

IT'S A BIG OLD GOOFY WORLD VIEW:  
JOHN PRINE AS A MODERN-DAY MARK TWAIN

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A Thesis Submitted to the  
University of North Carolina Wilmington in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

Department of English

University of North Carolina Wilmington

2005

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis, entitled “It’s a Big Old Goofy World View: John Prine As a Modern-Day Mark Twain,” makes the connection between Mark Twain, the nineteenth-century writer and lecturer, and John Prine, a contemporary songwriter and performer. Like Twain, Prine views the world with joy and pity: with humor and disdain. While Twain utilizes literary techniques to advance his impressions, Prine’s musical compositions demonstrate his unique outlook.

In my discussion of Prine’s songs, I will analyze not only lyrics but also musical characteristics. Lyrically, the songs demonstrate poetic characteristics and narrative devices. For this reason, I will closely examine the lyrics as one would examine poetry or prose. While musically the songs are simple, Prine’s choices of accompaniment, instrumentation, dynamics, and musical genre greatly affect how the lyrics are perceived and are no less important.

Born in 1946 and recording and performing music for more than thirty-four years, Prine’s observations of the world around him reflect the attitudes and practices of modern American culture. His views on love, social issues, politics, and religion are presented in a vernacular language that is made accessible by melodies that are both poignant and memorable.

Because Prine’s song, “It’s a Big Old Goofy World” is a microcosm of his world view, I have employed the lyrics to this song as a frame for each chapter. The characters which inhabit this song, and indeed many Prine songs, are described with a unique blend of wit and pathos: they can make you smile and they can break your heart.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost my thanks go to Kathy Rugoff whose writing expertise, love of literature, and passion for music inspired my own writing. Her patience and encouragement made this thesis possible.

I would also like to acknowledge my thesis committee for their interest in my topic and providing such valuable advice. Thanks also to the graduate faculty in the English Department at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington for passing on their knowledge of literature and writing.

Special thanks to my family who appreciate and express the arts of literature and music in their own unique way. Also, specific thanks to my brothers who introduced me to the music of John Prine, and my sisters for having a sense of humor and patience with regard to “unsold” music.

Finally, thanks to my friends who have supported me throughout this writing of the “big old goofy” thesis.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother, Eileen, whose unconditional support has always inspired and sustained me and to my father, Don, who taught me the value of laughter and perseverance.

“It’s a Big Old Goofy World”

Up in the morning  
Work like a dog  
Is better than sitting  
Like a bump on a log  
Mind all your manners  
Be quiet as a mouse  
Some day you’ll own a home  
That’s as big as a house

I know a fella  
He eats like a horse  
Knocks his old balls  
Around the old golf course  
You oughta see his wife  
She’s a cute little dish  
She smokes like a chimney  
And drinks like a fish

Chorus    There’s a big old goofy man  
              Dancing with a big old goofy girl  
              Ooh baby  
              It’s a big old goofy world

Now Elvis had a woman  
With a head like a rock  
I wished I had a woman  
Who made my knees knock  
She’d sing like an angel  
And eat like a bird  
And if I wrote a song  
She’d know every single word

Kiss a little baby  
Give the world a smile  
If you take an inch  
Give ‘em back a mile  
‘Cause if you lie like a rug  
And you don’t give a damn  
You’re never gonna be  
As happy as a clam

So I’m sitting in a hotel  
Trying to write a song  
My head is just as empty  
As the day is long  
Why it’s clear as a bell  
I should have gone to school  
I’d be wise as an owl  
Stead of stubborn as a mule

John Prine, from the album, The Missing Years

## CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION: PARADISE

Up in the morning  
Work like a dog  
Is better than sitting  
Like a bump on a log  
Mind all your manners  
Be quiet as a mouse  
Some day you'll own a home  
That's as big as a house  
"It's A Big Old Goofy World" (The Missing Years)

In a 1992 article, writer and music critic Joe F. Compton deemed singer/songwriter John Prine a "modern-day Mark Twain" ("John Prine" 47). Certainly writers of fiction and non-fiction have previously received such a title; but why a songwriter? The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate how the comparison of John Prine to Mark Twain inspired an analysis of Prine's lyrics and music.

First of all the question of genre must be addressed. In Twain's lifetime, America's "traditional oratorical culture gave way to an urgent concern with print-oriented literacy" (Zall x). As America steam-powered into the twentieth century, Twain responded to this change by creating maxims "that reflect(ed) this new urgency in their concise, precise wit" (Zall x). Twain reflected the times in which he lived.

Similar changes occurred in the 1950s, Prine's formative years. With the advent of the phonograph and the radio in the 1920s, America began transforming from a society of people who created music—who played and sang themselves—to a society of people who listened to music produced by others. In the 1950s as radios and phonographs became more affordable, post World War II popular music became more accessible to consumers. The new pop music influenced Prine's own songwriting, which began in the 1960s.

As an art form, modern popular music is influential because of its ability to reach the widest possible audience and to reflect the culture of that audience. The Da Vinci Code has been on the New York Times fiction “Best Seller” list for one hundred and two weeks (“Best Seller”), selling millions of copies. Despite these gaudy numbers, I would argue that Prine’s song “Paradise,” which was never on a best seller list of any sort, will reach as many people as has The Da Vinci Code. “Paradise,” which appears on Prine’s 1971 recording, John Prine, is still in print. In addition, there are numerous musical artists who have recorded the song on their own albums, performers all over the world who have covered this song, back porch pickers who have played it for family and friends, and radio stations who have it in on their play lists. For these reasons, “Paradise” continues to grow in popularity. It is doubtful that The Da Vinci Code will be dispersed in such a way thirty-four years after its publication.

This is the nature of popular music; its message is continually disseminated through myriad forms. As early as the 1880s, pop music tailored itself toward a young audience. As record companies became more influential, they produced short, simple, and catchy pop music to this audience. As young people matured, the demand for a more sophisticated pop music increased. Because the musical characteristics of pop songs are, by and large not complex, sophistication may be found in the lyrics. By the 1960s, artists such as Bob Dylan were achieving this complexity, and lyrics assumed a “poetic” role. Indeed, Dylan is credited for making pop music lyrics a legitimate type of “literature”: “The idea of marrying significant words with popular music was Dylan’s” (Karwoski). However, Karwoski disagrees with critics like Christopher Ricks, who believe that lyrics may be examined as a separate entity, divorced from the music of the song. Karwoski states, “The whole point of Bob Dylan’s songs is not whether they can be compared with Keats and viewed as great poetry, but what the lyrics *mean* and what they can tell us about the human condition [...]”

I believe the meaning of pop songs can best be achieved through analysis of both lyrics *and* music. Therefore, my position, with regard to Ricks and Karwoski, strikes a balance between the two scholars. Pop song lyrics do exhibit literary characteristics, but the study of the musical characteristics of the song, in addition to the lyrics, is essential for understanding the song as a whole. In addition, I maintain that, in order to acquire a clear overview of an artist, it is important to study the breadth of that artist's work, not just specific examples from isolated time periods. For this reason, I will examine works from all eleven of Prine's studio releases (not counting compilation albums and an album of cover songs), which span thirty-four years.

There is no doubt about the importance of pop song lyrics: "college freshman who can't recall a line of Shakespeare can cite line after line of rock lyrics" (Pattison vii). As a personal example, my notebooks from elementary school, high school, and even my college notebooks are covered with lines from pop songs. These are the words through which the modern generation filters its experience. And despite the perceived simplicity of pop song lyrics, there is a complexity present that heightens the message of the song.

In the study of pop music, most of the analysis has been done by scholars who have focused almost exclusively on the lyrics (at the expense of the music analysis) because "they mostly lacked the ability to distinguish songs in musical terms" (Frith 77). Because of my formal music training, I have the ability to comment on the theoretical and practical implications of pop songs. In addition, my formal literature training, and the fact that I have listened to Prine's music for many years, allows me to present a unique perspective on Prine's music and lyrics.

In the 1970s several singer/songwriters, including Prine, were termed, "the new Bob Dylan." Though philosophical, Prine is not "intellectual" like Dylan. Prine is more intuitive and down-to-earth, and this world view is reflected in his music and lyrics. He writes about misfits

and common people; celebrities and losers; the meek and the goofy. Among his music influences, Prine cites Merle Travis, J.D. Loudermilk, and Jack Clements; not exactly well-known names, but neither is Prine's. This is an ancestry of folk music that Prine absorbs and then interprets in his own compositions. Folk music may be measured by the ability of regular folks to perform it, and most Prine songs can easily be performed and appreciated with voice and guitar and still retain their essence. Though the words may be complex, the simplicity of the music makes the songs accessible.

While some songwriters crumbled under the weight of the Dylan comparison, Prine managed to build a solid songwriting, recording, and performing career for the next thirty-four years. It is difficult to pinpoint Prine's musical style, as this quote from Steve Cooper attests: "Prine's songs aren't folk; they aren't blues. There are country elements, but nothing Nashville would come close to claiming. There are rock elements, but nothing to appease your average air guitarist." The wide variety of performers who have covered Prine songs attests to not only his appeal across musical genres, but also his abilities as a songwriter; the list includes John Denver, Bonnie Raitt, Bill Monroe, Bette Midler, Tammy Wynette, Dave Matthews, and Johnny Cash. He has also garnered three Grammy Award nominations: in 1986 for German Afternoons, in 1988 for John Prine Live, and he won the Grammy Award for Best Contemporary Folk Album for his 1991 production, The Missing Years.

It is clear that both the music performers and music fans have great respect for Prine's body of work. Two questions need to then be asked. What is the specific appeal of Prine's songs, and why has he been compared to Mark Twain? Throughout this piece I will examine how Prine utilizes humor and storytelling to comment on such themes as love, culture, politics, and religion; however, the link between Prine and Mark Twain will be presented first.

Twain's observations of America stretch from the frontier life of 1840s Missouri to the

industrialization of the 1900s: from the simplicity of his boyhood river town to the complexity of modern adult urban society. Twain wrote about these transformations and “his intuitive and romantic response to that life was colored simultaneously by healthy skepticism and strong suspicion that the geography and citizens of America were not conforming to the scriptural patterns of the Promised Land” (Perkins 181). In other words, Twain’s childhood experiences of innocence and harmony were influenced by the realities and dissonances of not only a maturing man, but a maturing nation. Twain uses humor as a tool to point out human folly and in doing so allows readers to “recognize their own insularity, boorishness, arrogance, or ignorance, and laugh at it—the first step toward transcending it [...]” (Fishkin xii).

In the examination of Prine’s songs, several key songwriting elements demonstrate his kinship to Twain’s literary techniques. First of all, Twain humor is often achieved through the surprising juxtapositions of two elements. For example, in Twain’s, “The Story of the Bad Little Boy,” the bad little boy named Jim breaks all the “rules”: he steals cookies from the jar, apples from Farmer Acorn, and the penknife from the school teacher. In the end Jim blames the stolen knife on George Wilson, the good little boy, who never errs. Instead of the expected punishment for Jim and reward for George, in the end it is Jim who is “universally respected and belongs to the legislature” (Twain, “The Story of the Bad Little Boy” 9).

This ironic situation is a component of not only Twain’s work, but Prine’s too. For example, in his song “Dear Abby” instead of the sympathetic reply that the advice columnist is expected to give, Abby is harsh and direct:

Listen up Buster

And listen up good

Stop wishing on bad luck

And knocking on wood (Sweet Revenge).

Another key component that Prine shares with Twain is the author's habit of "inserting yarns of pure fiction into a non-fictional work [...]" (Neider xi). It's as if all Twain needs is a seed of fact to grow a forest of fiction. Neider cites five such "yarns" in Roughing It; among them is "When the Buffalo Climbed a Tree." It is true that Twain and his brother Orion were passengers on the overland stage coach bound for Carson City, and the beginning of the essay finds Twain describing the factual aspects of the landscape. For example, he describes the South Platte River as a "melancholy stream straggling through the centre of the enormous flat plain [...]" the Platte was 'up' they said—which made me wish I could see it when it was down, if it could look any sicker and sorrier" (Twain, "When a Buffalo" 143). Not only does Twain supply effective descriptions, but his humor shines through. When the stage coach breaks down, some of the passengers join a group of men on a buffalo hunt; this is where the fiction, the yarn comes into play. Twain "reports" that Bemis, one of the passengers, is charged by a buffalo and not only does his horse rear back, but it also stands on its front legs, does hand springs, stand on its head, and throws Bemis four hundred feet in the air only to have him land at the foot of a tree which both he, and the buffalo after him, eventually climb.

This technique of fact ( a stage coach ride) inspiring fiction (the yarn of the buffalo) is presented by Neider as the very unconventionality that "makes him [Twain] so appealing to those who like him" (xi). Neider goes on to say Twain was very casual about the line between fiction and non-fiction: "He was a fellow who had very definite notions about the appeal of the grab bag" (xii).

Prine's song "Lake Marie" is similar in its "grab-bag" characteristics; it begins with the factual information of twin lakes on the Illinois-Wisconsin border and then blossoms into a narrative of surreal fiction commenting upon (among others) marriage, murder, barbecues, love, narcs, dogs, divorce, and the song "Louie, Louie." This song will be further discussed in chapter

three.

The third key component concerns storytelling. An example of Prine utilizing the pop music genre to tell a story is the song “Sam Stone.” This song is a sobering narrative, and the technique of narrative forces the reader to be an active participant in the story-telling process. For example, In The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Jim, the runaway slave, gives up his freedom to save Tom Sawyer. Huck comments upon the reaction of the white townspeople when they hear of Jim’s sacrifice:

they all agreed that Jim had acted well, and was deserving to have some notice took of it, and reward. So everyone of them promised, right out and hearty, that they wouldn’t curse him no more. Then they come out and locked him up. I hoped that they was going to say he could have one or two chains took off, because they was rotten heavy, or could have meat and greens with his bread and butter, but they didn’t think of it. (Twain, “Adventures” 367-368).

