

SPOTLIGHT



David McClister

JOHN HIATT

Have a little faith in him—this prolific elder statesman is still cranking it up

JOHN HIATT JUST CAN'T UNDERSTAND the way some acts make albums. "You get a group like U2, who rent a place in Berlin for 10 grand a week," he says. "You can't write songs somewhere else? You're gonna get the flavor of Berlin? What is *that*?" By contrast, the veteran singer-songwriter chose to record his new *Dirty Jeans and Mudslide Hymns* at Ben Folds' studio in Hiatt's home base of Nashville. With the help of his trusted road band, Hiatt laid down 19 songs in 10 days—11 of which appear on the completed album.

Hiatt credits producer Kevin Shirley with making the process quick and relatively painless. "We work well together," he says. "He's a great facilitator. To me the first order of business to make music is to get your instrument out of the way—that's what Miles Davis said. So many musicians get hung up on their instrument, and so many producers get hung up in the gear. He doesn't. He's not precious about it. He works so seamlessly that it's not in the way."

At 59, with 20 albums in 37 years to his credit, Hiatt says that songwriting comes easily to him. "I pick up the guitar pretty much every day," he says. "It's just

a habit that I've had since I was 11. While my buddies were all learning Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton licks, I was writing songs. That's what I do and it's what I've always done, since I knew how to play two chords." His approach to record-making is just as straightforward. "When I have 10 or more good songs, I record them," he says. "But I've been cranking it up because I'm getting old. I know I've got fewer years left than I've already lived."

Hiatt was more than a decade into his career when he finally attracted a sizable audience with 1987's *Bring the Family*, which included much-covered songs like "Have a Little Faith in Me." He remains proud of his earlier music, yet rarely listens to his old records unless he's prepping for a tour. "I love that stuff and I love playing it," he says. "I have a pretty fair back catalog, so I can afford to do different things. But I always want to play the new stuff. For me it's important. I'm foolish enough to think my best work is in front of me."

—Jeff Tamarkin

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