

SPOTLIGHT



Kent Kalberg

# TIM O'BRIEN

## A bluegrass master in competition only with himself

WHEN SELECTING A TITLE FOR HIS new album, bluegrass icon Tim O'Brien found inspiration when his neighbor's chickens wandered into his photo shoot. He had a moment of realization later during a lunch of hardboiled eggs: "You don't know what came first," he says, "and it doesn't matter." Such is O'Brien's approach to folk and bluegrass music on *Chicken & Egg*. When Nora Guthrie, the daughter of folk legend Woody Guthrie, passed along some of her father's lyrics for O'Brien to set to music, he elected to use the elder Guthrie's method of setting words to the melodies of traditional tunes. "He wrote new lyrics for older songs, he took old Carter Family songs and rewrote the lyrics," O'Brien says. "Dylan did that too." Pairing the new lyrics with the music from the Guthrie classic "This Train Is Bound for Glory" resulted in "Sun Jumped Up," a playful folk tune about trying to remember a dream come morning light.

O'Brien's previous release, 2008's *Chameleon*, was a low-key effort on which he played every instrument. This time he's enlisted a top-notch group of musicians including guitarist Bryan Sutton, fiddler Stuart Duncan and drummer John Gardner. "I ended up choosing songs based on

who was going to play on the record," says O'Brien. "I wanted to have a little more motion on this record."

O'Brien is particularly proud of "Not Afraid O' Dyin'," which was written following the death of his father. He had already tried penning several songs on the subject but found them "too personal, too sad," he says. "They didn't feel like they were joyous." Wanting to celebrate his father's optimism instead, O'Brien compiled some of his dad's most memorable sayings, setting those dryly humorous observations and moments of parental concern to jaunty fiddle and guitar. "It's something completely different than I've written—theme-wise and lyric-wise," he says.

After over 30 years in the music business, O'Brien has largely turned his focus inward. "Songwriting has become more important to my identity and drives me to keep going," he says. "The most exciting thing is to write a good song and bring it to people. I used to be driven much more by what other people were doing and trying to measure up to it, and now I mostly measure myself against myself. I realize that's the only person I have to compete against."

—Juli Thanki

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