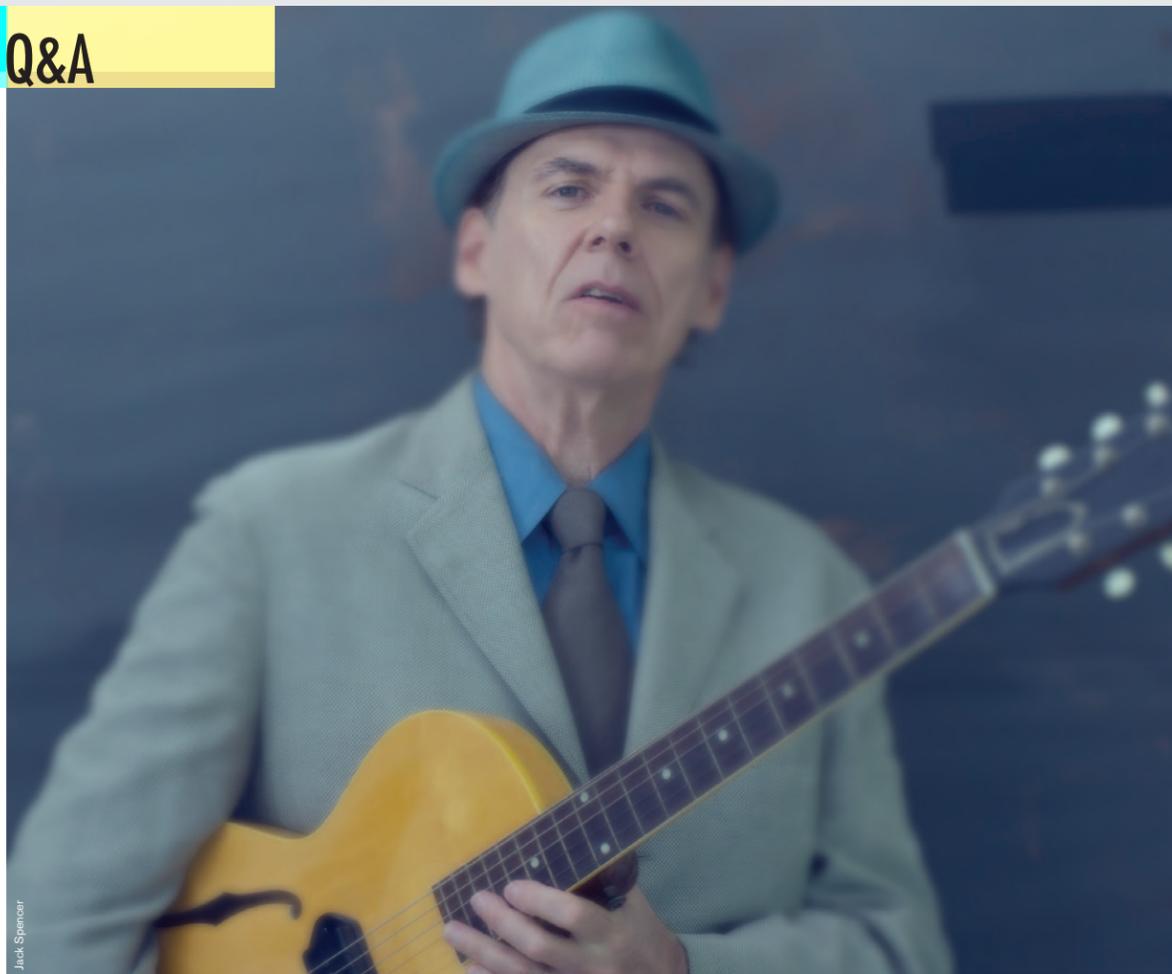


Q&A



JOHN HIATT

At 60, the master singer-songwriter still follows wherever the music leads

AFTER 40 YEARS AND 21 STUDIO albums, John Hiatt knows a thing or two about songcraft. On his new album, *Mystic Pinball*, he even manages to make a grocery list interesting, wrapping it up in the grisly story-song, "Wood Chipper."

"It's a bit of an homage to the Coen Brothers and the wood-chipper scene in *Fargo*," he explains. "I started playing the chord changes, and when that first line came out, it didn't make any sense to me: 'I'm from the Midwest / I know enough to cut a path around a wood chipper.' What the hell is that? I didn't even know what I was talking about, which is quite often the case. It just went from there, and this crazy story started falling out."

Exactly the way Hiatt likes to work—fast and loose. His breakout album, the 1987 masterpiece *Bring the Family*, was recorded in four days. The dozen rollicking songs on *Mystic Pinball*—produced by Kevin Shirley (Aerosmith, Black Crowes), who helmed last year's *Dirty Jeans & Mudslide Hymns*—prove the 60-year-old singer-songwriter has no desire to slow down.

