

erfectly Good Songs

After 30 years of songwriting, John Hiatt has learned to let the muses come to him

What do the following artists have in common: Iggy Pop and Paula Abdul? Bob Dylan and Conway Twitty? Nick Lowe and Willie Nelson? Buddy Guy and Ronnie Milsap?

The answer is that they've all recorded songs by John Hiatt, the veteran singer/songwriter whose recent album "Perfectly Good Guitar" is finally garnering him the recognition from the public that he has always enjoyed with his musical peers. Long a favorite of critics, Hiatt has undergone a transformation from angry '70s new waver to tasteful roots rocker, all the while turning out songs that other musicians have lined up to cover. In fact, nearly 100 Hiatt covers have been recorded, from Three Dog Night's 1974 "Sure as I'm Sitting Here" to recent hits "Thing Called Love" by Bonnie Raitt and "Drive South" by Suzy Boggus.

"Perfectly Good Guitar" sees Hiatt playing in a harder style reminiscent of his mid-80's albums "Riding with the King" and "Warming Up to the Ice Age." This time out, he's brought along some more rockers for the ride as well. Producer Matt Wallace, best known for his work with MTV favorites Faith No More and Paul Westerberg, was pegged for not only producing the album but putting the band together as well. Wallace paired Hiatt with young musicians like guitarist Michael Ward of the Los Angeles-based School of Fish to create a revitalized sound. The alternative rock edge was furthered in adding Cracker alumni Michael Urbano on drums and bassist Davey Faragher for Hiatt's touring band, The Guilty Dogs.

Hiatt's writing on the new record continues to exhibit his trademark humor, personal insights, and slightly-off-kilter storytelling. While not as introspective as recent albums, "Perfectly Good Guitar" continues to explore the mystical relationship between love, emotion, and what happens when we imperfect human beings give ourselves the opportunity to experience such lofty feelings. While the focus of albums like "Bring the Family" expressed affirmation of the value of love and relationships, this time out Hiatt

explores the apparent dichotomy of love and freedom, either in celebration ("Something Wild," "Buffalo River Home," "When You Hold Me Tight"), longing ("Blue Telescope"), or loss and betrayal ("Angel," "The Wreck of the Barbie Ferrari"). His ability to address these issues without becoming maudlin is a tribute to Hiatt's ability to write true to his experience and to the musicians, who play it like they mean it.

After 30 years of writing and 20 of recording, Hiatt's popularity is reaching an all-time high. "Perfectly Good Guitar" is fast approaching Gold status and has become the darling of the new Album Adult Alternative, or Triple A, radio format. Hiatt currently has three songs on the Triple A charts and "Perfectly Good Guitar" was recently named Best Triple A Album of the Year by the Hard Report.

I spoke to Hiatt on March 20 from his hotel in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where he and the Guilty Dogs were appearing. The tour is now in California, with upcoming dates including March 26 at the Crest Theater in Sacramento, March 27 and 28 at Slim's in San Francisco, March 30 at the Freemont Theater in San Luis Obispo, March 31 at the Belly Up Tavern in San Diego, and April 1 at the Wiltern Theater in Los Angeles.

John Hiatt

Jay Hipps: So how's the tour going?

John Hiatt: The tour is going great. It seems like it's been going forever, but it's going great. We've been out since September, not straight through but 3 weeks out, a week home, that sort of thing.

JH: Was this planned originally? I was under the impression that the tour ended December 18 in Nashville?

Hiatt: No, we were always planning to go right through the new year. This leg ends April 2nd, I think. We ended a leg December 18th, and then we came out again -- we had about two weeks off for Christmas and then we started back in the Northeast in January. And we've covered the Northeast and the Midwest and Texas and now we're up in Colorado and we're going out west. We knock it on the head April 2nd and then we're starting up again in May for two or three weeks. And then we're going back to Europe in June and then we're coming back out the end of July with Jackson Browne, we're going to do a shed tour. That's six weeks. And then we're going to knock it on the head-if we live that long (laughs).

JH: So that's when you wrap the whole thing up? That sounds like a pretty strenuous schedule.

Hiatt: It's basically a full year of touring, which I committed myself to when we made the plans to work this record. I was real charged up about the music and felt real re-energized about what I was doing creatively and it had been four years since I'd toured solo. 1990 was the last solo tour I did, with the exception of some solo acoustic dates here and there. So I figured it was important to get back out and play, play for the folks. And the show's been going great, and the audiences are ever-growing-we're selling out shows everywhere, so it's really been great, really been encouraging to me.

JH: Well, I saw the show in Santa Rosa -- I guess it was mid-November.

Hiatt: Ah yes.

JH: That was a lot of fun...

Hiatt: We've since changed the band a little bit, we've pared it down to a four piece, which seems to work much better.

JH: The third guitar player is not around?

Hiatt: Yes, Corky James is no longer with us. We've got Mike Ward from School of Fish on lead guitar and then the rhythm section, Davey Faragher, Michael Urbano and myself. It works, it gives it a little bit more air. The three guitar thing is something I've always loved, but it's very difficult to pull off. I think Moby Grape was probably the last band that did it well. And look where it got them!

JH: Yeah, hasn't done much for them. When was the last time you heard them on the radio? So did Ravi Oli leave a disciple there? ["Ravi Oli" was credited for electric sitar on the song "The Wreck of the Barbie Ferrari" from "Perfectly Good Guitar."]

Hiatt: Ravi Oli is not making any appearances! Although Corky was playing Ravi Oli, I was the actual original Ravi Oli on the record. So he was a surrogate Mr. Oli, bless his heart. But he's still there in spirit. Ravi is ever-present.

JH: So it sounds like you're pretty pleased with how things are going. I've heard that you're hoping to do a live album from this tour. Is that so?

Hiatt: Well, we've been recording since we came back out in January -- we've been hauling around 24 tracks of ADAT and recording every show. So, yeah, I would love to put out a live record, I would really like to put out a live record.

JH: It seems like it would be a good time because you have so much material. Now that you're audience is getting bigger, a live album would be a good way to introduce them to...

Hiatt: Exactly. Yeah, I feel the same way. Plus, I'm so pleased with this band, the Guilty Dogs, they just re-interpret a lot of the stuff in such an exciting way. I'm even more excited about getting into the studio with them, which we're planning to do in September.

JH: Are you writing already for that one?

Hiatt: Yeah, I've been writing like a madman. Writing on the road quite a bit.

JH: Seems like a good way to spend that time...

Hiatt: Well, you know, it's funny cause it's only in the last few years I've been able to do that. I didn't use to be able to write on the road, I used to have to be home in my little writing room and so on. But I've gotten more flexible about that.

JH: One of the things that I've noticed about "Perfectly Good Guitar" is that it seems like a sort of return to the sounds of "Riding with the King"-era material. What made you want to go back to that harder-edged sound?

Hiatt: I didn't feel like I was going back to it, but maybe just going on with it. I guess...I'm just trying to figure out how to best put it because it's not like you consciously make decisions, or at least I don't, in terms of music. What I'm writing and what I'm writing about and how a group of songs shape up over a year or two year period what tells me what's happened musically, how it's going to be. So in hindsight I suppose you can look back and see a design. I guess, if hindsight's 20/20, then I'm looking back and thinking to myself that whatever I was writing about with the last 3 A&M records ("Bring the Family," "Slow Turning," and "Stolen Moments"), I was done writing about that stuff. I

was done talking about myself in terms of a self-inventory style of writing. I was just through with that, you know? It's like the guy at the party -- you can only talk about yourself so long, and if you don't start talking about something else, people are going to walk away from you! (laughing) So I was just sort of over it. I don't know if that's personal development. I think -- I'm sure -- I think any writer in his writing life gets into that self-discovery, that kind of writing where you go into yourself and check yourself out. I think you do it more than once in your writing life, and I think it's useful for the writer and I think it's useful for the listener or the reader as well.

JH: But you don't want to make a career out of it...

Hiatt: Well, you do it when you need to do it. And when I'd done that, I wanted to get back to some storytelling and maybe revealing some things to myself and/or others through that.

JH: I think that's one of the real appeals to your music, at least speaking for myself. There are things that I hear you address that are real to you and are real to other people but that nobody really talks about.

Hiatt: Well, my whole motivation for writing these songs is to connect in just that way you described. I want to know that what I'm feeling is not all that unusual. I want to know that other people feel stuff like that too. So that's why I write about it, to kind of send a flag up a pole and see if anybody else says, "Oh yeah..."

JH: Yeah, "I recognize that, too." Well that's interesting. Having seen you on stage and how comfortable you are and how much fun you have, it's interesting to hear you say that. Because it sounds like something where you'd be a little bit timid out there, "Here, I'm revealing something..."

Hiatt: Well, I think my comfort level on stage comes from some years of having some things affirmed by the audience. In other words, by having connected in whatever modest way I have in terms of the width and depth and breadth of my career, I have that knowledge going into it, that there are some people that understand what I'm talking about. But years ago, when I started doing this, I couldn't even look at the audience when I played. I used to sit down and stare at my strings and so on and so forth. So it's been a journey for me of connecting with people.

JH: It's not like the first time you went on stage you were the same person we see today.

Hiatt: Exactly.

JH: Getting back to one thing you mentioned about the songs, and the direction they take you, it sounds like you let the song dictate...

Hiatt: Absolutely. Over the years, I've tried a lot of ways to trick the song into appearing

(laughs). Employing different disciplines, you know, or superstitions, or attitudes, or whatever. These days, and I think that's just a result of my personal and artistic development, I seem more willing to just sort of go along and see where the song's going to go. I don't have as many agendas in terms of, well "I want to write this kind of song." In your 30's you think you have notions and attitudes and ideas that are ever so important to get across to people, so you kind of come at it from that angle. But I don't do that so much anymore. It's more like an adventure for me these days, to see what the little old song is going to be about. It's fun and it's really opened up the possibilities of what I want to write about or what I'm going to write about because I hardly ever know anymore, lyrically, what's going to happen, to tell you the truth. I get inspired by a piece of music or a chord progression, and then a melody, and then the words are the last thing. And that's when you go along with the ride, see what happens.

JH: That's an interesting way to go about it, when you consider a lot of popular music today is...people have an agenda going into, it sounds like they have a marketing plan in mind before they even sit down to play anything.

Hiatt: Well, there is a lot of that, of course there always has been in pop music. There's been the Brill Building approach or Tin Pan Alley before that. And right now I think Nashville's a perfect example of that, just that approach you're talking about. It seems more designed to move product, have lots of records sold and then have that artist go out and collect...money. (laughter). And that's the pop machine, it's finally come to country music. Everybody down in Nashville is just thrilled with it, but artistically speaking, in terms of any artistic vision, it's slim to none, in my opinion. There are a few people that are working -- again, it's just my opinion -- there are some country artists who have an artistic vision, but right now there's just a real glut of sort of the "pop fodder."

JH: Well, when you look at someone like Billy Ray Cyrus...

Hiatt: There's a new kid every week. And it's the same story it's always been: somebody young enough and dumb enough (laughter) to do what they're told. It's a real producer-driven thing, right now, producers and record companies are in cahoots. Which is why, conversely, to my ears anyway, this new rock'n'roll, these new young bands that have been coming down the pike here the last four or five years are so refreshing. It's so invigorating to me that a music that is artistically driven for the most part -- although, sure, in any group in any music you've got people just trying to cop a thang, or whatever -- but what I hear is real songs being written about real everyday feelings that we all have. Not being cleaned up for the masses, or prettied up, just "here it is." I dig that.

JH: I guess that's one of the joys of rock'n'roll, really. In the early 60's, the record companies had it all pretty squared away -- Pat Boone would cover the Chubby Checker songs and they'd go about their business just fine. But there came about a time when artists broke through that the record companies didn't know what to do with, and they found an audience and broke free of that whole record company control. I guess that's the same thing you're talking about happening now.

Hiatt: Well, there's been many cases of producer driven and record-label driven periods where there has been some wonderful music made. Motown is a perfect example -- that was just fabulous stuff. And Stax, the Stax/Volt era in Memphis, the Chess era before that in the 40's and 50's with Willie Dixon producing all these great blues acts for the Chess brothers up in Chicago. But I think you have to have people involved that have some sort of artistic awareness. I mean, it's a commercial venture, let's not kid ourselves. It's a commercial art. I think that's not only the challenge, but I think it keeps you honest as well. I very much believe in that. If I just wanted to make records for a handful of people who think and look and dress like me, I'd be recording for some small label somewhere. I don't want to do that -- I want to reach people.

But again, it's whatever your motivation is, and a lot of times the motivation is purely dollars and cents, unfortunately. But in a lot of other lines of work it's the same thing too.

JH: Any word on further activities of Little Village?

Hiatt: No, no word, all's quiet on the western front. We have not spoken lately, but when last we spoke, which was six months ago, everybody was still hoping that we could at least make one more. I think we all felt like we made an interesting record, but we didn't make a really great one.

JH: Well, the record was good but I think expectations were probably pretty high...

Hiatt: For the audience and for us as well.

JH: I saw you guys perform in San Francisco and it was really an incredible show. It was a lot of fun seeing you guys work together. There are some great dynamics to the things that you four [Hiatt, Ry Cooder, Nick Lowe, and Jim Keltner] can do. So nobody in the group is averse to playing together again?

Hiatt: No. I think it'll happen. I think it may be a year or more before we get in the studio. The biggest problem is just getting these four guys together, because we all have these different projects. But I think we'll make one. There's a great rock'n'roll record in us, I think.

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