Writer Shelley Fisher Fishkin responds to this passage: “Why did the behavior of these people tell me more about why Watts burned than anything I had read in the daily newspaper?” (xxv). Fishkin had been an active participant in the literary process; she could come to a better understanding about the racial issues of the time because she felt she was getting the full story. There is a subtle, but resonant truth in stories that reporting cannot achieve; Prine achieves this effect with the song “Sam Stone,” which will be contrasted with other Vietnam protest songs in a later chapter on politics.

Finally, like Twain, Prine is a key observer of people and culture of his generation. Born in 1946 in a suburb of Chicago, Prine lived the typical baby boomer experiences; however, his parent’ migration from Kentucky to find factory work in Illinois left its county-flavored influence on Prine. His grandfather and Ike Everly (father of Phil and Don Everly), “both owned

barbershops in western Kentucky and would get together and pick in Drakesboro, outside of Paradise” (Compton, “Prine Time” 22). His grandfather’s musical inclinations infused Prine with a love of country, bluegrass, and folk music. In appreciation, Prine wrote, “Grandpa Was A Carpenter,” which describes vignettes of his grandfather’s life and his interactions with Prine.

Another family member to influence Prine’s musical growth was his brother, Dave. As a teenager, Prine discovered blues and rock ‘n roll, but Dave also reiterated the importance of folk music. When John was thirteen, Dave showed him the basic guitar chords. Then, John reports,

He taught me to fingerpick two Carter family songs and ‘Freight Train.’ I worked on them for six months, and they didn’t sound like nothing. Then one day I picked up the guitar and I could play a Carter Family tune. When you play a Carter Family tune, you feel like a master! Right away I started making up words and writing quasi-Carter Family songs. (Compton, “Prine Time” 23).

Throughout high school Prine wrote songs, two of which, “Sour Grapes” and “The Fryin’ Pan” were included on his second album, Diamonds in the Rough. In an interview with Jon Kruth, Prine comments on those early songs: “The songs were so outside and strange, I never played ‘em for anybody but my girlfriends. I was always surprised when people liked my songs. I wasn’t writing them to be off the wall. It was just the way I felt about stuff. Then I found out that other people felt the same way, only they didn’t say it like me” (“Driving All Night” 11). The ability to describe a shared feeling or cultural situation in a unique way is a strength of Prine’s songwriting.

Though not an exceptional student, throughout elementary school and high school, Prine’s best subjects were history and English, and he “excelled when asked to write dialogue [..]” (Light). This talent is apparent in his many song-narratives such as “Lake Marie” and in

cultural observations as demonstrated in the song “Donald and Lydia.” Instead of the academic world of the university, however, after high school graduation in 1964, Prine became a mail carrier for the U.S. Postal Service in Chicago. According to Susan Tillotson Light, this job afforded Prine “much time to dream his songs into fruition.” And Prine has admitted that he composed quite a few lyrics, including a majority of the lines for “Hello in There” while walking his route.

Though he was drafted into the army in 1966, instead of serving in Vietnam, Prine was stationed in Germany working as a mechanic. His army experiences, however, and the later experiences of many of his friends stationed in Vietnam, influenced songs such as “Fish and Whistle,” “Sam Stone,” “Donald and Lydia,” and “Take the Star Out of the Window.” He did not actually begin committing these songs to paper until he was discharged from the army in 1967 and returned to his job at the post office.

Prine began performing in 1969 after getting on stage at a Chicago club on a dare from a friend. He soon began playing the folk clubs in and around Chicago and established a friendship with Steve Goodman, the composer of “City of New Orleans.” According to Kruth, “Goodman and Prine were discovered on the same night—by the unlikely team of Paul Anka and Chris Kristofferson” (“Driving All Night” 12). The two well-known musicians got the two newcomers to come to New York City where Goodman signed with Buddha Records and Prine signed with Atlantic.

Ever since, Prine has groomed, or more aptly, let fly, his songwriting talents. In discussing his writing process, he says, “I just like close my eyes and jump off a building [...]. I don’t know what the end result will be, more than trying to describe an emotion or a character study [...] but I know when a song is done. So it’s like I trust my instincts” (Tobler 34).

His instincts, of course, were finely tuned by his family heritage. After his discharge

from the army, Prine visited his relatives in Kentucky and subsequently wrote the song, “Paradise”:

When I was a child, my family would travel  
Down to western Kentucky, where my parents were born  
And there’s a backwards old town, that’s often remembered  
So many times that my memories are worn (John Prine).

This is a cultural heritage so important to Prine’s family that it is constantly brought to his attention. Prine had spent several boyhood summers with relatives in Muhlenburg County, Kentucky where he passed the time with friends:

Well, sometimes we’d travel write down the Green River  
To the abandoned old prison down by Adrie Hill  
Where the air smelled like snakes we’d shoot with our pistols  
But empty pop bottles were all that we’d kill (John Prine).

Prine has fond memories of swimming, fishing, and playing in a rural landscape. In an interview he describes Paradise as “a Walt Disney kind of town which hadn’t progressed since the 30s” (Kruth, “Driving All Night” 11). The word “paradise” is used as a device to not only represent his memories of place but also to acknowledge the name of the Kentucky town. In the chorus, Prine imagines himself in a dialogue with his father; however, his nostalgia is shattered by the intrusion of modern progress:

And daddy won’t you take me back to Muhlenberg County  
Down by the Green River where Paradise lay  
Well I’m sorry my son, but you’re too late in asking  
Mr. Peabody’s coal train has hauled it away (John Prine).

The song “Paradise” has become a bluegrass standard. Its waltzing rhythm and

prominent acoustic guitar and fiddle (traditional folk instruments) lines support the idea of a man in love with the land. In fact, “Paradise” has also been hailed as an environmental protest song.

The third verse supports this idea of a ruined paradise:

Then the coal company came with the world’s largest shovel  
And they tortured the timber and stripped all the land  
Well, they dug for their coal ‘till the land was forsaken  
And they wrote it all down as the progress of man (John Prine).

It is interesting to note Prine’s further explanation: “The Tennessee Valley Authority tore it down and started strip mining in ‘65” (Kruth, “Driving All Night” 11). The growing region needed an energy source, and the Paradise Power Plant would provide it. It is ironic that many people in town of Paradise “were glad to sell their land for any amount they were offered and go buy a brick house somewhere” (Kruth “Driving All Night” 11).

Both the town of Paradise, and the concept of “paradise” that he knew as a boy is lost to Prine as an adult:

When I die, let my ashes float down the Green River  
Let my soul roll on up to the Rochester Dam  
I’ll be halfway to heaven with Paradise waiting  
Just five miles away from wherever I am (John Prine).

That is “paradise” with a capital “P,” and notice it is “five miles away.” Paradise is lost, never to be recaptured. The reality is that most of the residents of Paradise were willing to profit from the town’s destruction because they gained a better living situation: a “home as big as a house.” In other words, a bigger piece of the American Dream, but at what price? Not only is “Paradise” no longer a realized idea, it is no longer a literal town. This, then, is “the progress of man.” Prine, however, has lost his innocence, his youth. And Mr. Peabody, like Father Time, has

“hailed it away.”

## CHAPTER TWO - HUMOR

I know a fella  
He eats like a horse  
Knocks his old balls  
Round the old golf course  
“It’s A Big Old Goofy World” (The Missing Years).

Prine describes why he turned to humor at a young age: “I lived in a fairly tough neighborhood. I found out that it was hard for a guy to hit you if he was laughing [...]” (Compton, Prine Time 22). Prine’s songs are so rich in humor that it is difficult to focus on the “funny songs.” For example, “Christmas In Prison” is a beautiful love song that brims with wry humor; “Your Flag Decal Won’t Get You into Heaven Anymore” is a song that bites and smirks; “Pretty Good” is colored by a dark humor; and “The Bottomless Lake” is just plain fun. All these songs have different elements of humor; however, humor is not their focus. In contrast, the following songs will prominently feature wit and humor.

Most reviewers and critics agree that humor is one of Prine’s strengths: “Prine creates songs with a homespun, heartfelt American philosophy that favors pathos and humor over preaching” (Manning 36). Steve Cooper described him as having a “quirky, demented, and hilarious sense of humor.” Perhaps the most apt description comes from interviewer Lucinda Hutchinson:

John is undoubtedly one of the most lovable guys on this planet. He laughs a lot, peppers his sentences with jokes, and can tell a story like the pro storyteller that he is. He uses words like ‘goofy’ and ‘neat’ as a regular part of his vocabulary, and will do just about anything that will sidetrack him from having to work. Even in an interview, John’s going to have a good time...and so is everyone else in the

room. (37)

Though Prine's humor is sometimes over-the-top, it has a context within the song and is placed there with a purpose. He explains:

Imagine walking into a room and you don't know anybody in there and you tell them this sad story of this great love that you lost. You've got to give them a reason to sit there—why would anybody want to hear about the saddest possible things and how it feels and how broken your heart is? So I feel you've got to dress it up somehow to present it. I'd feel odd, I think, if I didn't do it like that and I think that's just as much a part of my writing as anything else. (Tobler 35)

The song-narrative "Illegal Smile," the first song on Prine's first album, firmly establishes how he "dresses up" his music to create an effect. As each verse narrates a scene, the musical accompaniment shuffles in four quarter time between a series of three chords. The chorus, on the other hand, changes to a waltzing three quarter time which creates the mood of a drinking song:

When I woke up this morning  
Things were looking bad  
Seemed like total silence  
Was the only friend I had  
A bowl of oatmeal tried to stare me down  
And won  
And it was twelve o'clock before I realized I was having  
No fun (John Prine).

An example of Prine's "quirky" humor can be found in latter part of each verse. "A bowl of oatmeal tried to stare me down" seems innocuous until the listener hears, after a slight

dramatic pause, the next line: “And won.” A quick chord change on each of these two words provides extra emphasis, like the punch line of a joke.

As an introvert and keen observer, Prine’s songs demonstrate how he processes the world, as is evidenced by the pre-chorus of “Illegal Smile”:

Ahhh but fortunately

I have the key

To escape reality (John Prine).

It is not really *escape*; however, it *is* a self-defense: it is a matter of facing the harsh realities of life with grace. And often life is so absurd that one has only three choices: laugh, cry, or go crazy. Prine decides to laugh: therefore, the chorus of “Illegal Smile” comes waltzing in:

And you may see me tonight

With an illegal smile

It don’t cost very much

But it lasts a long while

Won’t you please tell the man

I didn’t kill anyone

No, I’m just trying to

Have me some fun (John Prine).

Despite the “intoxicating” rhythm of the chorus and the implied reference to a smile created by alcohol or drugs, in an interview Prine maintains, “I have to confess, the song was not about smokin’ dope. It was more about how, ever since I was a child, I’ve had this view of the world where I would find myself smiling at stuff nobody else was smiling at” (Hutchinson 43). So his smile is *illegal* in the sense that it is outside of the norm; it is not under the same rules that others understand. From the first song on his first album, Prine is displaying a world view that,

while unique, uses humor to reach his audience.

Prine composes and performs with an acoustic guitar. In the studio, other instruments are also recorded to add flavor to the song. While “Illegal Smile” has a folk/rock feel, “Yes, I Guess They Oughta Name a Drink After You,” not only sounds like the title of a crying-in-your-beer country song, but the music itself is one of the most country sounding songs Prine has recorded. The only rhythm is supplied by an acoustic guitar and a bass guitar while a fiddle and a dobro exchange riffs. The song is, of course, about crying-in-your-beer about a lost woman:

It'd take all the booze in the world  
To forget you  
You've left my heart a vacant lot  
I'll fill it with another shot  
and yes, I guess they oughta name a drink after you  
(Diamonds in the Rough).

Prine says of this song, “I was going for a Hank Williams kind of song. Steve Goodman always told me that if I'd taken another couple of minutes and put a chorus to the song—there isn't any, just a tag line to every verse—that it would have been a hit country song” (John Prine Shrine, “Yes, I Guess song notes”).

The comparison to Hank Williams songs is appropriate because it shows not only Prine's craftsmanship, but also how his entire catalogue of songs benefits from the country music trait of emphasizing the voice of the singer, which in turn emphasizes the lyrics. In his discussion of country music in general and Hank Williams' songs in particular, David Brackett states, “lyrics occupy a privileged space in the discourse of fans and critics of country music; and the forward placement of the voice in the recorded mix, the ‘naturalized’ conversational delivery of the lyrics, and their strongly narrative character all work to focus listener attention to the

voice” (77).

This trait is so important in Prine songs that two of Prine’s least successful albums, Pink Cadillac and Storm Windows both suffer from a “bad mix.” In other words, the music was recorded too loud and it obscures the vocals. Of the Storm Windows album production, Steve Cooper contends that Prine’s voice “is about midway back in the mix. In fact, the vocals sound as if they are in the back room.”

In contrast, the voice in “Let’s Talk Dirty in Hawaiian” is prominent and relaxed. The addition of “Hawaiian” instruments (ukelele and a seashell drum) create a tropical feel that does not overpower the vocals. The song begins with a steel guitar, a stereotypical “country” instrument, playing the melody of the traditional Hawaiian song, “Aloha Oe.” Then Prine’s acoustic guitar enters and the verse begins:

Well I packed my bags and bought myself a ticket  
For the land of the tall palm tree  
Aloha old Milwaukee, hello Waikiki  
I just stepped down from the airplane  
When I heard her say  
“Wacka, wacka, nooka licka,  
Wacka, wacka, nooka licka,  
Would you like a lei?” (German Afternoons).

