

Country singer-songwriter John Prine dies in pandemic

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The death of beloved country music singer-songwriter John Prine from COVID-19 seems especially cruel. The 73-year old musician, known for his empathetic portraits of working-class life, had been hospitalized since March 26 at Vanderbilt Medical Center in Nashville, Tennessee, where he needed the assistance of a ventilator to breathe. He finally succumbed to the illness on April 7.

Prine was a wonderful songwriter and by all accounts a decent man. His music contained genuine moments of beauty, pathos and humor. In his art and his very personality, Prine pursued an existence entirely opposed to the sort led by those whose criminal negligence made possible his death from COVID-19.

Born in 1946, Prine grew up in Maywood, Illinois, in the Chicago metropolitan area. His parents had moved there from Kentucky in the 1930s. In Maywood, Prine's father went to work at an American Can Company factory and became a union organizer. In his song "Paradise," Prine wrote memorably of the Kentucky coal town his parents had left behind, destroyed by the strip mining of the Peabody Coal Company. He sang:

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
Mister Peabody's coal train has hauled it away

Before his career in music got going, Prine spent six years working for the post office. In 1966, with US operations escalating in Vietnam, Prine was drafted into the army along with several of his friends. During an appearance on the television show *Bobby Bare and Friends* in the 1980s, Prine remembered how the experience changed them all. He recalled that one friend, home for little more than a month, was

undergoing shock treatments. Others had drug problems. "A lot of the ones that came home, it never seemed like they came back," he said, "A lot of them still ain't home."

These experiences led Prine to write several songs opposing both the war and American nationalism. The best-known was "Sam Stone," about a soldier who returns from Vietnam addicted to heroin. The opening lines of the chorus are devastating: "There's a hole in daddy's arm where all the money goes / Jesus Christ died for nothin' I suppose."

When the veteran finally overdoses, Prine sings:

There was nothing to be done
But trade his house that he bought on the G. I. Bill
For a flag draped casket on a local heroes' hill.

Prine had an uncanny ability to get inside of a life and write about it from there. The stories he told may not always have been his own, and yet he seemed to know them in intimate detail. He took what appeared to be the private sufferings of individuals and rendered them general and relatable. In what the singer-songwriter offered large numbers of people, they were able to see and understand something of their own experience more deeply.

At their best, Prine's vivid lyrics sat perfectly in their songs. Each word fell in the right place. When he finished a verse or completed a rhyme, it was something like the effect of a gymnast who sticks the landing at the end of an elaborate routine. That speaks to something more than simply an individual accomplishment. Powerful social urges, thoughts and feelings find a voice through such singers and performers.

It is remarkable that, while still in his early 20s, Prine could write a song like "Hello in There," imagining the lives of an elderly couple whose children had all left

home, one of them lost in the Korean War. “Angel from Montgomery” examined similar territory of unfulfilled longing. Singer Bonnie Raitt recorded the definitive version in 1974.

Next to the poignant tragedies were Prine’s comedies, though the lines between the two often become blurred. In “Please Don’t Bury Me,” Prine sang:

Please don’t bury me
Down in that cold cold ground
No, I’d druther have ‘em cut me up
And pass me all around
Throw my brain in a hurricane
And the blind can have my eyes
And the deaf can take both of my ears
If they don’t mind the size

In “That’s the Way the World Goes Round,” he sings:

I was sitting in the bathtub counting my toes,
when the radiator broke, water all froze.
I got stuck in the ice without my clothes,
naked as the eyes of a clown.
I was crying ice cubes hoping I’d croak,
when the sun come through the window, the ice all broke.
I stood up and laughed thought it was a joke
That’s the way that the world goes ‘round.

Prine wrote too many moving and remarkable tunes to list, but one should not leave out “Speed of the Sound of Loneliness” and “Christmas in Prison.”

These and other songs bring out the liveliness and optimism embedded in much of Prine’s work. While tragedy had a presence, self-pity did not appear to exist in his world. Later in life, Prine suffered serious medical setbacks. In 1998, he had surgery to remove a tumor in his neck, which left his vocal cords and tongue damaged. In 2013, part of a lung was removed during a surgery to treat another cancer. When he recovered and returned to work, Prine looked and sounded different. But he went on. Some of his best work was still ahead of him.

In his later career, Prine recorded two memorable albums of duets, *In Spite of Ourselves* (1999) and *For Better, Or Worse* (2005). The duets with Iris DeMent, including the funny title track from *In Spite of Ourselves*, about two uncouth eccentrics who fall in love, were especially memorable.

Some Humans Ain’t Human,” “Prine of the social types that staffed the administration of George W. Bush, who appears as the “cowboy from Texas.” He sang:

Some humans ain’t human
Though they walk like we do
They live and they breathe
Just to turn the old screw

Prine’s final album *The Tree of Forgiveness*, released in 2018, was yet another strong addition to his catalogue. Along with more serious songs, it included the amusing “Egg & Daughter Nite, Lincoln Nebraska, 1967,” about eager young country boys running off to meet farmers’ daughters at the local roller skating rink.

Half a century into his career, Prine was still creating meaningful music that entertained and enriched listeners. He befriended and mentored many young country artists along the way. One of them, the talented Sturgill Simpson, has also tested positive for COVID-19.

What seems to have been a basic goodness came through in everything John Prine did. Iris DeMent put it well in a comment published April 10 in *Rolling Stone*, writing, “We all know that John ennobled the characters in his songs. Any of us lucky enough to have seen one of his shows knows he also did this for his audience. I, for one, happen to know he did it at truck stops and Dairy Queens, too. John was one of the all-time great ennoblers of others.”

There is no question but that, at the age of 73, his life was cut short.



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