

'Raw imagination and good instincts'

American song-writing legend John Prine builds on his long career of 'showing, not telling' life stories through song with his latest album 'For Better, Or Worse.'

BY HOLLY GLEASON
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There's too many volatile things going on in the world," says the always topical song writing legend, John Prine. Hitting on his fountain of inspiration, he adds, "It's always good for journalists, comedians and folk singers. This country is in a very odd place right now, paranoid really... take traveling around, talking to strangers. Just saying, 'Hello. How are you?' or 'Nice day, isn't it?' People are scared to talk to you.

"I just came back from Canada, and people are so very nice, warm. They don't have this fear driven into them like we do."

Prine – who releases "For Better, Or Worse" on Sept. 30, is a student of the world around him. He has served in the military overseas, delivered mail, spent time with his grandparents in Kentucky and written songs that capture major truths about the human condition in three minutes, often by illuminating a handful of moments in a few people's lives,

By observing and writing, he's built a career and body of work that make us all feel more, well, human. Indeed, those songs earned Prine a 2016 PEN Award (which promotes literature and defends freedom of expression worldwide) alongside equally singular songwriter/artist Tom Waits. It can be said no one brings the empathy to outsiders, lost souls, broken people and the forgotten quite like the Grammy winner from Maywood, Ill.

"Angel From Montgomery" captures the emptiness of a woman ignored

in her marriage; "Sam Stone" considers the junkie Vietnam veteran so strung out on his memories and drugs that he overdoses; and "Hello In There" peers on an elderly couple left behind by life. Then there's "Paradise," the song lamenting Peabody Coal's strip-mining in Muhlenberg County, recently vindicated by the Supreme Court in a suit filed by Peabody Coal to have the song removed from pending litigation against them.

With a chuckle, the very first singer/songwriter to ever read his work at the Library of Congress marvels, "All I was trying to do is tell the story about my mom's hometown. If you were there, you saw the world's largest shovel, tearing up this little town. The federal judge said my lyrics not only didn't defame them, they were the truth ... and he went on to quote them in his own summary."

Not that John Prine ever intended to be a crusader. The aw-shucks Midwesterner is much more live-and-let-live by nature, but his idea of living includes making sure a society grown calloused doesn't just throw people away. By showing – through the people in the songs – not telling, he's built

a wealth of work that speaks to those margin dwellers he think matter (and occasionally skewers some of the ones he thinks could be doing a better job, like "Fair & Squares,"

Some Humans Aren't Human).

Prine was the kind of kid in school who was a dreamer with an active sense of creativity. As he says of the education process, "I really enjoyed English when I had a teacher who knew enough to leave you alone and let you follow your imagination. If they wanted me to memorise verbs, not so much, but if they asked me to write dialogue for two characters on an escalator, I'd go to town."