So revered is Hiatt's songwriting gift that dozens of artists from across the musical spectrum have recorded his songs—most famously Bonnie Raitt, who scored a hit with "Thing Called Love" in 1989. "It changed my life in terms of people coming out to shows," he recalls of Raitt's chart success. "It helped my career. I hate to use that term, 'career,'

but I guess it is a career. I tried to keep my amateur status, but I guess I've gone pro."

Why are you so prolific?

I've ramped it up over the last couple of years. A lot has to do with working with Kevin Shirley. He and I hit it off, and we have a musical connection and understanding. I enjoy working with him so much that it makes me want to make records. I think age has something to do with it. I just turned 60, and you have a sense of time running out, so it makes you more passionate for the work.

Do you keep an archive of songs?

I'd love to think it's that organized, but it's not. I've always got a few songs scattered

about, so I start there, then write some more. We always record more than we put on the record. For *Dirty Jeans*, we recorded 19 songs but only 11 wound up on the record, so there were those songs to look at. We wound up using three or four from that session. Then we recorded about 14 more. I always have old songs around. On the last record, I had songs that were 10 years old, and one that was almost 40.

What's your song selection method?

There's no magic process. Kevin and I go back and forth, and as you start to hang songs together, a record emerges and you see how certain songs don't fit. For this record, we cut a song called "Mystic Pinball," but it just didn't fit on the record. I just liked the title so much that I used it for the record. Kevin reminded me that Led Zeppelin did the same thing, naming a record after a song that wasn't on there. So there was precedent.

Are you hands-on in the studio?

Not at all, which is good. Working with Kevin is the first time I've ever totally trusted a producer. He has a way of working with a crazy man like me. And he has a way of not letting the studio get in the way of making the record. There's an old adage among jazz players: The first thing you have to do as a musician is get your instrument out of the way. In other words, forget about technique and all you know. You've got to get out of yourself and your instrument and go to the music. Both times I've worked with Kevin, we've done just that. I never even notice that we're in the studio. He's not precious about any particular kind of gear or any of that stuff. He just plugs things in and we start making music. He works fast, and I do, too. We cut *Mystic Pinball* in a week back in April. It's really off the cuff. As soon as we know the changes, we start rolling the machine. We like to do a take live and then do any overdubs or anything that needs to be fixed right. If it's a keeper vocal, that's great, but if not, I'll sing it again, right then. We don't let stuff sit around.

***Mystic Pinball* feels looser than *Dirty Jeans & Mudslide Hymns*. Was that by design?**

It just happened. With *Dirty Jeans*, we were coming off that big flood in Nashville and there was a mood that came with that for a year or two. It affected the city, and all of that had an effect on the music. Things have lightened up a little, so this record was more fun, more rock 'n' roll.

Do you ever feel pressure to write classics like "Thing Called Love"?

No. Maybe when I was younger, I did. *Bring the Family* got my foot in the door, so I guess for a minute there in my 30s, I felt like I had to back it up. After that, we put out *Slow Turning*, which was well received, so I got over it. I just wanted to write good songs. I wasn't concerned with topping myself.

How have you evolved as an artist?

I don't really look at myself in those terms. I know I'm different than I was. I'm not the guy that made the records before *Bring the Family*. But I'm not the guy that made *Bring the Family*. This is a different territory for me. I look at things differently at 60. You

are either foolish or I can't imagine the wonder that eventually happens and how amazing things actually turn out. So there's no point. I know I'm playing a gig tomorrow, I know my wife and kids are OK. I know I have some friends I love and who love me, but all bets are off after I go to bed tonight. I don't know what's going to happen. But it's all good.

Why do you prefer being an indie artist?

There's been a real freedom for me in the last 20 years since I've been on a major label. I have the freedom to make the records I want to make and that's been great. I'm not even signed directly to the label I'm working with now. We do these lease deals per record. I pay for



Onstage in New Jersey, 2012

'You keep writing and chase songs up the mountains and down through the valleys?'

keep writing and chase songs up the mountains and down through the valleys and go different places because of the music. You follow the music, and it changes as you change. Writing, singing, making records and playing live, it's all one piece. It's a lot of who I am, and I'm a lot of things—a husband, a father. It's about the music, and I just try to be ready when the music strikes.

So you're not a big planner?

I stopped making plans a long time ago because they didn't work out. My plans

the record initially and then I'm reimbursed. I'm working for myself and working with a record company, which is a much better situation than feeling like you're a contract player as part of the old Hollywood movie studio system.

—Juli Thanki



'There's an old adage among jazz players: The first thing is to get your instrument out of the way.'