

Still Slow Turning

John Hiatt speaks about Napster, his new acoustic set, Crossing Muddy Waters, and the wonders of corndogs.

DANIEL DURCHHOLZ



Amid the unfettered opulence and antique furnishings of the St. Paul Hotel, veteran singer-songwriter John Hiatt sits, musing about the decidedly more plebian wonders of the Minnesota State Fair, in full swing a couple of miles away.

"You know, they've got more fried food there — and it's all on a stick. They have fish on a stick, meat on a stick. One place, they just have a huge hunk of fat —

breaded fat! — on a stick. I tell ya, man, you get a couple of corndogs in ya, you feel like a million bucks.” Hiatt is in the Twin Cities to play a pair of late-summer gigs at the fair with his once and future backup band, the Goners, with whom he’s reunited after 11 years. He’s excited about playing once again with the Louisiana trio of Sonny Landreth (guitar), David Ranson (bass), and Ken Blevins (drums),

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who last backed him on 1988’s *Slow Turning*. Hiatt’s also anxious to talk about *Crossing Muddy Waters*, his new all-acoustic album, being released on the Internet through EMusic.com, and through conventional means by Vanguard Records.

“I’d love to say there was more planning involved in putting this record out, but the fact that there’s not is usual with me,” Hiatt says. “We got out of our situation with Capitol [Hiatt’s former record label], and had to spend a few months doing that. I was about three-fourths of the way through a record with the Goners and didn’t want to leave it behind. So we had to do a little finagling, and when we finally got off the label, my manager, Ken [Levitan], said, ‘You want to make an acoustic record? ‘Cause EMusic and all these Web companies will just put it out on the Net.’ I just went, ‘Yeah, man.’ It was kind of a reaction to six months of haggling with the corporate business world. I thought, ‘Let’s make some music!’ ” Hiatt is old enough to be excused for not being computer-literate, much less keeping up with the issues and opportunities presented to artists by the Internet these days. But thanks largely to his wife and kids, he’s right on top of things.

“My wife — she had a computer back when they cost \$6000 and had a 25MHz processor,” Hiatt says with a laugh. “You

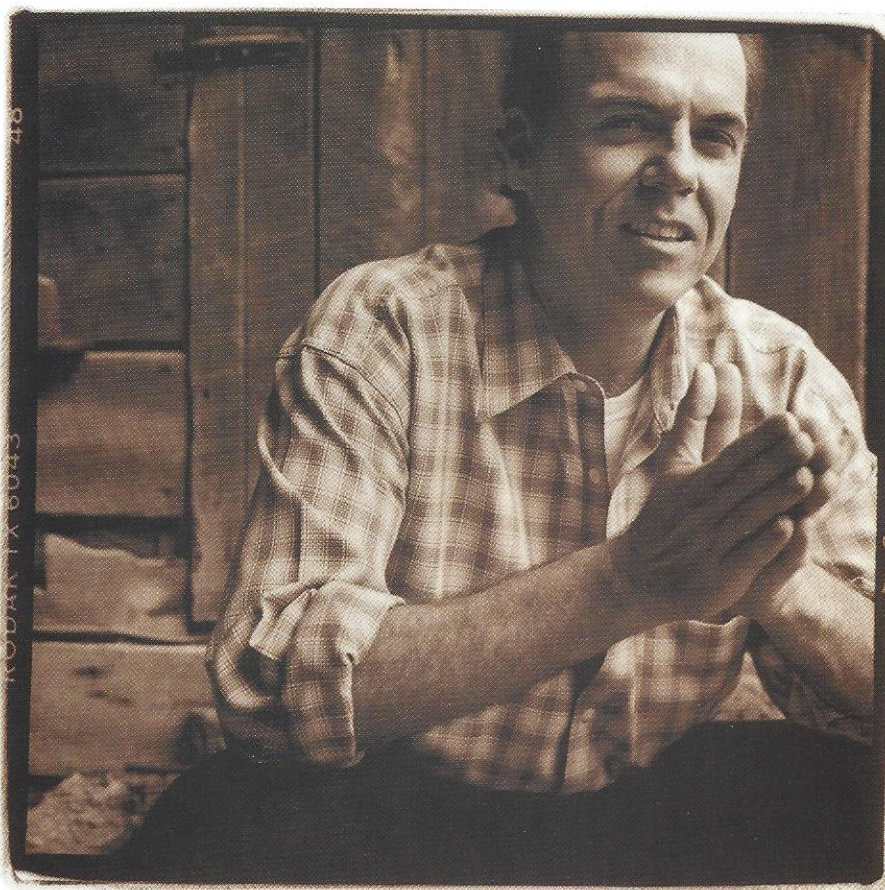
know, back in those days, they were steam-powered. So my kids grew up on computers. They sit there and multitask and carry on a conversation.”

One of the websites visited regularly from the Hiatt house is, surprisingly enough, the dreaded Napster.com, which has caused endless gnashing of teeth and rending of garments in the high offices of the major labels, as well as in the courts and even in Congress.

