

Good things are happening for John Hiatt at the right time

By Fran Fried
Register Entertainment Editor

"I think I've got nine lives in these corpuscles," John Hiatt declares with the snarl of a young lion — or is it an old lion with a young attitude? — in "Something Wild," from his latest album, "Perfectly Good Guitar" (A&M).

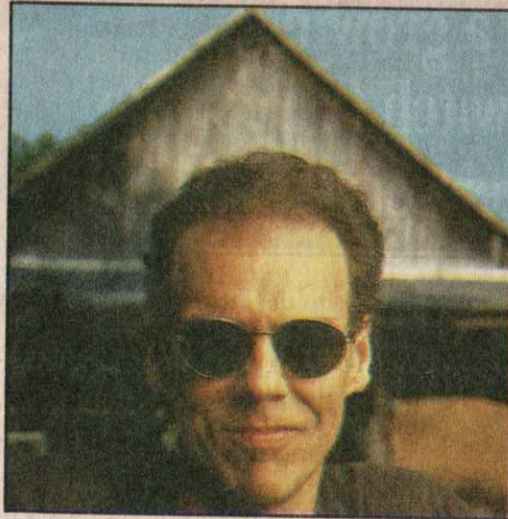
And now that he's a wiser man and knows better about life, he seems to want to live them all at once.

Hiatt, 41, the prolific singer/songwriter who packed Toad's Place last September and returns there for an early show Saturday night, seems to be making up for two decades of lost time with one album.

Long known more for his songwriting than his own recordings — "Thing Called Love" (recorded by Bonnie Raitt), "Feels Like Rain" (Buddy Guy), "Something Wild" (Iggy Pop), "The Usual" (Bob Dylan), "Sure as I'm Sitting Here" (Three Dog Night), "All Right Tonight" (Paula Abdul) — the native Hoosier has been reaping as good as he's been giving in the past year with the hardest-rocking and friendliest of his 12 albums.

The crowds have been loud and appreciative (he played four encores at Toad's last year), radio (including WPLR) has been playing the album, late-night TV (fellow Indiana boy David Letterman) has clamored for him. After years of plugging and working, stardom is happening. Why now?

"I don't have any reason why except I'm



Mark Seliger/A&M

John Hiatt looks 41, acts younger.

emotionally retarded," he said last month from his office in Nashville; he lives outside the Music City these days.

"That's OK. A lot of guys' talents are chemistry. Their skills at 40 are diminishing. I feel like I'm just starting to hit my stride."

After a career fraught with roadblocks both personal (alcoholism) and professional (radio and record label indifference), he just feels it's happening when it was meant to happen.

IF YOU GO

Event: John Hiatt & the Guilty Dogs and Little Buddy

Time: 7 p.m. Saturday

Place: Toad's Place, 300 York St., New Haven

Tickets: \$16.50 in advance, \$18 at door

Info: 562-5589

"You've gotta figure you're right where you're supposed to be," he said. "If it had come in the late '70s or early '80s, it would've killed me. It would've been too much pressure. I'm a wimp. I'm glad it's happening now."

And don't think for a moment it's not a thrill for him: "Sure, you bet it is. We did so well on all this touring and the audience keeps growing. It's almost a grass roots thing. It's not like we command the airwaves. It's been kind of a slow build. It's gratifying to see the folks come out."

Hiatt, who, with his band the Guilty Dogs, will soon embark on a summer tour supporting Jackson Browne (yeah, I know — should be the other way around), is also jumping at the chance to return to the studio; he has the date Sept. 20 circled on his calendar.

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Hiatt: Singer/songwriter can't explain why success was so late in coming

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"I have way too many songs — 30 or so," he said. "I've been writing like a crazy man the last three months. I'm pretty anxious to get into the studio."

"They're very simple, very straightforward, all written on guitar. There's a little rattle to them. They're pretty directly inspired by working with this band. There's definitely a little rattle when we get together. It's almost like folk songs with a beat."

"That's essentially what his career boils down to: narratives about slices of life — only this time, he said, "I am alive. I seem to be getting a little more urge to let it rip. That's hard for me. I'm a little self-conscious, a little timid. My playing has loosened up quite a bit."

The rock edge came from a couple of sources two years ago. One was the music his teen stepson, Rob, was playing: Nirvana, Screaming Trees, Sonic Youth, Di-

nosaur Jr., Smashing Pumpkins, Raging Slab. One day, Rob brought home a Faith No More

Hiatt at the Lighthouse

Weather permitting, John Hiatt will also perform Saturday at WPLR's annual Memorial Day weekend picnic at Light-

house Point Park. Hiatt is scheduled to play a brief acoustic set. The picnic takes place from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; rain date is Sunday. The New Riders of the Purple Sage will headline; local acts Mighty Purple, Cat Mercy and the Breakfast Band will also perform.

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Of the dichotomy between melody and lyrics, he says, "I like putting opposites together. Most of my stuff is about trials and tribulations and hopefully redemption. I've always got to put that stuff out."

The other source came from Little Village, his ill-fated 1992 "supergroup" of sorts with Ry Cooder, Nick Lowe and Jim Keltner.

"I got excited with the idea, with playing with a rock quartet," he said, but admitted, "It was a

demption these days. That's the singer/guitarist who was the seed of the title song on the latest album; the line "Oh it breaks my heart to see those stars smashing a perfectly good guitar" says it all.

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based on Kurt Cobain." Hiatt said. "That (Nirvana) 'Lithium' video. I was watching it and I started coming up with that little story about these seeming contradictions in rock 'n' roll — about guitars: smashing them and loving them."

Hiatt, no stranger to self-destruction (he's been sober nearly a decade) or suicide (an older brother and an ex-wife), didn't raise his eyebrows much when Cobain took his life in April.

"I kinda didn't, to tell you the truth," he said. "I was really upset because he was a great writer. I've been through two other suicides and I'm kinda jaded."

In retrospect, Hiatt, who says "It's amazing what you can do when you ask for help," doesn't know what made him choose life when he was at his lowest moments.

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