There is a child-like joy in the lyrical play of made-up, “Hawaiian” words that are both nonsensical and provocative at the same time. It’s obvious that he is having fun with word-play and ideas. A whole chorus of voices joins him on the chorus whose simple rhymes reflect the relaxed and goofy mood of the song:

Hey!

Let's talk dirty in Hawaiian  
Whisper in my ear  
Kicka pooka mok a wahine  
Are the words I long to hear  
Lay your coconuta on my tiki  
What the hecka mooka mooka dear  
Let's talk dirty in Hawaiian  
Say the words I long to hear (German Afternoons).

Another Prine song that is ripe with humor is "Dear Abby," which Charles Fanning calls a "classic paeon to popular culture." (58). While vacationing in Rome, Prine bought the only English language newspaper available: "which is all the tragic news in the world crammed into six pages with no sports and no comics. And yet here's my old friend 'Dear Abby'" (John Prine Shrine, "Dear Abby song notes"). So Prine wrote her a song, imagining four different people writing to Abby with different problems. The person in the third verse writes:

Dear Abby, Dear Abby  
You won't believe this  
But my stomach makes noises  
Whenever I kiss  
My girlfriend tells me  
It's all in my head  
But my stomach tells me  
To write you instead  
Signed...Noise Maker (Sweet Revenge).

After each verse of the song, Prine imagines Abby's reply, and instead of the expected

thoughtful and sympathetic reply, Abby is direct and uncompromising:

Noisemaker, noisemaker

You have no complaint

You are what you are

And you ain't what you ain't

So listen up Buster

And listen up good

Stop wishing on bad luck

And knocking on wood (Sweet Revenge).

Prine imagines Abby as a humanist like himself, telling Noisemaker that he can take care of his own problems, if he'll just stop concentrating on the negative.

There is no studio version of "Dear Abby." The song first appeared on the 1973 album Sweet Revenge as a "live" version and its appearance on two subsequent compilations are both "live." This live version not only adds intimacy to the song, but it demonstrates how Prine interacts with his audience. The previously mentioned information about Rome comes straight from this recording as Prine introduces the song to the audience. The audible laughter of not only the audience but also of Prine as he starts the third verse, attests to Hutchinson's earlier statement that when Prine is around, everyone, including himself is going to have a good time.

The following anecdote about "Dear Abby" is an example of how Prine fans not only appreciate his humor but also want to share it. Prine explains, "Years later, somebody took a verse about the guy whose stomach makes noises, wrote it just out of kilter enough so it didn't rhyme, and sent it to "Dear Abby." And she answered it in her column. She suggested that he seek professional help. She got loads of letters from people who knew the song and told her she'd been had" (John Prine Shrine, "Dear Abbey song notes"). Though Abbey did not know it,

she was helping disseminate John Prine's humor to millions of people.

Despite all the successful humorous element to his songs, sometimes Prine's humor does *not* work. In the song, "Quit Hollerin' At Me," the lyrics are typical Prine:

I don't want your big french fry  
I don't want your car  
I don't want to buy no soap  
from no washed up movie star  
You are so much louder  
Than the show I want to hear  
With your sugarless gum , Gee but I'm dumb, non-alcoholic beer  
It's enough to make a grown man  
Blow up his own TV  
Quit hollerin at me (Lost Dogs and Mixed Blessings).

This song is from Prine's 1995 album, Lost Dogs and Mixed Blessings and the production on this album is a more rock 'n roll sound than his earlier albums. Though it is not a bad mix, the music does not mesh with the lyrics. Prine has joked about the lack of minor chords in his songs; however, eighty percent of "Quit Hollerin' At Me" consists of a two minor chords in progression back and forth. Because the lyrical content is already about a difficult, sad subject, the minor chords weigh the song down; there is no major chord juxtaposition to lighten the dark lyrics.

In order for humor to be effective, risks must be taken. Despite a few misses, overall Prine's humor works. Whether it is in a joke form, "I know a fella / He eats like a horse," satirical like "Dear Abby," or just plain fun like "Let's Talk Dirty in Hawaiian," Prine has his listeners laughing, even after hearing the same song many times.

### CHAPTER THREE - STORYTELLING

Now Elvis had a woman  
With a head like a rock  
I wished I had a woman  
That made my knees knock  
“It’s A Big Old Goofy World” (The Missing Years)

“Prine’s early songs tended to be short stories about fictional characters” (Compton, “Prine Time” 23). After the first few albums Prine consciously avoided writing song-narratives; however, on his most recent albums he has returned to this song genre. Though not a complete song narrative, the previous excerpt from “It’s A Big Old Goofy World” begins with factual information about Elvis and his woman, and it inspires Prine to imagine a sweetheart who might captivate him.

In a similar manner, Prine’s song, “Lake Marie” is a mix of fact and fiction, time periods and descriptions. And, like many of Twain’s tall-tales, this song was inspired by facts. In an interview Prine describes the song: “I wanted to start it as a historical piece and then go off on any tangent I wanted. It only took one [newspaper clipping] which described the lakes being named after the two lost sisters, and I was off” (Compton, “Prine Time” 28). As a child he recalls hearing about an occasional murder and about victims often found in a wooded area near the lakes. It is also true that Prine is twice divorced and it is likely that at some point he was “trying to save (his) marriage”; however, the bulk of the song is surreal fiction.

The music that begins this five-minute song is simple; it consists of a repeated progression of three major chords. While these chords play, Prine *speaks* rather than sings the verses. This lends a sitting-around-the campfire warmth to the song. In addition, the performance of the music—the relaxed tempo, the absence of minor chords, and the addition of a

harmonica that echoes the vocal melody—creates the appropriate setting for the chorus: “We were standing / Standing by peaceful waters.” As if to confirm this contentment, a vocable—a nonsensical word that it produced for its sound rather than its meaning—comes next: “Whoa wah oh wha oh.” Simon Frith believes that “Song words work as speech and speech acts, bearing meaning not just semantically, but also as structures of sound that are direct signs of emotion and marks of character”(90). This is why pop songs, even in a foreign language, can still have an impact on a listener. There are two reasons that these vocables work in this song: first of all, the “whoa oh” vocable echoes and anticipates the “Louie, “ Louie” reference that not only appears in verse two, but also ends the song. The second reason is that the melody, with its comfortable range and simplicity, in conjunction with these pleasant sounding vocables, reaffirms the motif of peacefulness.

The first verse sets the scene:

Many years ago along the Illinois Wisconsin border  
There was this Indian tribe  
They found two babies in the woods  
White babies  
One of them was named Elizabeth  
She was the fairer of the two  
While the smaller and more fragile one was named Marie  
Having never seen white girls before  
and living on the two lakes known as the twin lakes  
They named the larger and more beautiful Lake Elizabeth  
And thus the smaller lake that was hidden from the highway  
Became known forever as Lake Marie (Lost Dogs and Mixed Blessings).

At this point the chorus is repeated; the second verse is introduced by the words, “Many years later I found myself talking to this girl.” The only connection with the first verse is the setting: the narrator and the girl are grilling out on the shore of Lake Marie. Prine pays careful attention to detail here; not only does he describe what is being cooked (Italian sausages), but also the sound of them being barbecued: “And they were sizzlin.”

The second half of the verse travels in time again: “Many years later” this same couple is now in Canada “Trying to save our marriage.” The humor is showcased in the next line: “And perhaps catch a few fish / Whatever came first.” The last part of the verse describes how she fell asleep in his arms “Humming the tune to ‘Louie, Louie.’” This paints a possible comforting scene—lovers arm-in-arm around a campfire—however, the last line of the second verse of “Lake Marie” is “Ahh baby, we gotta go now,” both a line from “Louie, Louie,” and perhaps an ironic reference to the marriage as it sinks or swims.

As a further discussion of this allusion to the 1960s pop/rock hit “Louie, Louie,” musicologists Kevin J. H. Dettmar and William Richey claim that: “[...] in order to accomplish any lasting musical or cultural work in three or four minutes, both the musical and lyrical texts must be highly associative, allusive, even quotational” (3). Because Prine can assume that a bulk of his audience is familiar with the song, the ‘Louie, Louie,’” the reference works; his listeners understand the allusion.

In Prine’s own assessment of the song, the third verse “took a sharp left turn [...] but it kind of felt like what the song needed at the time” (John Prine Shrine, “Lake Marie song notes”). And as a testimony to its grab-bag nature, the verse, which starts with a description of a crowd, might seem too surreal:

The dogs were barking as the cars were parking

The loan sharks were sharking

The narcs were narcing

Practically everyone was there (Lost Dogs and Mixed Blessings).

But not only does the *sound* of these words tickle the listener's ears, it also lifts them above cliché; and the fact that this crowd is described as if it's a social function of dignitaries rather than dogs and low-life people, adds to the humor.

The second half of this verse tells of the discovery of two naked bodies:

Their faces had been horribly disfigured

By some sharp object

Saw it on the TV news

Do you know what blood looks like

In black and white video? Shadows

Shadows (Lost Dogs and Mixed Blessings).

The last word is almost shouted. The verse is then summed up:

All the love we shared between her and me was slammed

Slammed up against the banks of old Lake Marie

Marie (Lost Dogs and Mixed Blessings).

Lake Marie is the central unifying element of the song: it is the smaller body of water hidden by the highway; the narrator and his girl are grilling out at Lake Marie, not the larger and more beautiful Lake Elizabeth; and the naked bodies with the disfigured faces are found at Lake Marie. In this song, the Native American reference, the marriage, the disfigured bodies are commenting upon the drama of the human condition. Are these descriptions helping the listener to understand the drama of the human condition and the nurturing, joyous, disfiguring aspects of love? It is up to the listeners to interpret for themselves, just as it is up to the readers to decide whether a fantastic yarn about a buffalo fits into a nonfiction piece.

It is interesting to note which words Prine chooses to vocally emphasize. Simon Frith contends that “Singers use non-verbal as well as verbal devices to make their points—emphasis, sighs, hesitations, changes of tone; lyrics involve pleas, sneers, and commands as well as statements and messages and stories” (90). In verse two Prine uses an onomatopoeic word, “sizzlin,” and he draws it out as “ssssizzlin.” It’s as if the relationship he is characterizing is so hot, it’s sizzling. The third verse employs a similar technique as he emphasizes the word “sharp” as “shshsharp,” as if the knife continues to cut even after the body is dead. In that same verse, “The police had found two bodies / NAY, NAKED bodies.” Prine’s choice to raise his voice on “nay, naked” emphasizes the vulnerability of the scene. When he asks what blood looks like on a black and white TV, he answers himself by shouting, “SHADOWS!” When he is done with the story of the bodies, the songwriter describes how “The love we shared between her and me was slammed / SLAMMED up against the banks of old Lake Marie.” Finally, to bring the listener full circle, the last line of the last verse is Prine repeating and shouting, “MARIE!”

These emphasized words draw attention to Lake Marie as the setting for the drama of love. Love sizzles and love is sharp. Love makes one vulnerable and love can be haunted by shadows. Love can certainly be slammed—it can be abused. And the irony is that the marriage of the narrator and his wife may be as dead as the disfigured bodies. While these various human dramas play out, the peaceful waters take it all in: “Whoa wah oh wha oh.”

Unlike “Lake Marie,” which uses spoken verses, “The Bottomless Lake,” utilizes sung verses to go along with the sung choruses. And unlike the surrealism of “Lake Marie,” “The Bottomless Lake” is more like a tall tale. Like “When the Buffalo Climbed a Tree,” which is inspired by travel, this song also starts with factual information. Prine begins with a family traveling on vacation, and then imagines the carload of people falling into a lake. In the song notes to “The Bottomless Lake” (transcribed from a live performance) Prine describes traveling

in the family car down old two lane highways: “Dad would go to pass a truck and he’d just get past and into the lane as an oncoming car was about to hit us head on. I remember my mother saying, ‘My god Bill, you’re going to kill every one of us!’ (Prine’s eyes go big and he looked dumfounded at the audience.) This woman has never lied to us...” (John Prine Shrine, “Bottomless Lake song notes”).

This song-narrative, which may also be called a fable, begins as many good stories do, with an introduction:

Here’s the story of a man and his family  
And a big trip that they took  
I heard all about it in a restaurant  
And I read it in a history book (Aimless Love).

So the story is already stuff of legend, with a moral hidden at the end. The scene has been set, now for the conflict:

They rented a car at the Erie Canal  
But the car didn’t have no brake  
Said ma to pa my God this car  
Is going to fall into the bottomless lake (Aimless Love).

It’s funny that at this point in the song, Prine interjects a traveler’s paranoid fears, which is going off on a tangent, but is very like a Twain tall tale:

Mamma turned to daddy with a pale face  
And said I’ve done something horribly wrong  
The water’s still runnin’ in the bathtub  
And I think I left the kitchen light on (Aimless Love).

Eventually the car crashes into the lake and sinks, but the family does not drown; they

“roll the windows up tight,” and look at “the fish out the window.” They even have chicken legs to nibble on and “papa played music on the radio.” Though the family is surviving, as the chorus says, they just keep on falling:

We are falling down  
Down to the bottom of a hole in a the ground  
Smoke ‘em if you got ‘em  
I’m so scared I can hardly breathe  
I may never see my sweetheart again (Aimless Love).

The only instruments performing on this song are an acoustic guitar and a fiddle. The fiddle echoes the melody during the instrumental breaks; this creates a square dance-type of rhythm figure throughout the verses, which in turn lends a western feel to this tall tale. This basic instrumentation allows the lyrics to tell the story. And the moral of the story comes in the last verse, which is full of irony as Prine plays on the phrase “put your best foot forward,” the cliché/caveat to always wear clean underwear in case of an accident, and to read the bible as a protection against evil:

So if you’re ever going on a big trip  
Ya better be careful out there  
Start everything on your good foot  
And wear clean underwear  
Take along a bible in the back seat  
Read of David and Solomon  
For if you make a mistake in the bottomless lake  
You may never see your sweethearts again (Aimless Love).

