

## Interludes: A Singer Finds His Voice

By Scott Sheldon

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Ten years ago **John Flynn** was a moderately successful Philadelphia-based singer-songwriter best known for children’s music with titles like “The Day A Mouse Got In My Father’s Pants.” He was a solid performer with a pleasant reedy alto voice and decent guitar chops, but, as an artist, it seemed that he was still searching for a focus that would set him apart from the crowd of singer-songwriters amassed by the end of the 1990s. Although his education in political science had given him an abstract interest in social issues, he insists he “never trusted himself” to explore those issues through his music. A series of life-changing events, however - coupled with the roar of our times – turned the tide of John’s musical life and allowed him to find a voice as a writer of gently provocative and stirring protest music.

John was booked to perform “God Bless America” at the first Phillies home game following the events of September 11, 2001. Rather than the polite inattention that marks the usual seventh-inning stretch, the entire crowd of 40,000 sang our fervently, in what John calls “a spontaneous expression of courage, optimism, and spirit.” But through

the succeeding months, John saw that spirit quashed by the rhetoric of fear, and it was with that perspective that his first political songs were born.

John wrote “I Will Not Fear”, a song that tells the stories of ordinary people in the days after the September 11 attacks who chose to board airplanes, join the military, or confront anti-Arab bigotry... defying “the ones in shadow who’d see freedom disappear.” He was astounded by “the amount of healing” that his song created.

He knew that he’d be “walking away from comfort” when his songwriting became topical. Yet, Flynn felt he had no choice. “Elvis used to shoot his televisions.” He reflected, “I can’t afford to do that, so I write songs.”

For his 2004 album *Dragon*, and then his 2006 effort, *Two Wolves*, he used his newly emerging story-song parables to hold up a mirror to injustice, hypocrisy and intolerance, and so to open hearts and minds to those wrongs.

### Booking Information:

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One beautiful example of that storytelling style is the song “The Passunder (New Orleans).” At the end of a whistle-stop fund-raising concert tour down the Mississippi on the fabled City of New Orleans, John and the other musicians (including Arlo Guthrie, Cyril Neville, and Willie Nelson) walked along the devastated streets of New Orleans in stunned silence. To John, the Ninth Ward “felt like holy ground, “and the spray-painted rescue markings on the doors echoed of the lamb’s-blood markings during the Biblical plague of the first-born. John began his song:

If someday we realized  
That God still speaks to us all in our hearts,  
Not just through words that long dead prophets scrawl,  
Perhaps we’ll add a new book to the Holy Bible  
Called “New Orleans”... New Orleans.

Folk music has always had a place for protest singers whose songs are soapboxes for their political views... or who preach to the converted, but John Flynn’s work is in a whole different category: he is a songwriter who makes an impact by painting a compelling picture and inviting the listener to draw his or her own conclusions. As he puts it, “My songs are more about the questions than they are about the answers – and I feel really comfortable about asking the questions.” Raising those questions about war, his song “Dover” simply describes a military transport bringing coffins home, with the prayer “Oh big airplane, bring ‘em down easy.” Raising these questions about bigotry, “Put Your Freedom Where Your Mouth Is” paints short pictures of people being oppressed and posits “who will speak for them?” Asked whether his songs are intended to bring about social change, he responds. “That sort of baggage would suffocate a song. I try to tell a story that becomes real enough that the listener will open his heart to it.”

John in fact, lives the beliefs he sings. For the last decade, he’s performed at and organized benefits for Camp Dreamcatcher, a summer camp for children affected by HIV and AIDS and marvels at the “joy, unrestrained... and so much glee” that music brings to the campers. Although he first declined, joking that “I’m a folksinger, there’s no more useless individual on earth,” he runs a monthly discussion group called New Beginnings at a Delaware prison, giving inmates the tools they need to stay out of jail.

In his modest way, John sums up his songwriting, “you have this way of looking at life and you owe it to yourself to speak from the heart.” Reviewer Vic Heyman however, put it more pointedly a few years back right in these pages: “John Flynn is as close as we come these days to a living Phil Ochs.” I couldn’t put better. With a poet’s voice and a heart tuned to justice, John Flynn’s voice and songs sing for us all.

---- Scott Sheldon

#### ON THE WEB:

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