

JOHN FOGERTY

THE **AG** INTERVIEW

BY JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS

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CCR: Tom Fogerty, left, John Fogerty, Stu Cook, Doug Clifford

“**W**orking 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.”



“‘Mystic Highway’ was a work in progress so long I’m almost embarrassed to admit it. But that’s the crazy process that we go through as songwriters.”

From “Bad Moon Rising” and “Born on the Bayou” to “Fortunate Son” and “Proud Mary,” the songs Fogerty penned with Creedence Clearwater Revival are so deeply embedded in American music, and covered so often by musicians 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 or 13, can’t even trace where the influence began.

“I don’t remember my first encounter the same way that I don’t remember my 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.”

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 songwriter himself. When he greets me, he’s looking just as John Fogerty is supposed to look, wearing a blue plaid flannel shirt, 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 to the swampy guitar riffs. Now fully embracing his past (in recent years he’s even worked with his longtime nemesis, Fantasy Records, now owned by Concord, on several releases of solo and Creedence material, including a new box set), Fogerty is far from coasting on it. He starts each day with intensive woodshedding on guitar and works hard on new songs, two of which, “Mystic Highway” and “Train of Fools,” appear on *Wrote a Song for Everyone*.


My visit with Fogerty came before he hit the road for a lengthy fall tour that included onstage jams with ZZ Top’s Billy Gibbons, Zac Brown Band, and Widespread Panic. No longer consumed by the bitter legal battles over his Creedence royalties and copyrights

(which he still does not own), Fogerty seems relaxed and content and very chatty—particularly on the topic of songwriting and guitars. We tour his home studio suite, where one room is piled with boxes of scrapbooks, photos, recordings, notebooks, and other mementos from more than 50 years in music. And he cracks open an old Anvil case to show me a 3/4-size, sunburst Rickenbacker—the John Lennon model—that he played with Creedence. As we talk in his family room, near a wall of gold records, Fogerty cradles a favorite new acoustic: a Santa Cruz Vintage Southerner inspired by his beloved Gibson Southern Jumbos from the 1950s.

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 in 1969. What happened was, I had written a song while I was on active duty [in the army], a song called “Porterville,” although I didn’t quite have a title yet. It was a narrative, kind of about my personal life as a kid, but in a lot of ways it was also made up. Remember, I’d been writing songs since I was probably five or six years old, but they were always kind of moon/June, Tin Pan Alley. I was trying to write a song like I saw on TV. When I was in the army, I began to write a song that meant some-

CELEBRATING A VINTAGE GIBSON



SANTA CRUZ VINTAGE SOUTHERNER

John Fogerty’s longstanding favorite acoustic guitars are two Gibson Southern Jumbos: one from 1952, which has a P-90 pickup and is tuned down to D, and the other from 1954, which stays in standard tuning. These SJs are all over his latest album, and he considers them the holy grail—and irreplaceable, so he won’t tour with them. At the suggestion of his guitar buddy Brad Paisley, who owns a Santa Cruz Guitar Co. interpretation of the prewar dreadnought, Fogerty contacted Santa Cruz about building a guitar modeled after his Gibson SJs.

Santa Cruz offers the short-scale Vintage Southerner (VS) as one if its regular models, so company founder Richard Hoover sent Fogerty a Santa Cruz VS to compare to the vintage Gibsons. Fogerty made a recording test of the Santa Cruz and his ’54 Gibson to help Hoover and company dial in the tone. For Fogerty’s guitar, Santa Cruz used mahogany for the back and sides (as on the standard

VS) and Italian (rather than Sitka) spruce for the top. “One of the real secrets about old instruments and why they sound better,” Hoover says, “is the wood sounds better with age. The resins polymerize, which is a chemical change that hardens the woods, as opposed to the common belief that they dry. So the woods that we used for this guitar were really old.”

Around the time Santa Cruz was building Fogerty’s guitar, Hoover adds, the company was using mahogany that came from the door of a rural church in Brazil, and also a Chicago mill dating from the 1920s.

Fogerty received his Santa Cruz in 2013, and says it’s the closest he’s heard to his vintage Gibsons. “I’m sure after years of me hammering on it, it’ll start to sound more like those guys,” he adds.

In a modern touch, Fogerty’s Santa Cruz is equipped with a K&K Pure Mini pickup for stage use.

thing to me, and I began to go someplace. 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 had just discovered poetic license. So while I’m marching around, I’m creating this song that’s a little bit autobiographical and a little bit not.

I got out of the army and was struggling with all that and realized, I need to get organized. So I went down to the local drugstore, and I got a little plastic book and called it Song Titles. I put blank paper in the little binder, and somewhere along the way the very first thing I wrote in it was the words

“Proud Mary.” I had no idea what that meant. After that, every time I had an idea, I’d write it in that book. What I discovered was if I had a title that sounded cool, then I’d try to write a cool song that fit the cool title.

Where did you get the idea of using a title book?

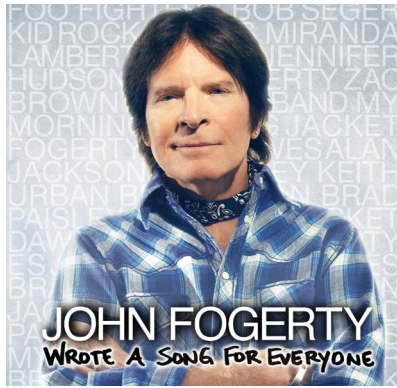
Of all people, I was talking with Duane Eddy once about this subject. Remember, Duane Eddy is an instrumentalist. He writes songs with no words, right? But one of the things I learned specifically from Duane Eddy was his song titles were really cool, like “Rebel Rouser,” “Forty Miles of Bad Road,” “Ramrod,” “Commotion,” “Cannonball,”

“The Lonely One.” The titles took you somewhere. 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, 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 then, don’t you?” This is a guy who never wrote lyrics. Man—he should have been writing lyrics if he was that clever about how it works.

So many of your songs have these great, simple guitar riffs. When you’re writing, do the riffs help to lead you into the song?

'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 had just discovered poetic license.'



Wrote a Song for Everyone, 2013

Featuring Bob Seger, Brad Paisley, Foo Fighters, My Morning Jacket, Jennifer Hudson, Miranda Lambert, Tom Morello, Kid Rock, and others.
Vanguard Records

JOHN FOGERTY, SURF GUITARIST?

Believe it.

One disc of this new six-CD box set includes 25 pre-CCR tracks, including eight previously unsold, that chronicle the band's evolution between 1961-67, from the '50s-style doo wop of their earliest band, Tommy Fogerty & the Blue Velvets, to the El Cerrito High School-era Golliwogs, which morphed rapidly from surf to Yardbirds-style rock to Jimmy Reed-inspired blues to garage rock.

By the time the band signed with Fantasy Records, in John Fogerty's birthplace in nearby Berkeley, California, Creedence had brewed a swampy blend of blues, Stax R&B, and roots rock. It was party-friendly music tempered with Fogerty's raspy blue-eyed-soul vocals, his seemingly bottomless bag of seductive guitar riffs, and a trance-inducing Louisiana bayou vibe that led many to assume, mistakenly, that Fogerty and his band mates had deep Southern roots.

This box set gathers 121 remastered tracks, everything released by the band, including such hits as “Born on the Bayou,” “Bad Moon Rising,”

"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, and Dave Marsh, among others, and rare photos, including images of such obscure memorabilia as Golliwog concert posters.

Of course, most of CCR's recordings featured electric guitars, but Fogerty and his brother Tom often went unplugged. The intro and outro to "Who'll Stop the Rain," for instance, were built around a simple three-note acoustic lick, and powerful acoustic-guitar strumming propelled the rhythm on such hits as "Have You Ever Seen the Rain" and "Lookin' Out My Back Door."

The acoustics seen on two of the band's album covers have even achieved iconic status: the dobro that John Fogerty posed with on the cover of *Green River* was featured in a recent CCR exhibit at the Grammy Museum in Los Angeles.

—GREG CAHILL



Creedence

Creedence Clearwater Revival
Fantasy/Concord

- 6-CD box set
- 121 remastered tracks
- 76-page book of essays
- Rare studio sessions
- Live concert recordings

I have a guitar in my hands every day, usually electric. I do a lot of practicing. I'm working on my technique, you know, trying to get better. So most of the riffs that I write are intended for electric guitar, leading a band. I can't really tell you how that comes about. You just have the guitar in your hands. You're noodling. You get into a certain sort of mood [plays E7 blues riffs]. Sometimes your fingers will go a new way by accident.

What you're playing sounds similar to the 'Born on the Bayou' riff, from the early days of Creedence.

That was certainly one of those accidents. It's funny. We were going to play at the Avalon Ballroom [in San Francisco], and there were a whole bunch of other people on the bill. My band was the last to soundcheck just before they opened the doors. I think this was our first chance to play at one of the big places in San Francisco. "Susie Q" was out. It wasn't a real album yet—it was a tape I had given to the radio station KMPX.

For some reason, I was inspired. I think it was just a young person in the environment—oh, man, we're in the Avalon Ballroom! Cool! My amp was sounding good, we've got everything plugged in. . . . So I started doing that [riff] on the guitar, and I turned to the drummer, Doug [Clifford], and I said, "Just play along with this," and I kind of gave him a feel. I looked at Tom [Fogerty] and Stu [Cook] and said, "Just play an E—follow me." And I just started screaming out vowels, because that's how I write songs—consonants and vowels, just nonsense. I was standing on the stage, basically doing what I did in my own little room, except it was much louder. I was making these noises and coming up with a sound.

That's how probably 90 percent of my songs get written, usually with a guitar in hand and usually at a point of, I've set up the opportunity, but I don't know what I'm going to do. That is very important for songwriting: you have to construct the opportunity. You have to have the intention, I guess, yet you have to have a completely open mind.

You also have to be able to capture your ideas somehow.

If I'm traveling in a car and I get an idea for something, unless I write it down in my little book, it's gone. All of us have had a zillion of those—oh man, it was such a great idea! What was that idea? You never feel exactly as you felt when you had that idea. I've noticed that I'll be sitting somewhere and not have a pencil and paper or even have a guitar, and I'll think, "I'll remember this—it's obvious." It's kind of like the movie is playing in your head. It's perfect. You're feeling all the emotions, and there's a certain way you're thinking about a topic. But then the next day or even two hours later, whenever you go to try and re-create it, it evaporated. It's just gone.

For me at least, I do better [holding onto the idea] if I have an actual phrase that sounds good to me, like “Bad Moon Rising.”

Didn't you originally write that in your title book?

Yeah. I have a lot of phrases in there. Somebody asked me recently, is there a song you haven't written yet? I looked at them: "I'm not going to give you that. If I give you that, you'll write the song!" [laughs] But I know, for instance, "Mystic Highway" was in that book for maybe 30 years. I knew what it was when I wrote it; I just didn't know how I'd ever tackle the subject and make a song out of it. I could see a group of travelers, probably a family, and they're weary but they're not broken. That's what I saw, and I would hear a little bit every once in a while over the years. It's like it's behind a veil and you can't make it come out—what does that really sound like?

"Mystic Highway" was a work in progress so long I'm almost embarrassed to admit it. But that's the crazy process that we go through as songwriters. I'd be opening a door, walking into a room, and, "Oh, man, there's that song again. How is that going to be?" Without realizing it over the years, I kept filling in just a little bit more of what that refrain was going to be, until finally, for this album, I guess I was ready to do something really tough. The thing had been floating around so long it was almost sacred. You know, it's got to be good after 30 years! But I wasn't afraid of it. When it finally occurred to me what to do, it was just right.

You've got to meet some kind of internal standard, right, no matter how long it takes?

Yeah, and it's a really imperfect process, at least for me. Like I say, I'll have the guitar in my hands 'cause I always have the guitar in my hands. A lot of riffs occur to me. Over the years, I've had special little recorders and a little Dictaphone kind of thing, but now I just turn on the phone and record them. I've got a whole bunch of stuff in my iTunes—that goes back probably eight years. I go back and listen to them sometimes.