This last verse produces a funny moral, a goofy moral, but a moral nonetheless. As Prine says,

“If you don’t have an ending to a song, you better have a moral” (John Prine Shrine, “The Bottomless Lake notes”). And the little acorn idea of a family vacation grew into a tall tale.

## CHAPTER FOUR - LOVE

You ought to see his wife  
She's a cute little dish  
She smokes like a chimney  
And drinks like a fish  
"It's A Big Old Goofy World" (The Missing Years)

In this excerpt, the wife is cute: which is certainly positive. On the other hand, "smokes like a chimney" (a compulsive cigarette or cigar habit) and "drinks like a fish" (alcoholic tendencies) are not admirable traits. As with most of Prine's songs, and with his love songs in particular, there is a philosophical twist intermingled with the humor.

According to Donald Horton, "The popular song [...] provides a conventional language for dating" (qtd. in Frith 93). Because popular music has become such an influential medium, and because many people lack the ability to express their feelings of love, pop love songs have become the "public, impersonal love poetry" (Frith 93) of modern times. And a performer is needed to convey this message, so "The singer became a 'mutual messenger' for young lovers, and pop songs were about emotional possibilities" (Frith 93).

Despite these "possibilities," researcher J. G. Peatman claimed that all popular love songs "could be classified under one of three headings—the 'happy' love song, the 'frustrated' love song, and the 'novelty song with sex interest'" (qtd in Firth 78). Though Peatman wrote these words in 1942, this standard still applies to songs today.

Though Prine has a few outright "happy" love songs, and there are a number of "novelty songs with sex interest," a majority of his love songs can be classified as "frustrated." He emphasizes the reason why his happy love songs are not greater in

number: “It’s hard to write a happy love song. You don’t have much time on your hands when you’re happy in a relationship. The last thing you want to do is sit down with a paper and pencil and write about it” (qtd in Manning 36).

At first glance, “Christmas in Prison” is an unlikely title for any type of love song, much less a “happy” love song. Prine explains, “It’s about a person being somewhere like a prison [...] and wishing they were somewhere else. But I used all the imagery as if it were an actual prison, with the lights swinging around in the yard, the food tasting bad, making guns out of wood or soap. And being a sentimental guy, I put it at Christmas” (John Prine Shrine, “Christmas in Prison song notes”).

Incarcerated criminals are often assumed to be evil; nonetheless, Prine puts a philosophical twist on this notion; despite its goofy title and premise, “Christmas in Prison” is actually a sweet and thoughtful love song. Charles Fanning’s assessment of the song, that it is a “beautiful, simple lyric poem/song” and that it “contains some of his most original metaphors” (58), is both right and wrong. “Christmas in Prison” *is* a beautiful song, but it is not *simple*. A simple love song would not have included a prison setting:

It was Christmas in prison  
And the food was real good  
We had turkey and pistols  
Carved out of wood (Sweet Revenge).

But the tone turns to serious thoughts of love:

And I dream of her always  
Even when I don’t dream  
Her name’s on my tongue

And her blood's in my stream (Sweet Revenge).

The protagonist of the song feels his love so intensely that the natural elements of this world have no effect on him. It's as Mark Twain says, "Courtship lifts a young fellow far and away above his common earthly self and by an impulse natural to those lofty regions he puts on his halo and his heavenly war paint and plays archangel as if he were born to it" (Mark Twain Quotes, "Romance"). Prine twists this into an inmate with wings and wisdom:

Wait awhile eternity

Old mother nature's got nothing on me

Come to me

Run to me

Come to me now

We're rolling

My sweetheart

We're flowing

By God! (Sweet Revenge).

Even though the protagonist is not physically with his lover, he imagines her touch and he believes that not even old age ("old Mother Nature") will keep them apart. The lovers, like the archangel, will be in the heavens together and, "flowing by God!"

Musically the song "flows" also. The slow waltz time lends itself to the symbolic idea of lovers moving together, but more importantly, the arpeggiated guitar figure provides a "flowing" accompaniment. To balance the song, the harmonica and dobro lend a down-to-earth feel to the song.

Fanning is correct in noticing the strong metaphors in the song: "She reminds

me of a chess game / With someone I admire” illustrates how the protagonist admires not only the physical attributes of his love, but also her cerebral characteristics. In addition, “Or a picnic in the rain / After a prairie fire” demonstrates love’s ability to overcome life’s adversities and provide relief. For the protagonist, this adversity is incarceration; his relief is the thoughts of his beloved, which allow him to appreciate, despite his imprisonment, the poetry of life:

The search lights in the big yard  
Swing around with the gun  
And spotlights the snowflakes  
Like the dust in the sun (Sweet Revenge).

Not only are the similes and images unique, but the words themselves display the poetic characteristics of consonance: “search lights,” “swing,” “spotlights,” “snowflakes,” “dust,” and “sun.”

In the last verse the protagonist faces the reality of his situation with irony:

It’s Christmas in prison  
There’ll be music tonight  
I’ll probably get homesick  
I love you. Goodnight. (Sweet Revenge)

The protagonist needs an outlet for his feelings. Singing this love song will help him, just as it would help the listener who is in need of a “love poetry” as a vehicle for self-expression.

Most popular love songs suggest total immersion into infatuation, but Prine’s songs are more realistic. He knows the world and the world of love is often frustrating. He admits that two songs, “Far From Me” and “Blue Umbrella” were written about the

same girl: “I ran into her years later. She’d quit school and married this Polish guy [...] she had like four or five children, and she worked in a bowling alley as a cocktail waitress. And I just thought, ‘You coulda had me.’ Like I was a real gift, right? Still, the first time you get your heart busted, you never forgive. Especially if you’re a writer” (John Prine Shrine, “Blue Umbrella song notes”).

“Far From Me” tells of the realistic story of the male protagonist and a waitress named Cathy as they reach the end of their love affair. The narrator is sitting in the café waiting for Cathy to end her shift; however, as the “radio played the hit parade,” Cathy says that the music is driving her “insane.” But the narrator knows “it weren’t just the music playing / It was me she was trying to blame.” Blame for what? The listener does not know for sure, but since it is the “Hit Parade,” the countdown of the most popular commercial songs in the land, it is reasonable to assume that Prine is commenting on the illusion of love put forth by most love songs. It’s as if Cathy is blaming the narrator for not living up to, and indeed, not *loving* up to, popular standards.

The narrator takes this all in and responds with a chorus:

And the sky is black and still now  
On the hill where the angels sing  
Ain’t it funny how an old broken bottle  
Looks just like a diamond ring  
But it’s far, far from me (John Prine).

Once upon a time the skies were blue for this couple; once upon a time the angels sang for them. Now the proverbial diamond engagement ring is cheapened—it is broken and ordinary. The narrator watches himself in the scene as if from a distance—from “far” away.

It is interesting to note the autobiographical aspects of this song; not only does the Cathy character represent a lover from Prine's life, but the reference to a "broken bottle" is straight from his childhood: "We were raised close to a junkyard and one of my favorite pastimes was playing in the junkyard and breaking bottles. The kids always commented that the fragments of glass looked just like a field of diamonds" (John Prine Shrine, "Far from Me song notes"). It is this ability to synthesize an old, seemingly unrelated childhood memory into a narrative about the end of a love affair that makes Prine's songwriting so strong. The child's fascination with glass becomes the adult's sad observation.

The scene changes to the parking lot where he observes Cathy "closing the lights." Not *turning off* the lights, which can be turned on again with a flip of the switch, but *closing* the lights. To "close" is to bring to an end. This mirrors the end of the relationship: in the third verse when Cathy asks, "Will you still see me tomorrow?" and the narrator replies, "No, I got too much to do." The most poignant statement of the song is the next two lines:

Well a question ain't really a question

If you know the answer too (John Prine).

Both Cathy and the narrator know the affair is over. Despite (or perhaps because of) the hit parade, the music is over, their love-light closed, and the sky is black.

The color changes from black to blue, but love relationships fare no better in "Blue Umbrella." Again the narrator anticipates the end of a love affair:

Feelings are strange

Especially when they come true (John Prine).

Just as in "Far From Me," when the narrator "Wished for once I wasn't right," he is

dealing with the uncomfortable acknowledgment of the end of a relationship:

And I had a feeling  
That you'd be leaving soon  
So I tried to rearrange  
All my emotions  
But it seems the same  
No matter what I do (John Prine).

The unnamed lover is leaving and the narrator is seeking shelter from the pain:

Blue umbrella  
Rest upon my shoulder  
Hide the pain  
While the rain  
Makes up my mind  
Well, my feet are wet  
From thinking this thing over  
And it's been so long  
Since I felt the warm sunshine (John Prine).

The quick rhyme of “pain /rain” echoes the falling rain as the spaced, near-rhymes of “shoulder / over” and “mind / sunshine” echoes the elongation of the setting sun. This use of rhyme, though not sophisticated, demonstrates Prine’s ability to produce lyrics that are both poetic and meaningful. As the chorus proceeds, the melody hits a high note as the narrator, like all rejected lovers, is calling out for answers:

Just give me one good reason  
And I promise I won't ask you anymore (John Prine)

and then a restatement in figurative language:

Just give me one extra season

So I can figure out the other four (John Prine).

The lyrics to this song are so sad that the music must act as a balance to keep the song from becoming simply pathetic. Had the accompaniment been composed of minor chords, as in the song, “Quit Hollerin’ At Me,” it may have shifted the balance too much into pathos, but because the accompaniment is composed of major chords, the sad lyrics are balanced by the “happy” sounding major chords.

Very little has been written about Prine’s personal life, and he protects his privacy. He is twice divorced and his 1978 album Bruised Orange contains many songs about unsuccessful, frustrated love. For example, “If You Don’t Want My Love,” is also a line from the song that is repeated no less than fifteen times. This repetition and subject matter of frustrated love might suggest a blues type of accompaniment; however, the music is a folk arrangement, not a standard twelve-bar blues format. Though musically it is not a blues song, lyrically it contains the same sparse and direct language of the blues: “Blues were expressed in realistic words, uninhibited words, words which were ‘a natural transposition of the everyday language of both users and hearers’” (Paul Oliver qtd. in Frith 84). There is no more direct Prine lyrics than the following:

If you don’t want my love

If you don’t want my love

If you don’t want my love

I know who

I’ll give it to (Bruised Orange).

Each of the words in this chorus is only one syllable, which reflects the raw, direct emotions of unrequited love.

Only a few Prine songs fall into Peatman's third type of love song, the "novelty song with sex interest" (Frith 78). The previously mentioned "Let's Talk Dirty in Hawaiian" is a play on Hawaiian words full of sexual innuendo. The protagonist of "Everybody Wants to Feel Like You" is wondering why there is a problem in his relationship:

I used to love you so hard in the morning

I'd make you stutter and roll your eyes

I put your mind on a brief vacation

To the land of the dull surprise (The Missing Years).

The references to sexual satisfaction is clear in this example, but this song is the exception, rather than the rule. Prine's strength in love songs, be they happy, frustrated, or sexual, is the ability to react to these love feelings philosophically, to observe the emotions, and to take that "extra season" to "figure out" the complexities of love.

Another frustrated love song, "The Speed of the Sound of Loneliness," is often cited by other performers as one of their favorite Prine songs. Nanci Griffith's 1993 album, Other Voices, Other Rooms, contains some her favorite songs; it is notable that Prine's "The Speed of the Sound of Loneliness" is included with songs by quality songwriters such as Bob Dylan, Jerry Jeff Walker, Gordon Lightfoot, and Janis Ian.

Prine notes that the idea for the song came from a photograph: "I think it was in Life magazine—of one of the astronauts from the 50's with his face all contorted by G-force. I was thinking of somebody's heart being pulled apart by a G-force like that, from

going through this real intense breakup of a relationship” (John Prine Shrine, “Speed of the Sound of Loneliness song notes”). Again, the fact that Prine can take the inspiration for an entire song from a single photograph is part of his strength.

The first verse and chorus address an unknown you:

You come home late and you come home early

You come on big when you’re feeling small

You come home straight and you come home curly

Sometimes you don’t come home at all (German Afternoons).

The juxtapositions of “late / early,” “big / small,” “straight / curly” illustrate not only the vagaries of love, but also of how individuals react to love. Though “You come home straight and you come home curly” might seem like a silly forced rhyme, it not only fits Prine’s style of writing, but it also describes the sometimes erratic behavior of someone feeling the stress of a relationship being pulled apart.

The chorus finds the “you” of the song questioned about his erratic behavior:

What in the world’s come over you

What in heaven’s name have you done

You’ve broken the speed of the sound of loneliness

You’re out there running just to be on the run (German Afternoons).

Is Prine accusing an old lover of ending a relationship without just cause, “running just to be on the run,” or is he acknowledging the failures in himself? As verse two states, it’s a little bit of both:

Well I got a heart that burns with a fever

And I got a worried and a jealous mind

How can a love that’ll last forever

Get left so far behind (German Afternoons).

Having experienced two divorces, it is understandable for Prine to ask how that love that was supposed to last until “death do us part” ended only with the death of the relationship.

The third verse reflects upon loneliness and its effects:

It's a mighty mean and a dreadful sorrow

It's crossed the evil line today (German Afternoons).

Certainly loneliness is the cause of much heartache and “evil” feelings and thoughts.

However, in the last lines of the verse, the lover wonders,

How can you ask about tomorrow

When we ain't got one word to say (German Afternoons).

The sound of loneliness is silence; there *is* nothing left to say. The speed of loneliness is both so fast that it is almost beyond human comprehension (like the speed of sound), and so slow as to be not moving at all: “You're out there running just to be on the run” is the thrice-repeated last line.

Prine has reached an inductive conclusion: he begins the song with a specific “you” and ends with a universal “you.” Listeners nod their heads and sing along. Prine the messenger has produced the language that others may use to communicate the pains associated with love. A lover must accept the bad (imprisonment, unrequited love, even a loved one who “smokes like a chimney”) with the good (“she's a cute little dish” and “we're flowing by God”). From the earthly prison of loneliness to the heights of the archangels, love is a big old goofy thing.

## CHAPTER FIVE - CULTURE

She'd sing like an angel  
And eat like a bird  
And if I wrote a song  
She'd know every single word  
"It's A Big Old Goofy World." (The Missing Years)

According to Robert Pattison, "There is a growing body of academics who specialize in deciphering the social and cultural message of popular music" (xi). Put another way, these scholars study "every single word" of a song. Why? "According to A. L. Lloyd, 'the song-proper becomes the most characteristic lyric form through which the common people express their fantasies, their codes, their aspirations'" (qtd. in Frith 82).

These fantasies, codes and aspirations are a reflection of "culture." Nadine Hubbs goes a step further and categorizes the different aspects of culture: "Pop-rock music is an enormously potent cultural discourse whose influences reach into diverse categories of gender and sexuality, generation, class, and ethnicity" (3).

While on some level all pop songs reflect culture, John Kruth believes that "John Prine's songs are a microcosm of American life" ("Straight Talk" 48). Indeed, the following Prine songs are placed in this chapter because the characters reflect specific cultural norms. The "angel" from Montgomery expresses her fantasies and disappointments; "Donald" and "Lydia" struggle to reconcile the reality of love against the confusing codes of courtship and sexuality; the "unwed mother" deals not only with sexuality, but also with gender and class issues; finally, "old people" struggle with generational issues.

"Angel from Montgomery" is a first person dramatic monologue of a woman who feels imprisoned in her own life. There is neither humor in her attitude nor hope in her outlook:

I am an old woman

Named after my mother

My old man is another

Child that's grown old (John Prine).

The beauty of this opening is the diction. Though the word “old” is used three times, it does not feel repetitive because its meaning changes with each phrase. The protagonist is “old”; this portrays her chronological age and sets the scene. She is “named after” her mother, who is either older than she or dead, which foreshadows her own death. Her “old man” is a vernacular phrase referring to her husband. Finally, all children grow old, but this phrase connotes a withering of the spirit.

If dreams were lightning

And thunder were desire

This old house would have burnt down

A long time ago (John Prine).

The listener can identify with this frustration of unfulfilled desires and because of this connection between protagonist and listener, the protagonist establishes the credibility that a storyteller needs to convey a philosophical point. However, before that point is delivered in the chorus of the song, the protagonist has more back story. One of her aspirations is to achieve a love like she had with a cowboy a long time ago. Verse two begins,

When I was a young girl

I had me a cowboy

He wasn't much to look at

Just a free rambling man (John Prine).

Despite her lover's average looks, when she was young, full of hope, and in love, she could dare to dream; dare to live.

But that was a long time  
And no matter how I try  
The years just flow by  
Like a broken down damn (John Prine).

Unlike the protagonist in “Christmas in Prison,” this woman, no matter how she tries to relive or rekindle hope, just grows older and dispirited—not able to fight the current of the years as they rush by.

The third verse illustrates the tragic minutiae of her life:

There’s flies in the kitchen  
I can hear them buzzing  
And I ain’t done nothing since I woke up today (John Prine).

A person desolate and depressed does not achieve much and does not have much to report at the end of the day. But what’s the excuse for someone (her husband) who is engaged during the day?

How the hell can a person  
Go to work in the morning  
And come home in the evening  
With nothing to say (John Prine).

There is no set rhyme scheme for the verses, and often the rhymes themselves are slant rhymes, which mirror the lack of form in the woman’s life.

Because of these despairing thoughts, in the repeated chorus the protagonist makes a wish:

Make me an angel  
That flies from Montgomery

Make me the poster of an old rodeo

Just give me one thing that I can hold on to

To believe in this living is a hard way to go (John Prine).

The phrase “Angel from Montgomery” originated in Montgomery, Alabama and it refers to a governor’s pardon for a prison sentence, especially a last minute pardon from the death sentence.

In other words, the protagonist is wishing for help: someone to pardon her from her own imprisoned life. If she could have just one thing to cling to, life might be tolerable. But the outlook is not good: according to Prine, the protagonist is “gonna keep on fixing dinner, living in this house, staying married. She probably won’t get up the nerve to leave the guy. But it’s just that—a portrait of a lot of people doing that” (John Prine Shrine, “Angel from Montgomery notes”)

Despite Fanning’s assessment of this song as, “the lament of a bored housewife” (50), “Angel from Montgomery” is not only one of Prine’s most popular songs with fans, but it is also the Prine song most often recorded by other artists. There are two reasons for this: number one, the words are so good. A performer hears and sees the words and immediately empathizes—men and women alike. The ache of the protagonist crosses gender and race: everyone has felt that “to believe in this living is a hard way to go.”

Secondly, because Prine’s studio arrangement of this song is sub par, other performers want to create their own versions. The chord progression is a typical Prine four chord progression consisting of major chords, but there is no juxtaposition between bright major chords and humor or satirical lyrics. Prine is deadly serious in this song and the studio version does not fit the mood. The gospel-sounding piano and the organ sound detract from the powerful lyrics. When performing this song in concert, Prine often plays it solo—a much better fit for the stark mood of the song. This allows the lyrics to be out in front, where they are meant to be.

Like a short-story collection, early John Prine albums contain many characters—some unnamed like the woman in “Angel from Montgomery,” others with interesting names. For example, of the thirteen songs on his first album, seven discuss named characters, such as Sam Stone, Loretta, Rudy, and Donald and Lydia. Prine approaches these characters as if he were writing character sketches: “I pick a name and I have a lot of respect for the sounds of names [...] I know what [a character named] Archie would do and what he wouldn’t do. I know what kind of friends he would have [...] I can tell what kind of person that is from as far back as when I wrote Donald and Lydia” (Hutchinson 40-41).

The song “Donald and Lydia” is a sketch of two lonely people who do not know how to love, and the arrangement of the lyrics displays Prine’s craftsmanship. There are three verses of two stanzas each. The first stanza is three lines of setting and the fourth line is a description of an unnamed person. For example, the first verse is as follows:

Small town, bright lights, Saturday night  
Pinballs and pool halls flashing their lights  
Making change behind the counter in a penny arcade  
Sat the fat girl daughter of Virginia and Ray (John Prine).

The second stanza of each verse starts off with a spoken introduction, then centers on specifics:

(Spoken:) Lydia  
Lydia hid her thoughts like a cat  
Behind her small eyes sunk deep in her fat  
She read romance magazines up in her room  
And felt like Sunday on a Saturday afternoon (John Prine).

A line like, “Behind her small eyes sunk deep in her fat” is not offensive or base because, Prine

puts the line in context with supporting phrases: she “hid her thoughts like a cat” and “felt like Sunday on a Saturday afternoon.” These active lyrics effectively paint the picture of a shy, overweight girl who felt out of place in this world.

Donald is not faring much better:

Bunk beds, shaved heads, Saturday night  
A warehouse of strangers with sixty watt lights  
Staring through the ceiling, just wanting to be  
Lay one of too many, a young PFC (John Prine).

Donald is not staring *at* the ceiling but staring *through* the ceiling. Staring at the ceiling would suggest that there is little serious thought in his mind; however, he is staring through the ceiling, hoping for more than being just a number in this “lonely warehouse of strangers.” In fact, Donald wants to *be*. Be what? The audience is not told, but surely it is what all people want: to be respected, content, loved.

Unfortunately,

(Spoken:) Donald  
There were spaces between Donald and whatever he said  
Strangers had forced him to live in his head (John Prine).

Who are these “strangers”? They are the world: his parents, his siblings, his friends, his drill sergeants, his fellow soldiers, and they represent the culture in which he lives:

He envisioned the details of romantic scenes

After midnight in the stillness of the barracks latrine (John Prine).

The irony in this narrative of two “pathetic” people is the hope that the listeners will learn from their story: it is necessary to get beyond the strictures of culture and find the depth of possibilities:

But dreaming just comes natural  
Like the first breath of a baby  
Like sunshine feeding daises  
Like the love hidden deep in your heart (John Prine).

But many people are unable to let this love out. Their concept of love, which they learned from “strangers” or “Virginia and Ray” does not work for them. For Donald and Lydia, love has become an object to obtain rather than a gift freely given: a fictional character rather than a felt reality:

Hot love, cold love, no love at all  
A portrait of guilt is hung on the wall (John Prine).

Perhaps the guilty portrait is pornography or a romance magazine--no less a damaging diversion.

Nothing is wrong and nothing is right  
Donald and Lydia made love that night (John Prine).

There is no hint in the song that Donald and Lydia have ever met; if they have, and *if* they actually made love, the audience gets the sense that it just wasn't very good. Playboy and Harlequin romances are their expected experiences:

(Spoken:) Love  
They made love in the mountains, they made love in the streams  
They made love in the valleys, they made love in their dreams (John Prine).

This, on the other hand, is what they get:

But when they were finished there was nothing to say  
'Cause mostly they made love from ten miles away (John Prine).

These two characters lack the ability to reconcile their experience with what their culture has

taught them to expect. Like the characters in “Far From Me,” Donald and Lydia cannot love up to cultural norms which have forced them to “live in their heads” and become disillusioned. Despite their failures they will continue to dream. Because it is just natural to want the best for yourself, even if your name is Donald or Lydia.

The next Prine song I will discuss also concerns making love; however, there are literal consequences for the lovers in “Unwed Fathers.”

In an Appalachian  
Greyhound station  
She sits there waitin’  
In a family way  
Goodbye brother  
Tell mom I love her  
Tell all the others  
I’ll write someday (Aimless Love).

Lyrically Prine follows an unusually strict rhyme scheme for this song; all the verses and the chorus are AAABCCCB. He is an intuitive writer; it is unlikely that he consciously created a strict rhyme scheme to illustrate the strict double standard of a girl getting pregnant and dealing with the consequences while the boy, the father, “can’t be bothered.” But that’s the way of this big old goofy world:

From a teenage lover  
To an unwed mother  
Kept undercover  
Like some bad dream (Aimless Love).

A child hides under the covers to make a bad dream go away. A teenage mother cannot hide,

But unwed fathers  
They can't be bothered  
They run like water  
Through a mountain stream (Aimless Love).

Such men, or should I say boys, are expendable. Prine sets the mood of the song with a color: grey, a depressing, cold color. Verse one describes a "Appalachian *Greyhound* station"; verse two a "*greystone* building"; and verse three a "Smokey Mountain *greyhound*."

Despite her situation, the young mother is striving to make the best of her life. And this is where the strict rhyme scheme breaks down:

You're daddy never  
Meant to hurt you ever  
He just don't live here  
But you got his eyes (Aimless Love).

The unwed mother may be heroic, but she is not rewarded for her heroism. The song ends with the refrain; the unwed father "runs like water/ through a mountain stream."

The unwed mother is fighting the double standard of culture: unwed mothers are punished while unwed fathers escape unharmed. In addition, by mentioning Appalachia, Prine also focuses on the fact that many unwed mothers live in poverty, a condition in which many Appalachian families find themselves. And because they are poor, they do not have the resources to deal with an unexpected pregnancy.

Like the unwed mother, "Old" people have lived through the trials of life; however, the loss of parents, friends, even spouses may create a devastating feeling of loneliness. Prine addresses these issues in the song, "Hello In There." Commenting on this song, he says,

I've always had an affinity to old people. I used to help a buddy with his

newspaper route, and I'd deliver to a Baptist old people's home where you'd have to go room-to-room, and some of the patients would kind of pretend that you were a grandchild or nephew that had come to visit instead of the guy delivering papers [...] it was all that stuff together, along with the pretty melody. I don't think I've done a show without singing "Hello in There" Nothing in it wears on me.

(Hutchinson 40)

Musically, the song begins with an arpeggiated acoustic guitar, and the chord progression features two unusual (for Prine) characteristics: not only the presence of minor chords, which suggests sadness, but also a major seventh chord, which suggests contentment. This complexity of chords, along with occasional melancholy riffs from the organ, sets the bittersweet mood.

The song tells the story of an elderly man as he recounts and reflects upon his life:

We had an apartment in the city  
And me and Loretta like living there  
It'd been years since the kids had grown  
A life of their own  
And left us alone (John Prine).

As the man recounts his family, the memories lead to a sorrowful conclusion:

John and Linda live in Omaha  
And Joe is somewhere on the road  
We lost Davy in the Korean War  
I still don't know what for  
Doesn't matter anymore (John Prine).

An omniscient narrator is heard on the chorus. Lyrically and musically the first half of the chorus reacts with defiance to this weariness:

You know that old trees just grow stronger  
And old rivers grow wilder everyday (John Prine).

Two major chords support both Prine's statement, and all the instruments crescendo while the vocal melody hits a high note on the word "everyday." However, the instruments quickly decrescendo and cadence on a minor chord:

Old people just grow lonesome  
Waiting for someone to say  
Hello in there  
Hello (John Prine).

The man cannot sustain his rage, his spirit. There is no getting away from the loneliness. Again, Prine employs an interesting rhyme scheme for his verse stanzas: ABCCC while the chorus is ABCBDE. In the verse, the last line has half the syllables of the previous three lines, perhaps suggesting the faster passage of time as one progresses in years. In the chorus the last line is a two-syllable word: "hello." In other words, is anybody out there? Does anyone care?

