

John Prine
By Dave Hoekstra
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NASHVILLE Blue has turned to gold in the rearview mirror of John Prine's new Corvette.

"Maybe because it's been 15 years now, but the questions I got asked all the time about how me and Steve Goodman got started - it seems in the last couple of years they've become a bit more special than they seemed to be," Prine says after a thoughtful pause toward the end of an interview under the poolside veranda of the Sheraton Music City Hotel.

"Now it seems like another time - back a ways - and real special. It's funny. You work real hard and then getting out (of Chicago) wasn't like getting out of a little town, it was just calling for a different music scene.

"All the things that went down the first four or five years seem real special to me now," Prine says. "It's almost like they're painted a special color when I think back at them. It's more than a pleasant memory - it's just real nice. Sometimes things have to change and move along before you can put them in some kind of proper perspective. Once something is done, you can't change it, so I'm glad it's a real pleasant memory rather than not."

The 38-year-old Prine is reminiscing while sharing a dozen chicken wings with me and Angie Varias, his drummer for the "Pink Cadillac" and "Storm Windows" albums. Kicking back in blue jeans, a black untucked T-shirt and bare feet, John Prine is content.

Laced with soothing Nashville bluegrass persuasions, his just-released "German Afternoons" album is a heralded return to the traditional country-influenced tones of Prine's first three records. And by looking back, he's looking ahead toward an "Our Town"-salted screenplay derived from "John Prine," his 1971 landmark debut album.

"I'm thinking about writing a screenplay, and writing it is the hardest part," Prine says with a laugh. "There's enough people interested that if I were to write something, they could get everything in motion. It's something I could do because I'm off until Labor Day. I've been asked about this (a screenplay) since 1976, which would mainly be about the characters of the songs from my first album. The whole idea surrounding it is they all wind up at Thanksgiving dinner together. I'd take one simple figure like Sam Stone who ODs within the first two minutes and he walks up a ladder and sits on a plank and become the narrator.

"We got close to getting something down in '76, but the songs got in my way," Prine says. "I was still too close to the songs and it felt real weird. It got to the point where I was going to call (song characters) Donald and Lydia on the phone and talk to them. They were real nice, they served their purpose and that was it. The further I get away from it, I can look at it a bit better. I thought, if nothing else, I'd sit down and try to write a couple of pages on each character, go into a bit more description and then maybe I won't identify them so much with the songs."

Such a screenplay would not only incorporate Sam Stone and Donald and Lydia, but other Prine creations, such as the ill-fated James Lewis (from "Six O'Clock News"), the Angel from Montgomery, Loretta and Rudy from "Hello in There" and Prine's own western Kentucky roots in "Paradise." (Prine's grandfather on his mother's side was John Luther Hamm, a Kentucky guitar-as-banjo picker in the style of Merle Travis).

"Then I've got a second idea for a screenplay called 'The Perfect Joke,'" Prine says. "It's about four guys in a cell - you know the old wives' tale that the best dirty jokes come from convicts. They've got nothing better to do so they write jokes - it's almost like 'The Dick Van Dyke Show.' These guys pace up and down in the cell and they try and write the perfect joke.

"On visiting day, one guy tells his wife the joke, his wife tells her boyfriend and by the time one of the guy gets out, he gets in a cab and the cab driver tells the guy the joke but he screws it all up. The guy kills the cab driver and goes back to jail."

After the independently released "German Afternoons" and "Aimless Love" Prine has exhausted his ideas for songs. "I'm on zero for writing right now," he says. "All the stuff I've backlogged and the things I've written the last two years is all on records, except for three rock 'n' roll songs (that may appear on an upcoming EP). I've got nothin' half-done. It's a perfect place to be. I like to be at zero."

"German Afternoons" is a deeply poetic effort moving from the delightfully offbeat "Linda Goes To Mars" (derived from a tune Granddaddy Hamm sang called "Where Has Nancy Gone?") about a spaced-out spouse to the beautiful "I Just Want To Dance With You" balanced with a gentle Tex-Mex samba.

"'German Afternoons' has been out two weeks and we shipped 10,000 the first day," he says. "It's up to 17,000 already. The independent thing (his Oh Boy! Records) is working out pretty darn good. I couldn't imagine dealing with any majors - unless on my own I made a real pop-sounding record.

