this quote from **Gene Simmons** in Billboard: "I am responsible for **Liza Minnelli's** recording career. Anything to do with Liza Minnelli records is my responsibility. To that end, I got her signed to Epic/CBS Worldwide... As you can tell, I'm pretty excited." Simmons also said he's writing a book about "Gene Simmons and his active libido," but did not mention Minnelli in that context.

— **James Nold Jr.**, Contributing Critic