But life goes on:

Me and Linda, we don't talk much more  
She sits and stares through the back door screen  
And all the news just repeats itself  
Like some forgotten dream  
That we've both seen (John Prine).

Lack of communication, isolation, and lack of spirit are signs of depression and a common problem among the elderly. But how to fight it? Attempt communication, and make an effort:

Some day I'll go and call up Rudy  
We worked together at the factory

But what could I say when he asks “What’s new?”

“Nothing, what’s with you?”

Nothing much to do. (John Prine).

This chorus again replies to the dismissive end of this verse. The narrator of the song, who attempts to buoy an elder’s spirits, insists on having the last word. The third verse (which functions as a coda) is in the narrator’s voice:

So if you’re walking down the street some time

And spot some hollow ancient eyes

Please don’t just pass ‘em by and stare

As if you didn’t care

Say hello in there

Hello (John Prine).

The emphasis on discourse, communication through the spoken word, is paramount in this song. As the third verse illustrates, it is not enough to *see* elderly people; and to simply stare is impersonal and cold. The narrator encourages the next step: start up a conversation because everyone (and according to Prine, Jesus too) needs someone to talk to. A thoughtful person will take the time to say, “Hello in There.”

American culture does not place high value on its elders. For this reason, Prine’s message is too important to be forgotten. Perhaps that is why he plays “Hello in There” at every show. The audience often knows, and sings, every single word of the song. People identify with the message, and, for many, nothing in the song wears on them.

An unsatisfied housewife, misfit lovers, unwed mothers, old people—these are not the usual cast of characters for pop songs. Nonetheless, Prine infuses these characters with an ability to tell their stories; often this is the only thing they have to hold onto—their stories. The

angst of living is universal; however, by illustrating his characters' unique problems, Prine allows the audience to absorb cultural issues they might have otherwise missed.

## CHAPTER SIX - POLITICS

Kiss a little baby  
Give the world a smile  
If you take an inch  
Give 'em back a mile  
“It’s A Big Old Goofy World” ([The Missing Years](#))

Politicians often kiss babies and smile for the cameras; yet they rarely take an inch then give back a mile, unless the public demands it. How does the public get its demands across? They may sign petitions or write letters to their congressmen. Yet the songwriters of the 1960s and 1970s chose a different medium to get their point across: the protest song.

Because the Vietnam War had a tremendous impact on the culture of this time period, war was a primary target of protest songs. Songs like “War!” by Edwin Starr in 1970 and “I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag” by Country Joe and the Fish in 1969 are explicit in their condemnation of war. Starr does not specifically name Vietnam:

War!

What is it good for

Absolutely nothing ([The Vietnam War Song Page](#)).

However, the year that the song was produced implies that connection. In contrast, Country Joe does name Vietnam in his song:

And it’s one, two, three,

What are we fighting for?

Don’t ask me, I don’t give a damn

Next stop is Vietnam ([The Vietnam War Song Page](#)).

In a discussion of war protest songs, mention must be made of Bob Dylan. Though Dylan does have overt protest songs such as “I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag,” and “War,”

subtler songs like “Blowin in the Wind” have a more lasting impact. “Blowing in the Wind” was produced in 1963, perhaps in reaction to the Cuban Missile Crisis, but definitely before America’s “official” involvement in Vietnam. And though the song is not linked to a specific war, Dylan’s emphasis is on the literary power of the lyrics, whereas songs such as “War” punch with a rock back-beat. Dylan’s song whispers with acoustic guitar and harmonica:

Yes and how many times must the cannonballs fly

Before they are forever banned

The answer my friend is blowing in the wind

The answer is blowing in the wind (Vietnam War Song Page).

Starr and Country Joe are making emotional, provocative, and direct *statements*. Dylan is inquisitive. He is subtly discussing war, but more importantly, he is searching for words that will resonate with the listener.

Like the above mentioned artists, Prine has written political songs; however, he puts his own twist on this song genre. “Your Flag Decal Won’t Get You Into Heaven Anymore” is a satirical look at America’s view of war. Because it was produced in 1971, this song implies a connection to Vietnam. It uses humor to point out the misguided attitude in unthinkingly supporting a war. From the very first line, the setting illustrates how the main character of the song is corrupted:

While digesting Reader’s Digest in the back of a dirty book store

A plastic flag with gum on the back fell out on the floor (John Prine).

Then, under the influence of propaganda and misguided patriotism, the main character springs into action:

Well I picked it up and ran outside and slapped it on my window shield

And if I could see old Betsy Ross, I’d tell her how good I feel (John Prine).

Though the protagonist is feeling good to be a part of the group and is caught up in patriotic fever, the narrator of the songs states,

But your flag decal won't get you into heaven anymore  
They're already overcrowded from you dirty little war  
Now Jesus don't like killing no matter what the reason's for  
And your flag decal won't get you into heaven anymore

(John Prine).

Prine, as the omniscient narrator, is commenting upon the main character's fervor and lack of wisdom. The chorus might seem like the voice of God except for one word: "*They're* already overcrowded," not "*We're* already overcrowded." Prine downplays the idea of divinity and puts the omniscient narrator in a more human role, like a wise old man giving advice to an impulsive youth. And the youth runs on:

Well I went to the bank this morning and the cashier said to me  
If you join the Christmas club, we'll give you ten of them flags for free (John Prine).

Marx would say that this is an example of the capitalist ruling class influencing the working class: "Culture is capitalism's way of getting people to construe domination as freedom [...] and quite (un)canny in its ability to do this" (Rivkin and Ryan 232). The main character of the song is full-throttle ahead into this idea:

Well I didn't mess around a bit, I took him up on what he said  
And I stuck them stickers all over my car, and one of my wife's forehead  
(John Prine).

So ends the second verse with its commentary on the political/economic institution. The third verse addresses the ramifications of blind obedience:

Well I got my window shield so filled with flags I couldn't see  
So I ran the car upside curb and right into a tree  
By the time they got a doctor down I was already dead  
And I'll never understand why the man standing in the pearly gate said (John Prine).

This last line appears in a "Saint Peter at the gates of heaven" joke form: "I'll never understand why the man standing in the pearly gate said," with the following punch line: "But your flag decal won't get you into heaven anymore." In addition, this satirical song uses phrases like "digesting Reader's digest," "and one on my wife's forehead" as funny anecdotes.

Despite the humorous tone, the song's commentary on the dangers of blind patriotism are serious. Or, as Mark Twain said, when asked, "What is humor?" He replied, "The good-natured side of any truth" (Zall 165). Though Prine's message is couched in humor, the truth of its message reaches the audience.

Prine does have more direct "protest songs." For example, "Take the Star Out of the Window" relates the practice of the relatives of Vietnam soldiers putting a star in the windows of their houses to designate that a soldier was not forgotten. Its verses describe the main character who is "fresh out of the cradle" who swears to do his "duty," in the armed forces and gets "blood on his high school ring" because he sails across the ocean "To the old far eastern war" where he "Made an oriental waitress / His own homecoming queen" (Diamonds in the Rough). These are sad, but direct anecdotes satirizing the Vietnam war and its toll on the young men who served there. Despite its direct commentary, the song does not showcase the strengths of Prine's songwriting.

Like Twain, Prine effectively uses narratives not to directly preach but to tell a story and let listeners reach their own conclusions. The song-narrative "Sam Stone" tells the tale of a

Vietnam vet after he returns from the war. Each verse of this song-narrative begins with the title-character's name. Verse one sets the scene:

Sam Stone came home  
To his wife and family  
after serving in the conflict overseas (John Prine).

The conflict of the narrative is then presented:

And the time that he served  
Had scattered all his nerves  
And left a little shrapnel in his knee (John Prine).

To ease this pain and to help him regain "All the confidence he lacked," Sam takes morphine and smokes marijuana; however, all this gets him is "A Purple Heart and a monkey on his back."

This last line, like a tight conclusion to a chapter, sums up this verse. A Purple Heart implies bravery, valor, and duty. For these valorous characteristics, Sam gets physical, emotional, and psychologic pain all rolled together, aptly described as "A monkey on his back." This is both a reference to a drug addiction and to a vexing burden: something he cannot shake.

The second verse begins, "Sam Stone's welcome home / Didn't last too long." It goes on to describe how Sam's drug addiction, "a hundred dollar habit without overtime," forces him to take "to stealin.'" Even though the drugs "eased his mind in the hours that he chose," the result is identified by the last line, which again ties up the theme of this verse: "the kids ran around wearing other people's clothes" (John Prine).

Sam Stone is alone in the final verse, and Prine employs chilling language to describe the scene of an overdose;

Sam Stone was alone  
When he *popped* his last balloon

*Climbing* walls while *sitting* in a chair  
Well he *played* his last request  
While the room *smelled* just like death  
With an overdose *hovering* in the air  
But life had *lost* its fun  
And there was nothing to be done  
But *trade* the house he *bought* on the G. I. Bill  
For a flag *draped* casket on a local heroes' hill (emphasis mine John Prine).

Not only do these verbs appeal to the five senses, they help to vividly describe the scene: broken dreams, despair, and finally, the desolation of death as the decorated casket is buried in a local cemetery.

The narrative structure of the verses is evident; however, the importance of the refrain must not be overlooked. In Dylan's Visions of Sin, Christopher Ricks examines songs such as "Blowin' in the Wind" and "The Times They Are A-Changin,'" not only for their cultural impacts but also for their structure. He contends that for each of these two songs, its *essence* may be found in its "title-refrain" (260). In other words, the refrain acts as a thesis statement; each line and verse refers to the refrain.

Unlike the Dylan songs mentioned above, Prine's title is repeated at the beginning of the verse; however, like the Dylan songs, the essence is the refrain:

There's a hole in daddy's arm where all the money goes  
Jesus Christ died for nothin' I suppose  
Little pitchers have big ears  
Don't stop to count the years  
Sweet songs never last too long on broken radios (John Prine).

It is ironic that the lyrics of the refrain, and indeed the last line of the song, were the first words of the song that Prine wrote: “It was ‘broken radios’ that started the whole song off” (Tobler 34), Prine explains, and goes on to say that there was an old radio on a shelf in the mail room where he sorted mail before going out on his route. Occasionally the radio was bumped off the shelf and became battered. And because “there’s nothing to think about on a mail rap” (Tobler 34), as he walked, Prine thought about the image of the broken radio, the experiences of friends of his who had served in Vietnam, and of his own military experiences in Germany: “I had this picture in my mind of a little girl, like Little Orphan Annie, shaking her head back and forth while a rainbow of money goes into her daddy’s arm. I think I invented the character of Sam Stone as a story line just to get around to that chorus” (Hutchinson 39). Isn’t that why writers write? To convey a main idea, a theme? Because “Sweet songs never last too long on broken radios,” Sam Stone, as a human being, is broken. His innocence, his sweetness, is shattered by his experiences in the war.

More than the above mentioned songs, the story of Sam Stone makes my heart ache. I understand the pathos of the situation, the frustration in looking for nobility in an dishonorable action. However, the terrors of war come alive in a subtle but biting way as Prine sings of the sad story of Sam Stone. I can picture Sam being forced to steal, and his flag draped casket; I can smell the overdose “hovering in the air”; I can feel the “pop” of his last balloon; and I can hear the sorrow of the line, “Jesus Christ died for nothin’ I suppose.”

The uniqueness of Prine’s form of protest song only strengthens its appeal. Prine comments on this: “At the time, all the other Vietnam songs were basic protest songs, made up to slap each other on the back like, ‘Yeah, this is the right cause.’ I don’t remember any other songs that talked about soldiers at all” (Hutchinson 39).

There was, however, a song in 1969 that reached number six on the Top Ten list for pop

songs: “Ruby Don’t Take Your Love To Town” by Kenny Rogers and the First Edition. It tells the story of a paralyzed Vietnam veteran and his wife who does not appreciate him: she “Takes her love to town”: “It wasn’t me that started that old crazy Asian war / But I was proud to go and do my patriotic chore” (The Vietnam War Song Page). The song goes on to describe how the vet is paralyzed and that “it’s true that I’m not the man I used to be / Oh Ruby, I still need company.”

As in “Sam Stone,” the veteran’s anger, desperation, and threat of death are apparent in “Ruby Don’t Take Your Love To Town.” The last lines of the song state: “And if I could move I’d get my gun and put her in the ground / Oh Ruby, don’t take your love to town.” Despite their similarities in content, “Sam Stone” is not only a more effective narrative than “Ruby Don’t Take Your Love To Town,” but it is also more interesting lyrically and musically.

“Ruby” is a first person account of vet and the only theme of the song is a man’s injury and his wife’s unfaithfulness. This simplicity is reflected in its rhyme scheme: a repeated AABB pattern with no delineation of verse and chorus. “Sam Stone,” on the other hand, tackles several themes: not only injuries sustained in combat, but also drugs, stealing, morality, family, religion, and politics. The rhyme scheme of “Sam Stone” reflects this complexity. The first verse is ABBCBDDDEE; the second and third verse are similar in their construction: ABCDDCEEFF. It is ironic that the very sober and hopeless nature of the chorus uses the same rhyme scheme as the humorous, often nonsensical and bawdy limerick: AABBA. But, it is this very juxtaposition that strikes the listener.