“Yeah, we have Napster. We’re nappin’. It’s great,” Hiatt says. “My 16-year-old daughter discovered it a month ago, and she’s downloaded 50 different live versions of songs by Pearl Jam. She came to me the other day and said, ‘You know, Dad, since I’ve been doing Napster, I’ve bought 10 new CDs.’ And I thought, ‘Isn’t that what it’s all about?’

— JOHN HIATT

“I know there are problems, but let’s work those out. Instead of ‘I’m gonna cut you guys’ balls off’ (that’s sort of the corporate-record-world version of how to deal with things), ‘We’re just gonna put you out of business’ — it’s like, *deal* with it. The record companies were just caught with their pants down. Somebody had the technology, and they were just so far ahead of the ninnies that sit up in the record-company towers and take too many damn vacations. It’s



called competition. Unfortunately, the corporate approach to that is to try and annihilate the competition."

In leasing his new album to EMusic and to Vanguard, Hiatt hasn't taken the giant leap of artists such as Ani DiFranco, John Prine, Emmylou Harris, Steve Earle, and Prince, who formed their own labels in defiance of the corporate attitude that music is a failure if it can't keep pace with the sales of 'N Sync and Britney Spears CDs. Still, Hiatt thinks that what he's doing is a step toward seizing control of his own work and determining the direction of his career.

"This is the first record of mine that I own," he says. "EMusic and Vanguard can put it out and market it for five years, then the ownership reverts back to me. The record that we got back from Capitol, the one with the Goners, we'd like to put that out in the spring of the new year. There's been some interest with some other majors, but we kind of like this free-agency thing. We're going to see how it goes."

Hiatt has reason to keep the big labels at arm's length—after all, you don't leave a label unless the partnership has broken down in some fashion, and over the course of his career, now spanning more than a quarter century, Hiatt has been through six: Epic, MCA, Geffen, A&M, Reprise, and Capitol. So it's no wonder that he sees the increased democratization of power in the music business as a positive thing.

But Hiatt also has reason to be especially protective of *Crossing Muddy Waters*: Intended as it may have been as a relatively quick and amusing treat for artist and fans alike, it's turned out to be one of his finest efforts. Given that Hiatt's extensive catalog includes such gems as *Bring the Family*, *Slow Turning*, and the raucous *Perfectly Good Guitar*, that's saying something.

Recorded in just four days at a studio around the corner from his home near Leaper's Fork, Tennessee, *Crossing Muddy Waters* is toned down, perhaps, but doesn't lack for intensity. Its 11 songs feature Hiatt on vocals and guitar, with the Nashville Queens: Dave Immergluck on mandolin and guitar, and Davey Farragher on bass ("he's the one stomping his foot," says Hiatt). Justin Niebank, who has manned the boards for numerous rock and blues albums and has dabbled in techno music as well, produced the album.

Most of the songs were written in the last year, Hiatt says, but when he began the project, he made a list of 20 older songs that, for one reason or another, he'd never recorded. Of those, three ended up on the record: "Lincoln Town," "Only the Song Survives," and the title track.

To write the rest of the material, Hiatt says he drew on "my earliest inspirations. You know, when I first picked up a guitar at 11—what would that have been, '63?—we just wanted to do Beatles songs and Who songs, Mitch Ryder, whoever was happening on the radio. But by the time I hit 14, 15, I discovered Bob Dylan, and for me, he was the gateway to all the blues and country blues and American Roots

music. So through him I discovered guys like Mississippi John Hurt, John Estes, Lightin' Hopkins, Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon, and, gee whiz, so many others. It all came about through listening to 'Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands' over and over again for about a year." [laughs]

Those influences can be heard most directly on "Lincoln Town," a stomping country blues; the moaning "Mr. Stanley"; and "Lift Up Every Stone," a rousing gospel-style raveup.

"You know, the inspiration for songs... I kind of look at it like shrapnel that you've picked up over the years, and something, a piece of it, will move in your body after 20 years and hit a little nerve, and you'll remember that little piece of shrapnel and something will come out of it. I remember taking one of my daughters to a party, some little party at a kid's

house that we'd never been to. I took her up to drop her off, and I met the little girl's parents, and I overheard the woman at one point trying to tell somebody else where you drive out to leave. They had a big property, and she said, 'You just go down there until you get to my slave wall, and then you take a right.' And I was like—'my slave wall'—it just rubbed me the wrong goddamn way.

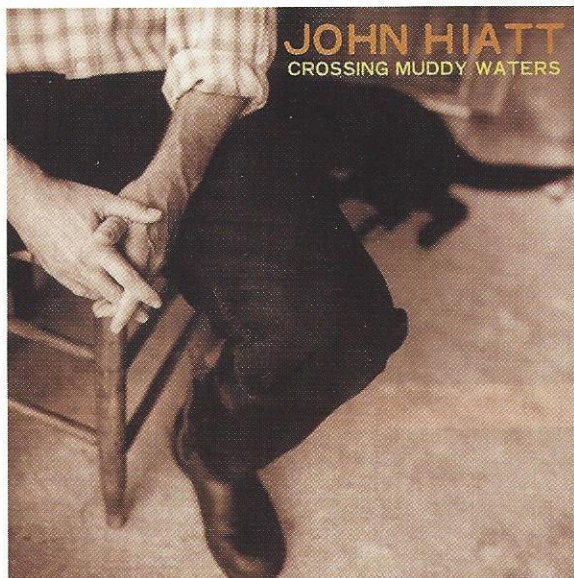
"But that was the inspiration for 'Lift Up Every Stone.' The story—I love telling a story where you don't exactly know who's doing what. Obviously something happened, somebody died, and somebody is going to get blamed for it, probably not the right person—kind of like the American justice system!