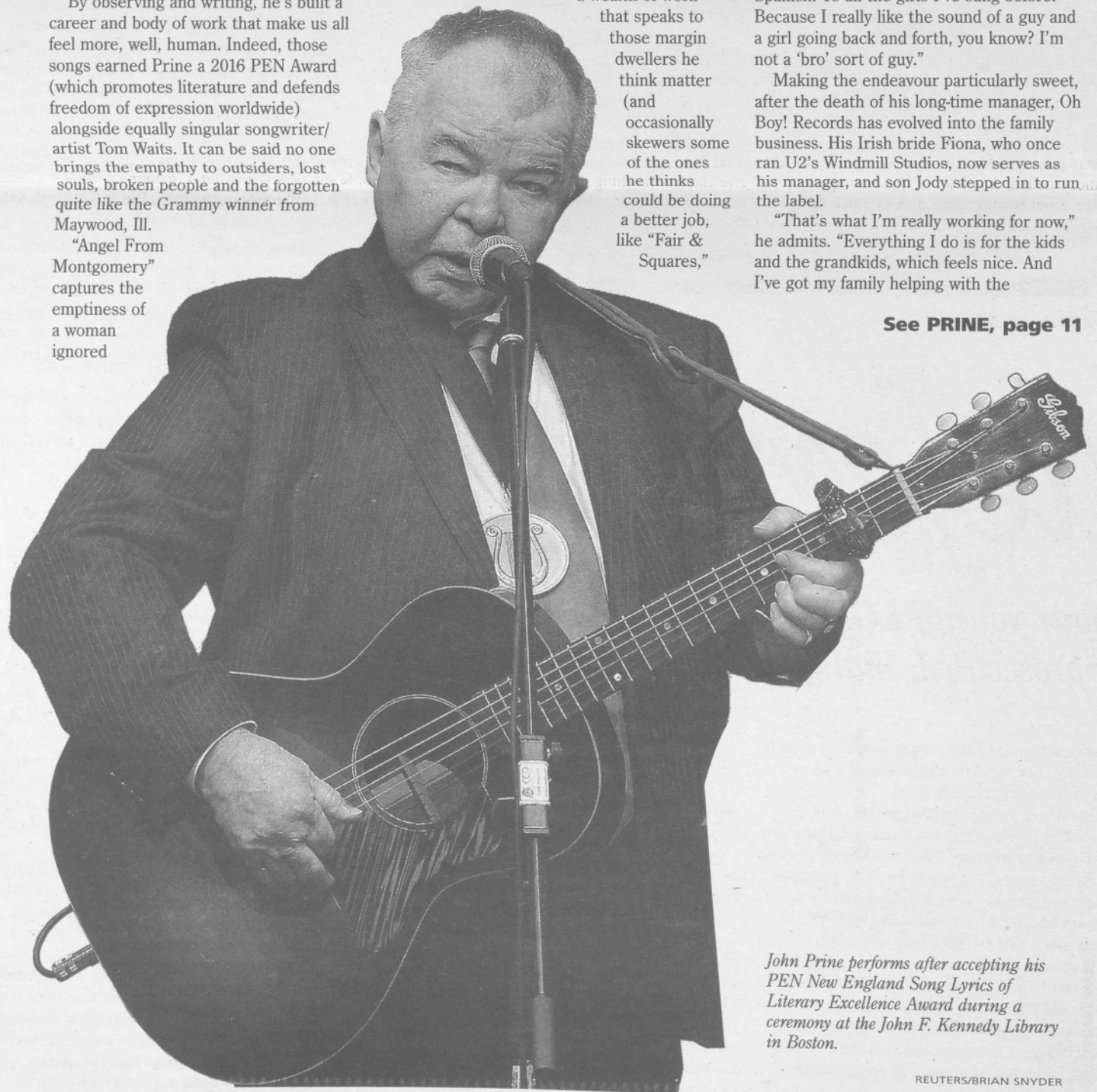
On the verge of 70, that strong streak of whimsy and play remains. On "For Better, Or Worse," Prine teams with another group of integrity roots singers to cull the vintage country songbook. After longtime duet partner Iris DeMent kicks things off with the bouncy sarcasm of "Who's Gonna Take the Garbage Out," Susan Tedeschi, Alison Krauss and Amanda Shires join Prine for "Color of the Blues," "Falling In Love Again" and "Dim Lights, Thick Smoke, and Loud, Loud Music."

"I love singing with girls," Prine enthuses, as much a fan of the individual vocalists as the vintage country they reclaim. "I could make those duet records all day, every day! Opera, all French, Spanish. To all the girls I've sung before! Because I really like the sound of a guy and a girl going back and forth, you know? I'm not a 'bro' sort of guy."

Making the endeavour particularly sweet, after the death of his long-time manager, Oh Boy! Records has evolved into the family business. His Irish bride Fiona, who once ran U2's Windmill Studios, now serves as his manager, and son Jody stepped in to run the label.

"That's what I'm really working for now," he admits. "Everything I do is for the kids and the grandkids, which feels nice. And I've got my family helping with the

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John Prine performs after accepting his PEN New England Song Lyrics of Literary Excellence Award during a ceremony at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston.