



John Hiatt will try out new material at Toad's Place Saturday.

John Hiatt is proud of his 'Perfectly Good Guitar'

By Orla Swift
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"Turn that racket down!"

Most teens have heard that command a few times in their lives — presuming they have a stereo and they like rock 'n' roll.

In John Hiatt's family, things are different. When Hiatt's 15-year-old stepson, Rob, slipped his alternative rock albums into the car stereo as they drove to school, Hiatt didn't mind the racket at all. In fact, he liked it. He wanted to make a racket, too.

That's precisely what Hiatt's done with his latest A&M release, *Perfectly Good Guitar*. Following a string of releases that focused on family, relationships and the evocative lyrics that have made him a king among songwriters, Hiatt cranked up the amps, hooked up with a metal music producer and some young '90s rockers, and let loose.

While the results won't be absolutely shocking to those familiar with Hiatt's raucous live shows or older albums, they may surprise some. One music critic who saw a recent warmup gig

turned up her nose at Hiatt's "strange screechy guitar" sound.

Hiatt laughs at the description. "Well, we definitely have that. It's a three-guitar band," he says. "I'm kind of getting off on that, so I'm hoping everybody else will."

Hiatt will try out this new material during a brief warmup tour that'll bring him to Toad's Place for a 7 p.m. show Saturday. Then he'll head to Europe later in the month to begin a full-fledged tour. His tour band — titled either The Knuckleheads or Hamsters of Love — will feature guitarist Michael Ward (from School of Fish), bassist Davey Farrager (from Cracker and Camper Van Beethoven), Cracker drummer Michael Urbano, and guitarist Corkey James (of Toni Childs' band). Ward also played on *Perfectly Good Guitar*, along with Wire Train drummer Brian McLeod and bassist John Pierce.

The new studio and tour bands are a wild jump from past Hiatt collaborators like Louisiana slide guitarist Sonny Landreth and fellow

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veteran rockers Ry Cooder, Nick Lowe and Jim Keltner, with whom he recently performed as the supergroup Little Village.

Hiatt pursued this new path himself, inspired by a new batch of songs he'd written, which were, in turn, inspired by his stepson's grungy three-chord rock. The first thing he did was contact producer Matt Wallace, who's famous for his work with Faith No More. Wallace then hooked Hiatt up with barely post-pubescent studio gang.

Although the two came from different worlds (Hiatt says Wallace had heard his music before, but then adds with a laugh that perhaps Wallace was lying), their aim was precisely in sync.

"We were really pretty clear in our intent," says Hiatt, who recorded the album in two weeks and mixed it in another two weeks. "We were really focused in right from the get-go on what I wanted. I'd sought Matt out because I had a batch of tunes I thought were really rocking and guitar-driven. I wanted to hook up with somebody that could get that sound."

The resulting collection ricochets between hard-driving, full band rockers like the intro cut, "Something Wild" (first recorded by Iggy Pop), "Angel" and "Cross My Fingers" and to funky and slinky, soulful rockers like "When You Hold Me Tight"

and "Old Habits," and more typical, introspective Hiatt tunes like "Straight Outta Time" and "Blue Telescope." Running throughout is that "strange screechy sound" — feedback — that gives the album a grungier feel than past collections.

And does his stepson approve? "He claims he's heard some of it. I don't know," says Hiatt. "He's been living at his dad's house. I don't know if he likes it or not. He's 15, he'll be 16 in a month; he's sort of in that subterranean teen groove."

The first single (though not really the best cut), "Perfectly Good Guitar," laments the longtime rebellious rockers' tradition of smashing guitars. "He threw one down from the top of the stairs," it begins, "beautiful women were standin' everywhere / they all got wet when he smashed that thing / but off in the dark you could hear somebody sing / 'Oh, it breaks my heart to see those stars smashing a perfectly good guitar.' "

The sentimental lyrics imply that Hiatt has never even sold, let alone smashed, any of his own guitars. But he has. That's why he's sentimental.

"As a matter of fact, I have smashed a couple of guitars in my career," he admits. "Never as a theatrical device mind you, a la Pete Townshend or Kurt Cobain. But I have smashed some in fits of rage. Indeed, I really did hurl one from the

top of stairs...but there were no beautiful women around."

Coinciding with Hiatt's new release — though not by his own contrivance — is *Love Gets Strange: The Songs of John Hiatt*, a Rhino Records compilation of some of the almost 100 performers who've recorded his songs. Although the collection features some intriguing covers by Don Dixon, the Neville Brothers, Katy Moffatt, Rosanne Cash, the Jeff Healey Band, Mitch Ryder and Marshall Crenshaw, it's also notable for the exclusion of Hiatt proponents like Bonnie Raitt and Ry Cooder.

"I'm sure licensing had something to do with what they could and couldn't put on," says Hiatt, who's heard the compilation but was uninvolved with its execution. If he could have requested the inclusion of any additional covers, he said, "I like the idea of Bob Dylan singing 'Across

the Borderline,' which I've heard he's done in concert. I'd like to hear that. I've heard rumors The Boss (Springsteen) has done that song live, too."

Hiatt says he enjoys hearing other people performing his songs. In fact, some, like Marshall Crenshaw's Hiatt cover, "Someplace Where Love Can't Find Me," sound so well that the artist might as well have written it himself, he notes.

"As personal as I have gotten in my material from time to time, I still feel like once it's written it's kind of not your song anymore," he says. "I've always felt that way about them. I just kind of write them and let them go."

And when someone else embraces one of his songs, "It's really nice, it's flattering," he says. "It's like somebody speaking well of one of your children. It just kind of makes you glow with pride."