

A FolkWax Reprint
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A Perfect Match
John Prine Live With Opening Act Todd Snider
Municipal Auditorium
Charleston, West Virginia
By Ken Bays

What makes for a good opening act? Besides the obvious — an ability to keep the crowd entertained without overshadowing the headliner — it usually helps if the two acts share some essential quality that makes their music, well, just “fit together.”

Singer-songwriter Todd Snider couldn't “fit” any better with John Prine, for whom he opened during a brief December tour of the mid-Atlantic. I'm not just talking about the fact that both Prine and Snider write in a style that balances humor with poignancy, or that both write from a left-of-center social perspective. I'm talking about the way both artists pace their songs: Both Prine and Snider are brilliant at letting the point of a song unfold slowly and deliberately, saving the most clever turn of phrase until the last verse, when the listener is finally let in on the song's true intent.

Prine does it each time he sings his 1972 tune “The Great Compromise,” a three-chord wonder that starts off being about a two-timing lover but winds up as a comment on U.S. foreign policy. Snider's penchant for this kind of writing comes across on his 2004 song “The Ballad of the Kingsmen,” which at first sounds like an attack on censorship (in the Fifties, the Kingsmen's smash “Louie Louie” was investigated for its “immoral” lyrics) but later reveals itself to be about the mixed messages our society sends young people. (“Only the strong will survive,” he sings, but “the meek will inherit the earth.” Well, which is it?)

Both of those songs were played at Prine's performance in West Virginia's capital city, making them centerpieces to a show peppered with social commentary. Besides “The Great Compromise” — originally about Vietnam but today played in response to the war in the Gulf — Prine played his other great antiwar piece, the serious-as-a-heart-attack “Sam Stone,” where bassist Dave Jacques and lead guitarist Jason Wilber added a mournful underpinning to Prine's fragile melody. Jacques and Wilber were Prine's only accompanists on this tour and the three-piece, drumless format was perfectly suited to a Folky batch of songs that heavily mined the songwriter's early catalog. All the staples were there, from the rocked-up version of “Spanish Pipedream” that opened the set to the slowed-down take on “Paradise” that closed it, the eco-friendly song resounding powerfully in a state where mountaintop removal is a hot-button issue.

In between, we had favorites such as “Souvenirs” (during which Prine pointed out that he's still using the same Martin guitar he's been composing on since the 1960s), “That's the Way the World Goes 'Round” (which had him telling two funny stories about misheard lyrics, going far beyond the rap you can hear on his 1998 album *Live*), and “Fish and Whistle” (which Prine said he almost didn't like enough to include on the album it was written for, 1978's *Bruised Orange*). Prine even broke out a couple of less frequently performed gems. On his near-perfect 1971 debut album, the quiet character study “Far From Me” was lost among more universal numbers like “Hello in There” and

the hilarious reefer ode “Illegal Smile”; in concert, it was a mesmerizing masterpiece of swirling strings. “Sweet Revenge,” the Country-Rock title track to Prine’s 1973 release, didn’t fare as well — it was the only song the otherwise boisterous crowd didn’t sing along with.

A late-set run of songs from Prine’s Grammy-winning 2005 album Fair & Square brought things into the present. He paid tribute to his wife of eleven years, Fiona, with the sweet “She Is My Everything,” and took on the Carter Family’s “Bear Creek Blues” with rugged, rural abandon. But on those quick-tempo, wall-of-sound numbers, as well as on the upbeat perennial “Please Don’t Bury Me,” poor sound tended to muddy up the proceedings. No such problems occurred during Prine’s solo performance of “Carousel of Love,” a new song that’s available on iTunes, but that has yet to be released in physical form. Or, for that matter, on the slower tunes that featured Jacques and Wilber: “Takin’ a Walk” was a highlight of the evening, its rambling narrative broken up by supremely melodic solos in which Wilber’s fluid playing spoke as deeply and clearly as Prine’s lyrics.

Like Snider — at 41, he’s 20 years Prine’s younger — John Prine is a Folk-Rock storyteller with a hippie-derived worldview and an ability to hit listeners’ hearts and brains in equal proportions. They’re proof that “message” music can be rowdy, that funny songs can make you cry a little, and, above all, that one guy with one guitar can make a surprisingly big noise.

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