I seem to come up with enough riffs automatically that I don't go searching for riffs—I probably should. But I do go searching for song ideas. The lyrics are far and away the hardest part to me. In fact, one of my own truisms is I have to have a really strong melody; it has to sound really like a song or I'm not even going to bother working on the lyrics, because they're so hard. In the old days, I would get one verse or two verses, half finished songs. I used to tell people, for every song you hear I'm writing ten other songs that I don't finish. Somewhere you get into it, you just realize this is a dead end. It's not going to work. This is stupid. You turn the page and try to get onto something better.

Your songs are so lean, both the words and the music. You get in there, get the feeling, and get out. Does that quality reflect your roots in '50s rock 'n' roll or country?

Yeah, you know I had grown up through the whole rock 'n' roll era. Songs were short—they were two minutes and 30 seconds on average, so that's what I learned from. Arranging a record, you knew that you didn't have a long time for a solo, you didn't have a long time for an intro, and I was very conscious of trying to say what I was going to say with as few words as possible—but have them be really good words. If I could find one

word that took the place of five words, that was way better to me.

Were you aware of the writers behind songs you grew up with?

I had read a little bit about other songwriters. I certainly admired the craft of songwriting. I had learned especially, mostly from my mom, about people who were earlier than my day, meaning Irving Berlin and Harold Arlen and Hoagy Carmichael, and Stephen Foster actually. This is probably a well-known tale from me now, but for some reason when I was about three and a half in preschool, my mom gave

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.

AG

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THE ANATOMY OF A SONG

JOHN FOGERTY DESCRIBES HIS EUREKA MOMENT IN WRITING THE NEW SONG “TRAIN OF FOOLS”

As told to Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers

Actually, when I got the idea [for “Train of Fools”], first I wrote another song. It was still called “Train of Fools,” and it was kind of fat Elvis, [*sings*] “hoo-a hoo-a train of fools.” I was under the gun to make a song in the next 24 hours, because in 48 hours I was going to be in the studio with my band. I finished this dreadful thing, but it wasn’t good enough. So I backed up, and miraculously I was able to do it with the same song [title]. Usually that’s so tainted you’ve got to put it away for a while.

But what is this train of fools? I knew it was a really solid concept. And so I started coming up with the idea of these characters and their backgrounds. It was kind of a morality play, I guess. The way I described it later, long after the record was made, it was almost like an episode of *Twilight Zone*. I could just hear Rod Serling, “Here’s the gambler and here’s the loser and here’s the pretty maiden who’s deceitful.” Anyway, the song was basically done, and I actually went into the studio and recorded it with the band, but I just felt that the song was incomplete. It had a narrative, it took you on a little description of the journey, but it didn’t have a conclusion. And so I said, it’s got to be more. Even though the song was already recorded, I was willing to throw it out.

So I was working on “Train of Fools” and there was the line, “One will be addicted / Chained to the devil’s cross / That one’s going to die before he’s old.” That was really where the song ended, and it went into the chorus. I started thinking in terms of a child. I finally got the lines, “This one is a victim / A lost and broken child / Soon enough he’ll be a man to hate.” I thought, all right, pretty good. And then I had to have rhyming words that filled in. I had the idea that people stand around, they’re holier than thou, they think they can do no wrong, and so the [next] line was, “Those that point their finger / Will also share the blame.” Pretty good. Then—this is probably over a period of a few days—there was this little space and suddenly the line was, “Those that point their finger / Will also share the blame / No one leaves this train to judgment day.” I went, what? That was a gift. It surprised me. It’s one of those moments, you’re all alone, and you go, “God, that’s so good.” I mean, who am I going to tell? Even my wife, who loves my music, doesn’t quite struggle with me over words. I can’t go in and [shout], “Judgment day! Judgment day!” She’ll be stirring the spaghetti and she’ll go, “Right, John, judgment day.”

I was literally alone, but it’s like the whole Olympic stadium had gone, “Rah!” The writer knows it. The writer is almost basking in it. Now I take no credit—I give all the credit to the Almighty, whoever or whatever he or she is. That’s when you know someone’s saying, “OK, you worked really hard, my son: here.” I don’t know how to say it . . . It was just beyond what I expected to do.