The music of the two songs is also interesting to compare. Both “Ruby” and “Sam” are musically simple, but whereas “Sam” still sounds fresh, “Ruby” sounds hopelessly dated. Ruby begins with an a capella voice, which tries to suggest emotion but cannot shake off the polish of the studio: “You’ve painted up your lips and rolled and curled your tinted hair” (The Vietnam

War Song Page). Despite this technique of drawing attention to the first line, the line does not hold up under the scrutiny of the emphasis; it could be any line of the song. The following guitar arpeggio, and especially the cliched oom-pah of the bass situate the song squarely in the country music genre. The background vocals of the chorus especially sound like a dated, early 1970s recording practice. The words are very serious, but the music, by and large, does not achieve a complexity. The song conveys none of the whimsy that Prine is able to achieve through his particular juxtaposition of music and lyrics.

“Sam Stone” begins with a mournful organ sound—almost like a church organ — suggesting the sober story about to be told. Prine’s voice will never be described as “polished” or even “good” as one would measure a trained vocalist; however, there is a sincerity in his voice and degree of truthfulness in its roughness that is an appropriate vehicle for the tone of the lyrics. Gradually an acoustic guitar, electric guitar, and bass guitar are added but very subtly—never vying with the vocals for supremacy.

Perhaps Prine’s most complete observation on politics and American attitudes is “The Great Compromise.” Produced in 1972 as the Vietnam War was winding down and America was attempting to come to an understanding about the conflict, “The Great Compromise” gives Prine’s take on the state of the Union. Charles Fanning calls it an allegorical song “in which America is personified as a honky-tonk waitress” (52). Prine is able to stay focused on the allegory the entire song.

I knew a girl who was almost a lady  
She had a way with all the men in her life  
Every inch of her blossomed in beauty  
And she was born on the Fourth of July (Diamonds in the Rough).

American culture is portrayed as very beautiful, but also shallow and foolish:

Well she lived in an aluminum house trailer  
And she worked in a juke box saloon  
And she spent all the money I give her  
Just to see the old man in the moon (Diamonds in the Rough).

The white house is suggested as only a facade of greatness; the government as doing dirty work and defending itself like a broken record; and working people's taxes are going towards fantastical things like space travel while problems accumulate at home.

In the chorus, the protagonist speaks of his observations, and his former pride turns to disillusionment:

I used to sleep at the foot of Old Glory  
And awake in the dawn's early light  
But much to my surprise  
When I opened my eyes  
I was the victim of the great compromise (Diamonds in the Rough).

In a compromise, each side grants concessions in order to reach an agreement. The irony in the phrase "great compromise" is that the greatness is not in its power to do good but in the degree of its error. The narrator's patriotism and innocence are gone. His eyes are open and he now feels wronged.

The second verse continues the allegory as the narrator tells of going to a drive-in movie with his girl, only to have her hop "into a foreign sports car." It is interesting to note that the third verse is spoken rather than sung: this lends drama and emphasis to the protagonist's words:

Well you know I could have beat up that fellow  
But it was her that had hopped in his car  
Many times I had fought to protect her

But this time she was goin' too far (Diamonds in the Rough).

The protagonist could have joined the army to defend her honor, but the American government made the decision to wage war, not that “foreign sports car.” The lady just went too far.

Now some folks they call me a coward

‘Cause I left her at the drive-in that night

But I’d druther have names thrown at me

Than to fight for a thing that ain’t right (Diamonds in the Rough).

During the Vietnam War, rather than fight an unjust war, many young men refused to join the armed forces and were castigated for their decision. Prine emphasizes this issue in the fourth verse as the “lady” writes love letters to other fellows. The protagonist reflects,

But sometimes I get awful lonesome

And I wish she were my girl instead

But she won’t let me live with her

And she makes me live in my head (Diamonds in the Rough).

The phrase “Makes me live in my head” shows up in several Prine songs and is meant to convey indecision and confusion. In this instance, the protagonist wants to love his country, but she won’t allow it and it causes him to wonder why. This allegorical song captures not only Prine’s attitude, but also the attitude of America at the time. The song was produced in 1972 when America was deep in the Vietnam conflict and Americans were searching for ways to express their feelings about their country.

Protest songs continue to be relevant, and in 1992, Prine was asked in an interview, “During the Philly show you did a stunning combination of ‘Your Flag Decal Won’t Get You Into Heaven Anymore’ and ‘Sam Stone’ and commented that these old songs were sadly still relevant. Could you elaborate?” Prine replied, “I’ve been doing ‘Flag Decal’ for about a year

new, mostly in reaction to the Desert Storm Victory celebrations that went on for six or seven times as long as the war. These Welcome Home parties were lasting so long that I thought, I've got to get [start playing again] these old warhorses [songs] and they are going down well" (Compton, "John Prine" 50).

So the old warhorses are out there making sure that the politicians hear the stomping and the singing of America.

## CHAPTER SEVEN - RELIGION

Cause if you lie like a rug  
And you don't give a damn  
You're never gonna be  
As happy as a clam  
"It's A Big Old Goofy World" (The Missing Years)

Most people want to be happy, but everyone has different viewpoints on how to achieve happiness. Many people associate happiness with religion, and most religions stress good deeds (such as avoidance of lying) that are rewarded with the gift of heaven. How then to justify this Mark Twain's quote: "There is no humor in heaven"? (Zall 70). Does that mean Twain, and Prine for that matter, will not be granted admittance into heaven? More importantly, would they even want to go?

In Civilization and Its Discontents, Sigmund Freud maintains that religion is "[...] the system of doctrines and promises which on one hand explains to him the riddles of this world with enviable completeness, and, on the other, assures him that a careful Providence will watch over his life and will compensate him in future existence for any frustrations he suffers here" (22). Freud claims that although life is difficult, there are three measures to deal with the pain: deflections, substitutive satisfactions, and intoxicating substances (23-24).

Deflections "cause us to make light of our miseries" (Freud 23). Scientific endeavors, hobbies, sports, and humor are all examples of deflection. Substitutive satisfactions such as art, provide "illusions to contrast with reality" (Freud 24). The third measure that Freud speaks of is "intoxicating substances," which most people have tried at some point in their lives.

Prine, however, chooses deflection and substitutive satisfactions, and he uses humor and music to solve "the riddles of this world" on his own. The soldier in the song "Spanish Pipedream" advocates Prine's view that everyone should find their own answers:

Blow up your T. V.  
Throw away your paper  
Go to the country  
Build you a home  
Plant a little garden  
Eat a lot of peaches  
Try to find Jesus  
On your own (John Prine).

These lyrics from the song “Spanish Pipedream” display Prine’s ever-present wit because the words are spoken by a “level-headed” topless dancer; not exactly the type of person one goes to for sage advice. However, Prine is suggesting that wisdom, even holiness can be found in everyone; even those considered the lower class of society. In this, Prine may be considered a humanist, because even though he does not display outright contempt for religion, neither does he advocate it. In other words, Prine believes that human beings are able to achieve healing and self-realization through reason rather than divine intervention; they should “find Jesus,” that is spirituality, through their own experience, not the doctrine of a religion.

The soldier and the dancer soon find their own way:

Had a lot of children  
Fed ‘em on peaches  
And they all found Jesus  
On their own (John Prine).

The back-to-the-earth, happy ending mentality stressed in “Spanish Pipedream” may have sprung from the counter cultural/hippie movement (the song was produced in 1971), but the song still strikes a chord with contemporary listeners and is a concert favorite. The fact that

Prine dismisses organized religion in this song is important to note. The question is, why?

Because he grants so few interviews and because he has said even less about religion, it is difficult to discern Prine's religious background. There are, however, two religious anecdotes that Prine has commented on: a nightmare and a job as a teenager. This is what he reports as a recurring nightmare: "these guys that looked like the three wise men knocked on my door one night, tied up my mother and brother and put me in a closet with a nun. It was really crazy, and I'm not even Catholic" (Manning 21). As fifteen-year-old he had a job at an Episcopal church. In Prine's own words, he was a "pew dustin,' cross polishin,' lawn mowin,' snow shovelin' son of a gun" (John Prine Shrine, "Bruised Orange" notes). Prine used this intimate knowledge of the aspects of the church when he wrote the chorus to the song, "He Forgot That It Was Sunday":

On a dusty pew in the vestibule  
Sits the devil playing pocket pool  
He's waiting for the next poor fool  
Who forgot that it was Sunday (Lost Dogs and Mixed Blessings).

The song's verses meander from motels to docks to the local Cracker Barrel restaurant; and Prine even takes a turn imagining himself as Charlie Parker's teddy bear. Despite these wanderings, the verses, like the end of the second verse, always end up at the chorus: "The train tracks all run parallel / But they'll all meet up one day." The chorus takes another shot at organized religion and the "fools" who feel guilty for missing the Sunday church service. Prine symbolically shakes his head and sings, "They'll all meet up one day."

Concerning religion, Milo Miles says of Prine, "[...] the man has been haunted by Christianity since his debut album twenty years ago" (75). Both "Spanish Pipedream," and "Pretty Good," another song that briefly but significantly mentions religion, are on his debut

album, John Prine.

The main idea of “Pretty Good” feels very Zen; no matter what happens, “Everything is just about the same.” The four verses range in seriousness. The narrator has a conversation first with a friend he sees only twice a year, then in the second verse with a lover from “Venus.” In both cases these characters ask the narrator how he feels. The narrator replies,

Pretty good

Not bad

I can't complain

But actually, everything is just about the same (John Prine).

The third verse takes a macabre twist as “Molly went to Arkansas / And got raped by Dobbin's dogs.” (“Dobbins” is a possible reference to Bill Dobbins, a musician and photographer who frequented the New York folk scene at the same time as Prine.) Despite being the victim of this horrendous act, the narrator decides that Molly is “Pretty good” and that “actually, all them *dogs* are just about the same” (emphasis mine).

Charles Fanning portrays this song as “an eerie, disturbing hymn to the blase, for whom even bestiality is boring” (53). But that is taking Prine too literally. “All those *dogs* are just about the same”? By implication, all men are just about the same? All humans? All acts of evil? What about the so called “good-guys,” the holy ones? Prine takes that next step with a discussion of various gods in the fourth verse; however, he sets it up like a joke—as if he were saying, “Did you hear the one about the priest and the rabbi?”:

I heard Allah and Buddha

Were singing at the Savior's feast

And up in the sky

An Arabian rabbi

Fed Quaker Oats to a priest

Pretty good

Not bad

They can't complain

'Cause actually, all them Gods are just about the same (John Prine).

The silliness of an *Arabian* rabbi and the fact that such a man would feed *Quaker* oats (not to mention any oats at all) to a priest highlights Prine's view of religion: that as an organization, it needs to be taken with a grain of salt and a huge helping of humor.

Prine is not afraid to say this either: notice that he does not use the lowercase *gods* to distinguish the deities; instead, he uses *Gods* to acknowledge that people take religion very seriously—but perhaps they shouldn't. In addition, the music to “Pretty Good” is one of Prine's harder edged songs. It starts with the standard acoustic guitar, but a Hammond organ sound and especially an up-front distorted electric guitar sound gives the feel of rock 'n roll, and rock 'n roll is not subtle. Even Prine's normally laid back vocal sound has a sense of urgency. He uses this genre of pop music to support his views; even though it's in familiar Prine narrative form, there is no mistaking Prine's attitude about organized religion.

Human folly is again called to task in “Fish and Whistle,” where Prine narrates vignettes of his life from a stint in the army to his first job. The crux of the song comes in the first two lines: “I been thinking lately / About the people I meet.” Prine is a humanist, and after considering people, he decides no one person is superior to another:

Father forgive us

For what we must do

You forgive us

We'll forgive you

We'll forgive each other

'Till we both turn blue

Then we'll whistle and go fishing in heaven (Bruised Orange).

The implication, of course, is the practice of confessing to a priest. The word "forgive" acts as a mantra as it appears four times in the chorus. But it is not just the priest who is doing the forgiving because the scale is equal: you forgive us and in return we'll forgive you. And another thing, all men are about the same, so let's relax and go fishing.

Of course, nothing is that simple, and musically Prine composes a rare, for him, bridge (a transitional section of a song differentiated from the verse or chorus) for "Fish and Whistle":

Fish and whistle

Whistle and Fish

Eat everything

That they put on your dish

And when we get through

We'll make a big wish

That we never have

To do this again

Again? Again???? (Bruised Orange).

Prine realizes that man is fallible, and yes, we will all have to do this again: forgive, forgive, forgive, just as Jesus said.

The 1975 album Common Sense is considered to be one of Prine's weaker efforts. As Fanning says about Prine, "[...] the problem of communicating despair and chaos mimetically (by means of confusing metaphors and a negative tone) simply cannot motivate or sustain an artist for long" (63). The song "Saddle in the Rain" from this album suffers from many of these

same problems. The song lacks the coherence of many of Prine's narratives, and is not held together by a humorous or ironic twist; however, the third verse is important to note:

I dreamed they locked God up  
Down in my basement  
And he waited for me there  
To have this accident  
So he could drink my wine  
And eat me like a sacrament (Common Sense).

Prine is reversing roles here. In some denominations, Christians eat and drink the symbolic body and blood of Jesus. The fact that the protagonist of this song believes that God is going to "drink my wine / And eat me like a sacrament" again demonstrates Prine's humanism. He is not, however, explicitly stating that the protagonist is a divine because

And I just stood there like I do  
Then I came and went  
I came and went  
Like a bird in a foreign sky  
Couldn't even say goodbye  
Or come and share my pain  
My saddle's in the rain (Common Sense).

Prine is obviously aware of the Christian practices. And even though God is there waiting for a sacrifice, the protagonist frees himself and flies away. Man is not divine: his saddle is in the rain, and it is getting more rotten everyday.

"Everybody," a song from Prine's second album, Diamonds in the Rough, also displays Prine's humanism. The verses are a dialogue between the protagonist and Jesus, while

the chorus is an aside by the narrator. With his typical irreverent humor, Prine sets the scene:

While out sailing on the ocean

While out sailing on the sea

I bumped into the Savior

And He said "Pardon me."

