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**JOHN PRINE**  
by Erin Osmon

B L O O M S B U R Y



## JOHN PRINE

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John Prine



Erin Osmon

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*To my dad, family in Western Kentucky, and the City of  
Chicago—the hearts and homes who showed me John Prine.*



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“Prine’s stuff is pure Proustian existentialism. Midwestern  
mindtrips to the nth degree.”

—*Bob Dylan*

“Proustian existentialism? I can’t even pronounce that.”

—*John Prine*



## Preface

When John Prine died from complications related to Covid-19 on April 7, 2020, he took with him a section of America's heart. Since his 1971 self-titled debut galvanized fans, his profound, economical words have become a singular emblem of Middle America, its families and landscapes, trials and triumphs, progress and hypocrisy, polished into lyrical gold with striking poetic clarity. Prine was our chuckling uncle, our tender best friend, a beacon, a guide, a megaphone. He was celebrated by the likes of Bob Dylan, but he never forgot who he was. A son of Chicago. A working-class hero. A man of people and places overlooked and underestimated.

I was lucky to see Prine perform a handful of times in my life, but a brief encounter in 2019 remains the most memorable. I happened upon Prine at an event celebrating the year's Grammy Award nominees, when his *The Tree of Forgiveness* received three nominations. I'd just recovered from an ugly cold when, the morning of the soirée, I was stricken with laryngitis. After weighing the absurdity of being unable to speak at such a social affair, my fear of missing out prevailed. The spectacle, and promise of free food, was too enticing. Plus, I had a great dress. By the time I

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arrived, and stepped into the glittering banquet hall, a wave of hunger hit me like a car-wash sprayer, soaking my being, leaving me light-headed and wobbly. So I made a beeline for the raw bar, and heaped one plate with many, many oysters.

As I backed away from the spread, lemon wedges in one hand, bivalves in the other, I spotted him. Seated in the middle of the room, as if presiding over his court, was Prine, in a sharp black suit, his wife Fiona reclining Botticelli-esque by his side. In some mystical act of mind-melding, Prine and I locked eyes. It has long been my experience that Midwestern people find one another in the most far flung places—the rainforest of Costa Rica, the Louvre, a plane flying from Taiwan to Thailand—and this psychic connection only furthered the theory. In that brief instance of me, unable to speak, and Prine, in a chair six feet away, I mouthed, “You’re my hero.” He grinned and then mouthed “Thank you,” nodding at my plate with a swift thumbs-up. If I’d known I’d never see him again, I might’ve made more of a fuss, with makeshift hand signals and embarrassing selfie requests. But somehow, the exchange feels more valuable than any conversation we might’ve had. My appetite had impressed him—perhaps the greatest compliment bestowed between Midwesterners.

As an Indiana native with family spread across Western Kentucky, and a fifteen-year Chicago resident, I’ve always understood Prine through the lens of our Middle American provenance, and admired his singular ability to convey our commonplace happenings to universal effect. Only Prine could make a city slicker care for a rural grandma, and turn pedestrian life in a Chicago suburb into an arresting image.

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When Prine sang “Paradise,” a whole world became known outside of itself. Prine used the Kentucky town’s real-life events to evoke an abiding sense of bucolic nostalgia, and a loss of innocence, that appeals to anyone with a modicum of conscience, crafting one of America’s most enduring protests in the process. He championed the people and places of flyover country—a pejorative for Middle American states that has been subverted as a badge of honor—without a hint of bitterness. Instead, he left the front door wide open, inviting listeners to look closer, feel deeper, laugh harder, to genuinely connect with those who’ve been overlooked and discarded, to understand them as friends and neighbors, not the worthless backdrop of the country’s midsection. Prine’s unfussy acoustic guitar playing fit perfectly within Chicago’s folk music revival of the 1970s, but his masterly lyrics marked him a star. His words are so potent, so important to the artistic legacy of the region that Illinois governor J.B. Pritzker named Prine the state’s first honorary poet laureate in 2020.

And it all began with *John Prine*, his extraordinary debut. Prine wrote from inside a very specific world, defined by Chicago, its suburbs, and his ancestral roots in Western Kentucky. The album didn’t break any sales records upon its release in 1971, but rose to the rank of American icon, like the man himself, an unassuming titan who touched lives around the globe. *John Prine* is a gripping statement on love, loss, loneliness, and family fleshed out by one of America’s most prestigious backing bands, The Memphis Boys. “Illegal Smile,” “Hello in There,” “Sam Stone,” “Paradise,” “Your Flag Decal Won’t Get You Into Heaven Anymore,” “Far from Me,” “Donald and Lydia,” and “Angel from Montgomery” are now

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standards in the American songbook, covered by icons such as Johnny Cash, Bonnie Raitt, John Denver, Joan Baez, Dwight Yoakam, and countless others. Beyond his music, Prine's greatest legacy is that of an underdog champion, and the America of his understanding is a better, more vibrant, and well-respected place because of his generosity and uncommon gift. Middle America gave to Prine in abundance, and he reflected those treasures tenfold, with poetic words and a knowing grin. Prine may be gone, but his influence lives eternal.

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