“Working on a new song, there’s a point where nothing is there and then, as most of us say, the gift is given to you—the exact right description, the right choice of words that describes what it was you were trying to give a picture of to the audience,” John Fogerty says during an interview at his home in Los Angeles. “When that happens, there’s not a soul anywhere around. I’m all alone, except for God. But I have to say, that moment when you know you got it right is more rewarding and more happy and maybe even more spooky than any of the other parts of music—being in front of 10,000 people getting a standing ovation or somebody giving you a gold record or whatever.”
Many of your songs begin with a title phrase written in a notebook. How did you get started collecting titles? Well, there’s one notebook in particular I started when I was 17. In 1969. What happened was, I was an active duty soldier in the army. I had written a song while I was in the army, and I was working on it. It was a narrative, kind of about my personal life as a kid, but in a lot of ways it was also made up. I was just writing down the things that I was going through. So I at a very young age learned or at least formed the opinion that the title is really important.

I was talking about that with Duane Eddy, because he was the guy that inspired that in me, and he says, “Well, yeah, when you have a title, you kind of know where you’re going to go, don’t you?” This is a guy who never wrote lyrics. Man—he should be writing songs. Who says, “It’s a little bit better, isn’t it?”

“I’m sure after years of playing, you get the idea of using a title book? What I discovered was if I had a title, I could make up a song that was a little bit autobiographical and a little bit not.”

The ubiquity of Fogerty’s songs, not just the Creedence classics of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, but such solo hits as “Centerfield,” makes it a little startling to meet the writer himself. When he greets me, he’s dressed in jeans, his face strikingly youthful even at the age of 68. On record and in concert these days, Fogerty sounds just as he’s supposed to sound, too, from the searing vocals of every stripe, that it’s hard to imagine anyone wrote them. For decades Fogerty’s songs have been a part of our cultural vocabulary, which explains why artists as diverse as the Foo Fighters, Kid Rock, Miranda Lambert, My Morning Jacket, and Brad Paisley all sound so at home reinterpreting his catalog on Fogerty’s Latest album, Wrote a Song for Everyone. Paisley, who first covered one of Fogerty’s songs onstage when he was 12, can’t even trace where the influence began.

“I don’t remember my first encounter the same way that I don’t remember the first drink of milk either,” Paisley says. “You’re born in the United States of America, especially when I was born in 1972, and you’re just surrounded by John’s music.”

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I had stumbled upon the idea of a completely blank sheet of paper or completely blank mindset that could go anywhere or be in any time. I could be anything or anyone I wanted to. I could just discovered poetic license.

JOHN FOGERTY, SURF GUITARIST?

Believe it.
One disc of this new six-CD box set includes 28 pre-CCR tracks, including eight previously unreleased, that chronicle the band’s evolution between 1958-65 from the ’50s-style doo-wop of their earliest band, Tommy Fogerty & the Blue Velvets, to the El Centro High School-era Golliwogs, which morphed rapidly from surf to ‘Fкров-р’s-style rock to John Reed–inspired blues to garage rock.

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JOHN FOGERTY | THE AG INTERVIEW


GREEN RIVER: “I Heard It Through the Grapevine” and “Fortunate Son,” to name a few. It includes two CDs of rare studio sessions and live concert recordings from 1970-72.

The set also has a 76-page book of essays by Ben Fong-Torres, Stanley Booth, Alec Palao, Jennifer Hudson, Miranda Lambert, Tom Morello, Kid Rock, and others.

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me a record and explained to me that was Stephen Foster, and he was the songwriter—
one side was "Oh! Susannah" and the other was "Camptown Races," doo-dah, doo-dah. I mean that's remarkable to be telling a kid about a songwriter. I don't know if she had an intent, but she gave me the record, which I loved. Of course I thought Stephen Foster was on the record.

Then as rock 'n' roll and the folk tradition came along, I went to the library a couple of times and got books about songwriters. It was in one of those books that I saw this instruction—I always thought it was from Johnny Mercer but it's probably someone else. Anyway, the idea was when you're working on a song and it's not right, it's just not resolved, a bell will ring in your head. The little bell is telling you that you need to fix this—you can't leave it that way. But if you ignore the bell, pretty soon it won't ring for you anymore.

If you're going to be lazy—"Oh yeah, that's good enough"—well, then, you're never going to develop. I think the act of searching for the right thing is what improves you as a writer—the very act of digging and then the knowledge of the reward.  

Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers (jeffreypepperrodgers.com), Editor-at-Large for 'Acoustic Guitar,' is author of 'The Complete Singer-Songwriter' and the Homespun video series 'Learn Seven Grateful Dead Classics for Acoustic Guitar.'