I said "Jesus you look tired"

He said "Jesus so do you

Sit down son

'Cause I got some fat to chew (Diamonds in the Rough).

The fact that Prine portrays Jesus as just another guy who needs someone to talk to is very humanistic. In fact, in the second verse Jesus talks so much that the protagonist "only got a few words in." But that's all right with him:

But I won't squawk

Let 'em talk

Hell it's been a long, long time

And any friend that's been turned down

Is bound to be a friend of mine (Diamonds in the Rough).

As if Jesus were down on his luck. But even saviors need friends, as the narrator observes in the chorus: "Everybody needs somebody that they can talk to."

The fact that Jesus gets as much, or more out of the conversation than the protagonist does is a delightfully irreverent view as Prine completes the third verse:

Now we sat there for an hour or two

Just eatin' that Gospel pie

When around the bend comes a terrible wind

And lightning lit the sky  
He said, “So long son, I gotta run  
I appreciate you listening to me”  
And I believe I heard him sing these words  
As He skipped across the sea (Diamonds in the Rough).

The simple ABCB rhyme scheme reflects the relaxed nature of the song, and despite its irreverent and surreal take on the Christian notion of having a “personal relationship with Christ,” “Everybody” is not an offensive song.

Prine’s most in depth examination of Christianity is the song, “Jesus The Missing Years.” In a Catholic mass, before reading the Gospel, the priest will hold up the Bible for everyone to see and intone: “The Gospel according to...” Prine’s song begins with no music, just his voice in a spoken declaration: “Jesus...the missing years.” Then begins a very simple guitar accompaniment, which repeats throughout the song.

“I got the idea for this next song when someone at a party told me there were all these missing years in the life of Jesus, from the time he was twelve until he was thirty” (Wild 15). Prine pondered this situation and then he let his imagination run. As with any good storyteller, he begins the song by setting the scene:

It was raining, it was cold

West Bethlehem was no place for a twelve year old (The Missing Years).

As if Bethlehem was a neighborhood or ghetto as we the modern audience would think of it. As with any young man, Jesus is restless,

So he packed his bags and he headed out

To find out what the world’s about

He went to France, he went to Spain

He found love, he found pain (The Missing Years).

Jesus is portrayed as any other young man. He is human with good and evil within him:

He found stores so he decided to shop

But he had no money so he got in trouble with a cop

Kids in trouble with the cops from Israel didn't have no home

So he cut his hair and moved to Rome

It was there that he met his Irish bride

And they rented a flat on the lower east side

Of Rome...

Italy that is

Music publishers, book binders, Bible beltors,

Swimming pools, orgies, and lots of pretty Italian chicks

(The Missing Years).

Jesus shoplifting? Married? Living in Rome among the orgies, bible beltors and swimming pools? As in the song "Everybody," in "Jesus The Missing Years," Prine imagines Jesus as his friend—a very fallible friend at that. Milo Miles suggests that "[t]he singer's identification with the Redeemer is plain, but again, he's not puffed up about it. The proposition seems to be that Prine, (James) Dean, Mark Twain, you, me, and anybody at all could be Jesus" (75), which was similarly expressed in the Joan Osbourne song, "One of Us": "What if God was one of us? / Just a slob like one of us?" ("Joan Osbourne lyrics"). "Jesus The Missing Years" attempts to answer that question. As the second verse begins, Jesus is in Rome and

Wine was flowing, so were beers

So Jesus found his missing years (The Missing Years).

Is Prine perhaps suggesting that institutionalized religion does not want the masses to know

about the missing years of Jesus? Or is he just amusing himself? It is not possible to know for sure because Prine has not commented about the content of “Jesus The Missing Years,” but Prine’s humanism is apparent and his ability to imagine how Jesus felt provides for interesting suppositions:

So he went to a dance and said, “This don’t move me”

So he hiked up his pants and went to a movie

On his thirteenth birthday he saw “Rebel Without a Cause”

He went straight home and invented Santa Claus

Who gave him a gift and he responded in kind

He gave the gift of love and went out of his mind (The Missing Years).

To respond to despair and uselessness with love and kindness, and to “do the right thing” morally and ethically is difficult. If Jesus is human enough to dance and see a movie, then he is human enough to despair. Whenever humans are involved there will be pain:

You see him and the wife weren’t getting along

So he took out his guitar and he wrote a song

Called “The Dove of Love Fell Off the Perch”

But he couldn’t get married in the Catholic church

At least not back then anyhow (The Missing Years).

Jesus is portrayed as having marital troubles and making music; how refreshingly normal. But the story goes deeper:

Jesus was a good guy, he didn’t need this shit

So he took a pill with a Coca-Cola and he swallowed it (The Missing Years).

Neither the profanity nor the drug inference seems out of place. According to Freud humans

look for ways to lessen the pain, whether it is an intoxicating substance like a drug or a substitutive satisfaction like music:

He discovered the Beatles

He recorded with the Stones

Once He even opened up a three-way-package for old George Jones (The Missing Years).

Milo Miles describes this song in this manner: “Christ shatters time and space to get tangled up with James Dean and get on stage with George Jones and generally acts out the fantasies of, as Prine puts it in another song, ‘A young man from a small town with a very large imagination’” (75).

But the young man grows up, and the third verse states:

The years went by like sweet little days

With babies crying pork chops and Beaujolais

When he woke up he was seventeen

The world was angry, the world was mean (The Missing Years).

The innocence of youth is gone and Jesus is waking to the realities of adulthood.

Why the man down the street and the kid on the stoop

All agreed that life stank, all the world smelled like poop

Baby poop that is...the worst kind

So he grew his hair and threw away his comb

And he headed back to Jerusalem to find Mom, Dad, and home

But when he got there the cupboard was bare

Except for an old black man with a fishing rod

He said, “Whatcha gonna be when you grow up?”

Jesus said “God” (The Missing Years).

There is a pronounced, but fleeting studio echo effect on the word “God” that makes the statement even more dramatic:

Oh my God, what have I gotten myself into?

I’m a human corkscrew and all my wine is blood

They’re going to kill me Momma, they don’t like me Bud (The Missing Years).

A good storyteller can entertain an audience even with a story the audience has heard many times. The tension mounts as the narrator finishes the story:

So Jesus went to heaven and he went there awful quick

All them people killed him and wasn’t even sick (The Missing Years).

Nobility is often not rewarded. There is anger, pain, loneliness and death in the world which has no antidote: “To believe in this living is a hard way to go.” But human beings desire and are educated by social interactions. A story not only helps to soothe the “hard and sordid things of life,” but it also develops a bond of kinship between the singer and his audience:

So come and gather around me my contemporary peers

And I’ll tell you all the story of Jesus...the missing years (The Missing Years).

The story of Jesus has been told for almost two thousand of years; however, new theories on the life of Jesus not reported in the bible are being explored, as in The Da Vinci Code. Nonetheless, there is a freshness that Prine is able to achieve through imagining the unreported years of Jesus. Jesus is fallible and just “one of us.”

At the end of each verse about these missing years, there is the seemingly unrelated

chorus:

Charley bought some popcorn

Billy bought a car

Someone almost bought the farm

But they didn't go that far (The Missing Years).

Do you buy it? Prine asks. Do you follow institutional religion, or can you find Jesus on you own? Are you going to "buy the farm"? Are you going to die without having really lived?

Things shut down at midnight

At least round here they do. (The Missing Years).

Here on earth, life ends and what's next is anyone's guess. Life may be tolerable, however, if you have a friend to talk to:

Cause we all reside

down the block inside

at...23 Skidoo (The Missing Years).

According to American attitudes and laws, people have the right to pursue happiness. In studying this pursuit, some artists take an irreverent look at the institutions that promise happiness. Many of the songs Prine produces can be called satirical in the sense that "satire is both cruel and kind, as a surgeon is cruel and kind: it gives hurt in the interest of the patient or society" (Perrine 613). Prine uses humor to illuminate the idiosyncrasies of humans' beliefs and practices, and their sometimes illogical attempts to define happiness. Perhaps through this enlightenment they will "find Jesus on their own." And if there truly is "no humor in heaven," I'm not sure I want to go either.



## CHAPTER EIGHT - CONCLUSION: IT'S A BIG OLD GOOFY WORLD

So I'm sitting in a hotel  
Trying to write a song  
My head is just as empty  
As the day is long  
Why it's clear as a bell  
I should have gone to school  
I'd be wise as an owl  
Stead of stubborn as a mule  
"It's A Big Old Goofy World" (The Missing Years)

The last song I will discuss, "It's a Big Old Goofy World," symbolizes Prine's world view. The lyrics of the song are composed of seemingly unrelated similes such as "happy as a clam," "like a bump on a log," "quiet as a mouse," and "drinks like a fish" (The Missing Years), but Prine manages to combine these figures of speech into a loose story form. Twain describes this type of juxtaposition: "To string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way, and seem innocently unaware that they are absurdities, is the basis of American art" (Zall xviii).

Twain's success was due in part to his ability to synthesize "Old World" European knowledge and sensibilities with "New World" American humor and stubborn desire to create a new nation. From these differing characteristics, he created a uniquely American literature. In Prine's chosen genre of music, he is able to achieve a similar effect. For example, in "It's a Big Old Goofy World," he takes the poetic language (an influence of Europe) of similes, and creates an American tall tale of humans who "work like a dog," "smoke like a chimney," and "sing like an angel." Prine's vehicle for expressing these words is a musical combination of folk and rock 'n roll. Folk songs were passed down from the troubadours of Europe, and rock 'n roll is an American creation. "It's a Big Old Goofy World has a slow shuffle tempo, and its guitar and bass rhythm section, its toy piano and clarinet add libs, and the Midwestern drawl of Prine's

voice all mix together to create a sound that can only be called “American.”

In the song, Prine covers many cultural icons: from the American Dream of owning a house to the golfing buddy and his cute wife; from Elvis to liars; from Prine’s own struggles writing songs to a wish that he “should have gone to school.” Neither John Prine nor Mark Twain went to college; a bulk of their professional lives was spent on the road observing the world. Prine does not sell as many albums as a typical recording artist, so most of his income is earned by performing on the road. Likewise, Twain’s writing assignments for various newspapers took him all over the world; however, it was on the lecture circuit that he earned his living. In fact, Twain scholar Paul M. Zall, claims that, “In his own day Mark Twain was more popular as a speaker than as a writer” (xv).

Prine acknowledges his kinship to Twain in both song and interview. The song “Great Rain” imagines a conversation with Twain:

Great rain, great rain

I thought I heard you call my name

I was standing by the river

Talking to a young Mark Twain (The Missing Years).

Commenting on this song, Prine states, “I always liked Mark Twain, his anecdotes and his short stories. I am sure I would have loved to hear one of his lectures ” (Compton, “John Prine” 49). Prine draws people to his concerts for similar reasons. People speak of “loving” an artist when there is a connection between fan and artist; when the fan appreciates the work of an artist and feels the artist is able to convey an attitude or belief that the fan agrees with. Bonnie Raitt, not only an artist herself, but a friend and a fan of Prine, claims, “What makes John so special is that there’s no separating who he is from his music—you just love him (Wild 15).

Prine’s passion for the music and the characters he creates is one reason that he has

garnered such loyal fans. At the request of Poet Laureate Ted Kooser, in May of 2005, Prine performed at the Library of Congress and was interviewed by Kooser himself. The topic was songwriting, poetry, and Prine's oeuvre. Kooser's introduction included this statement: "John Prine has taken ordinary people and make monuments of them [...] treating them with great respect and love" (Kooser). The enduring nature of his songs support this statement. Prine has stated that he plays "Hello in There" at every show. And he even commented fondly that "Sam Stone" was a song "that won't let go" (Kooser). In other words, the singular quality of the song, and the voice delivering the song, do not lessen over time.

When a reader talks of love for a writer, "voice," the style and unique approach a writer has to art, is often mentioned. In Prine's case, his fans love him not only for his figurative voice, but also his literal voice. His figurative voice may be described as the images and tone he incorporates in his songs; his literal voice is the timbre and pitch of his singing voice. Because of his heritage, Cooper reports that Prine sings "with a dirt-road, Southern accent: 'Hello in tharrrr, hello'" (screen 1). Though trained neither as an instrumentalist nor a vocalist, Prine's voice is not only pleasing, but unique. Parke Puterbaugh states, "Prine's voice has been ground to a fine-grained, sandpapery rasp that is nonetheless expressive and melodic[...]" (24). Perhaps the best quote comes from Mike Britten:

[...] his dust-bowl voice is still a relaxed, homegrown combination of Illinois, Kentucky, and thirty years of road work. It may not appeal to everyone, but it's a highly expressive instrument, alternately dripping with sly humor and great tenderness. It's hard to hear him singing [...] and imagine any other voice could do justice to his material [...] it's also hard to hear him sing live and not want to sing along with him, as the audience merrily does on the chorus to 'Illegal Smile.'

Like Mark Twain, John Prine entertains and instructs audiences on the goofy characteristics of human beings, and he does so with story, song and an illegal smile. Joe F. Compton maintains that “John Prine has a clear-eyed vision of the essential craziness of this world, and like some 20<sup>th</sup>-century Mark Twain, he allows his audience to see the craziness, understand it, and laugh at it” (“Prine Time” 22). In America, the Promised Land is not always paradise. But, there is much humor to be found. We just need people like Mark Twain and John Prine to illuminate our foibles and help us transcend them.

The repeating chorus of “It’s a Big Old Goofy World” sums up both the song and Prine’s world view:

There’s a big old goofy man

Dancing with a big old goof girl

Ohhh baby

It’s a big old goofy world (The Missing Years).

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