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NASHVILLE, Tenn.--- It figures that one of singer-songwriter Pat McLaughlin's favorite Nashville joints is a small 71-year-old downtown diner called the Pie Wagon.

He's an affectionately crusty guy, always on the move.

The Waterloo, Iowa, native has drifted through the proverbial record wringer. His soulful self-titled 1988 debut for Capitol Records was met with nearly unanimous critical acclaim, yet McLaughlin was dropped in a 1989 housecleaning that included two dozen Capitol acts.

A former short-order cook and carpenter, McLaughlin is touring solo to support "Unglued," his sterling Dos Records followup to "Pat McLaughlin."

Former Rolling Stones/Bob Dylan sideman Al Kooper recently told a Nashville alternative paper that *"Pat McLaughlin is every bit as good as Van Morrison. . . . He should be a nationwide, worldwide phenomenon."*

Over some recent Pie Wagon greens and fried chicken, McLaughlin modestly shrugged off the praise. "I don't quite find myself in Van Morrison's league," McLaughlin said. "But I'm sure glad Al Kooper does. It's surprising how much that means to a musician in this town."

"Unglued" sticks to the pliant blues-soul idioms that are part Van Morrison, part Lou Rawls, but definitely all rural McLaughlin. He comes from the forgotten Jack Clement/Jim Rooney school at the Cowboy Arms Hotel and Recording Studio, which Clement built here in 1969.

Clement, a former engineer at Sun Records down the road in Memphis, stresses rhythmic minimalism. Besides discovering Jerry Lee Lewis, Clement has produced Johnny Cash and Charley Pride. Rooney, a singer-producer-publisher who worked under Clement, produced John Prine and Nanci Griffith in recent years.

"If there is a Clement-Rooney school, it has a lot to do with strumming on guitar," McLaughlin said. "They know how to play three guys off each other at the same time."

It was through a Rooney session that McLaughlin met Neil Young steel guitarist Ben Keith, who produced "Unglued." The recording was done in two days in a big room at McLaughlin's house in Franklin, Tenn., outside of Nashville. Three more

songs were recorded live at the Howlin' Wolf in New Orleans .

McLaughlin's New Orleans-based band is the Continental Drifters, led by original Subdudes drummer Carlo Nuccio. The extended Drifters family has included Peter Holsapple (R.E.M., db's) on accordion and guitar, Dream Syndicate bassist Mark Walton, ex-Bangle Vicki Peterson and Susan Cowsill of Cowsills fame.

McLaughlin and Keith wanted to record live with the Drifters to give the album a greater edge. Some of the cuts, such as "Wind It on Up" and the Motown-tinged "Nothin' But Trouble," are older songs.

"I don't know how many chances I'll get to record," McLaughlin said. "I just want to get my best songs out. I also felt I had to run my songs by Ben. He's around such good music."

McLaughlin regularly drives between Nashville and New Orleans, which is how he does some of his best writing. "It's easy to write on the highway, especially if you have a cruise," McLaughlin said. "I can play the mandolin and drive, while steering with my knee."

One new song that came about that way is a lilting mandolin-driven ballad called "Friendly Bird." McLaughlin asked, "You know how they broadcast a TV station on the radio? I was listening to 'People's Court' on the radio. A lady went into a pet store. There was a cage that said 'Friendly Bird' on it. She stuck her finger in the cage and it bit her, so she took them to court. But it's a love song, too. It's the most literal song I've ever written."

"Unglued" is dedicated to McLaughlin's mother, Katherine Ward McLaughlin, who passed away in 1992. He wrote the ballad "Highway of the Saints" while driving the road that connects St. Louis with St. Paul, Minn., to visit her while she was ill.

"Man, she was a great whistler," McLaughlin said with a soft smile. "She only sang the best songs while doing the dishes. Her favorite song I ever did was 'Down Home Girl' by the Rolling Stones. And also Carl Perkins' 'Honey Don't.' She and my Dad just loved to sing."