When we cut that, we felt like the ghosts were coming up out of the front pasture. It was pretty emotional."

Equally emotional is "What Do We Do Now," a devastating portrait of a relationship stuck between gears. Hiatt readily admits that it was based on a particularly wrenching personal experience. "We've been married 14 years, my wife and I, and at about five years, we hit a wall," he says. "And you know, if the 'D' word is ever uttered, it's a scary thing. We didn't want that, but we wondered, 'Is that gonna happen?' I just remember, it was a tough year for us, and that's what I was trying to tap into."

"Some time later, I sort of befriended a guy, Dan Fouts, who used to quarterback the San Diego Chargers. He's a great guy. We met because I've done a couple of benefits for his wife, and when he first heard that song, he said, 'Man, we used to say that in the huddle all the time, when we were getting our asses kicked.' And I thought, 'Well, it is pretty universal, that feeling of total helplessness.'"

Hiatt, of course, has never shied away from delving into personal issues. He donned various guises early on in his career—that of rock'n'roller, neo-folkie, and, oddly, brash New Waver ("the American Elvis Costello," he was called in some circles). But he found his true platform at last on the rootsy *Bring the Family*, an album that marked a change in his life in more ways than one.





With his career in turmoil in the early '80s, Hiatt had sunk into an alcoholic haze and, at the same time, suffered the suicide of his first wife. One has only to look at the deathly pallor of Hiatt's face on the album covers of *Shug Line* and *Riding With the King* to know that all was not well. He entered rehab in 1985, and moved from Los Angeles to Nashville, which had been his first home away from his native Indianapolis back in the early '70s.

He remarried, and the lyrics of *Bring the Family* and the two albums that followed, *Slow Turning* and *Stolen Moments*, are sometimes celebratory, sometimes self-excoriating, but always brutally honest reflections of what he was going through at the time. Songs like "Have a Little Faith in Me,"

"Through Your Hands," "Feels Like Rain," and "Thank You Girl" are among his finest work, and the record-buying public picked up on them, putting Hiatt on the commercial map for the first time.

"*Bring the Family*, to me, was like, you know, I finally have a career," Hiatt says with a laugh. "It felt like I had my foot in the door, finally. So everything was up from there. A number of things just came together around then. My personal life had been a mess. I'm one of those artists who... I kind of grow artistically as I grow personally. I guess everybody does to some degree. But the more I've gotten my shit together as a human being, the better the music has gone."

It wasn't as if no one else had noticed. In addition to his own commercial upturn, Hiatt's songs were suddenly ripe for numerous cover versions. Artists including Bob Dylan,

Bonnie Raitt, Rosanne Cash, the Neville Brothers, Willie Nelson, Emmylou Harris, and many others have recorded his material, making it equally at home on rock and country albums. That's something of a surprise when you consider that Hiatt, in "Memphis in the Meantime" from *Bring the Family*, berated mainstream country by singing "I don't think Ronnie Milsap's gonna ever record this song."

In fact, Milsap *has* recorded a Hiatt song, "Old Habits are Hard to Break." Reminded of that fact, Hiatt notes, "You know, lately when we do that song, I replace his name with Tim McGraw. I'm hoping for a Tim McGraw cut. I figure if I mention people in that song as not ever doing one of my songs, then they probably will."

He's kidding, sort of. Hiatt says he doesn't really seek out cover versions, but is happy when they come along. "Put yourself in my place," he says. "If you wrote a song and somebody decided to do it, wouldn't that just thrill you to death? It's been great, and it's sort

of been the surprise part of my career. In fact, I don't write for other people. I've never been able to do that. I just write, and I guess because I write a lot, there's always stuff for people to record."

His work habits, however have changed over the years. As other parts of his life crowd in—there's his role as father of three, of course, plus his hobby of driving Pro Challenge

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Trucks on a racing circuit in Tennessee, as well as his part-time job as host of the PBS series *Sessions at West 54th*—songwriting can sometimes seem to take a less important role. But that's all right, he insists.

"I have no disciplines," he declares. "I don't have any kind of a daily exercise. I can write five songs in a week, and then I won't write for two months. And whereas in my earlier years, two months without writing would freak me out, two months without writing doesn't bother me in the least now. As you get older, you can go two months without doing a *lot* of stuff." [laughs]

"It's funny—when you're younger and you have all the time in the world, you don't think you do. And when you get older and you're running out of time, you feel like you've got all the time in the world. What's up with that?"