"I think the majors stifle a lot more artists than just me," Prine continues. "Although I can't say that much bad about them because they gave

me a free swing to do anything I wanted to do. And I did.

"But just say I was still with a major right now," Prine postulates. "I could see 'em, watching someone come up every couple of years. They'd see Ricky Skaggs selling records (contemporary bluegrass), so they'd say, 'Let's go that way.' Then they see Dwight Yoakam come on with something ('cowpunk') that nobody could get past the door with, and now they're talking kids into doing that type of music.

"They put you on somebody's coattails, and that ain't what I do. As long as I can keep above water with what I do, I don't have to worry about what year it is or who is doing what. And I'm doing all of this without radio."

Prine has always carried an independent creative streak. After 1978's intelligent, blue-collared "Bruised Orange," considered the finest record of his career, Prine's sequel was a lovingly sloppy rockabilly-tinged "Pink Cadillac," somewhat produced by Sun Records legend Sam Philips and his sons, Knox and Jerry, in Memphis, Tenn.

"Musicwise, I was already wanting to do an album like 'Pink Cadillac' while we were doing 'Bruised Orange,'" Prine says. "But (producer Steve) Goodman saw the songs for 'Bruised Orange' were what they were and should be recorded thusly. That's why we had a bunch of arguments cutting 'Bruised Orange.' I was into another place musically but he was just trying to service the songs, which was a real important lesson to me. That's what I do all the time now.

"I'll take a song and if I'm confused about it when I get to recording, I'll refer back to a tape of when I first wrote it," Prine says. "It's real easy to get away from a song, so you have to service it. Otherwise, nobody will ever hear how it was in the original state. Ever since Goodman showed me that, I've been trying to follow along and record the song for what it is."

A proper example is one of the staples of Prine's recent tour, a new song called "Let's Talk Dirty in Hawaiian."

"I wrote that two weeks after we finished 'German Afternoons' so I couldn't put it on the record, but it's been stealing the whole show. I made up Hawaiian words so they sound like dirty words in Hawaiian. Like, 'Lay your coconut on my tiki' or 'What the heck a mooka-mooka dear.' It's like a Hawaiian Shiner's song, and people are going nuts over this stuff. So I'm going to put it on a single and include it with 'German Afternoons.' I'll put it on green vinyl with palm trees on it."

Prine has been receiving hearty inside endorsements from Bob Dylan, who said "Aimless Love" was one of his favorite records in a long time. "Yeah, I

heard from Tom Petty's bass player that Dylan was listening to the record all through his Australian tour."

How does Prine feel about all the Dylan comparisons at the outset of his career?

"I thought it got to be a little too much - it finally got in the way, especially for people who had never listened to me, and who were trying to make up their mind," Prine says. "Other than, that I got tired of reading it."

Not as tiring is the matter of Prine's little red Corvette.

"I finally sold the '59 Porsche that I used on the cover of 'Sweet Revenge,' which was the only album cover I ever took in Chicago," Prine says. "It was shot down by the gun club on Lake Shore Drive. I only used it two months of the year - it was in the shop more than I had it. This kid down the block kept making me offers on it.

"I bought a used '73 ski-boat last summer and we've used it a lot, so I thought I'd sell the Porsche and get a little bit bigger boat. So I did it. But I've still got my four-door Cadillac that doesn't go fast enough. I go down to the Cadillac dealer to ask about a front-wheel drive to make it go faster, and just then the owner of the dealership pulls out of the garage with this '86 red 'Vette with a smoked glass top.

"I didn't even recognize it was a 'Vette, but it was his car and they said any car he had was for sale," Prine says. "It had like 300 miles on it. They give me the keys, I take it for a half-hour, I come back and say, 'I don't care what you gotta do, but figure out a way you can present this to my accountant. If I tell anybody, they're going to have a stroke.' And man, those cars are fun. It's fun to go get that quart of milk that you forgot - especially if you got a radar detector.

"And I've still got my red '51 Fordomatic - I'm not going to get rid of that or my old '76 BMW," Prine says. With a laugh, he adds, "Now we've got four cars and none to pull a boat with. I may have to buy a pickup truck to pull the boat."

Prine pauses, and says, "Aw, it's not like the old days when, after a car would run down on me, I'd just talk to (Chicago folkie) Fred Holstein."

Aw, but the old days are smiling in the rearview mirror.