



# John Mellencamp



BY DEBORAH FROST



**A**s legends go, John Mellencamp's is more in tune with the Little Engine That Could than the gods of those pantheons from Olympus to Cleveland. His life itself has been a sheer triumph of will, an uphill battle against formidable odds. Diagnosed at birth with spina bifida, a neural tube defect with often devastating consequences, Mellencamp was hospitalized frequently throughout childhood. Given his early prognosis, his merely banging on the gates of the music industry, never mind surmounting all its obstacles, seems fairly miraculous. Over the past three decades, he has evolved from glitter-punk heartthrob to purveyor of youthful hit-the-highway hits to a distinctive voice of the American heartland whose magnanimity as artist and citizen has been hailed from corner stores in Podunk to the corridors of power in Washington, D.C. He has recorded twenty-some-odd albums, of which he's sold more than thirty million copies, remained a consistently exciting arena headliner, and been accorded top honors as much for his humanitarian as his musical accomplishments. And he's never really left home.

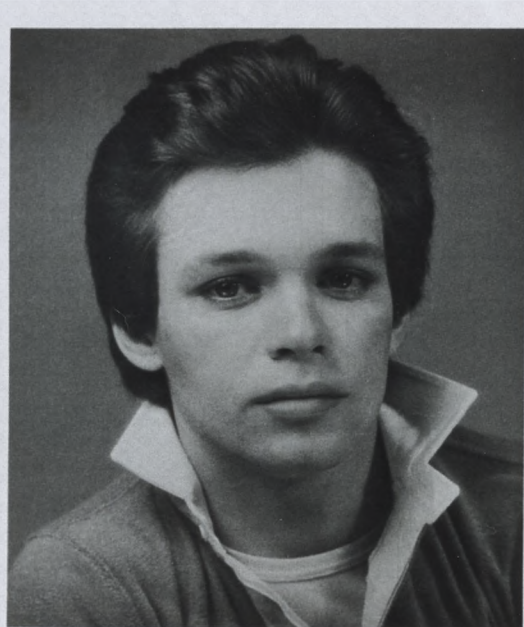
He was born on October 7, 1951, in Seymour, Indiana, a place most people had never heard of before Mellencamp put it on the map. In an environment more fertile for corn than artistic ambition, the teenaged dreamer nonetheless started hashing out a heady mix of Motown, British Invasion, and American garage rock wherever his high school peers defended their right to party. In Seymour, this was barely tolerated as

a diversion, much less a calling. By his senior year, the seventeen-year-old Mellencamp was hardly bound for glory – but rather for fatherhood, eloping to Kentucky to marry his pregnant twenty-one-year-old girlfriend, without parental consent. After a stint in junior college, he made a valiant effort to support his family as an Indiana lineman, a career that ended rudely when he accidentally disconnected all the telephones in a place called Freetown. Having few other skills, marketable or otherwise, he began sending out demo tapes that garnered such a tremendous response from music-industry titans that he and his wife decorated their abode with a novel theme – rejection-letter wallpaper. Then Tony DeFries, David Bowie's former manager, picked Mellencamp's cover of Paul Revere and the Raiders' "Kicks" out of his slush pile.

Given his options, Mellencamp might have grabbed a brass ring if a monkey had offered it. What did he know – or have to lose – as he made his Los Angeles debut strutting in bikini briefs and batting his eyeliner under streetlamp props that were probably discarded when Bowie decamped for Berlin? He was just following orders to promote *Chestnut Street Incident*, the 1976 debut LP he swears he had no inkling would be released under the name Johnny Cougar until he saw the cover. Its follow-up, 1977's *The Kid Inside*, was equally notable more for mascara than tunage. This didn't prevent Billy Gaff, Rod Stewart's manager, from signing Mellencamp to his new label, Riva. Unfortunately, the 1979 Riva debut, *John Cougar*, was greeted as enthusiastically by the record-buying public as

*He has continued to defy previous expectations and define a truly inimitable character and voice*





Johnny Cougar



A glam beginning: An early publicity shot, 1976

were his previous efforts. The singer was in L.A., fulfilling the final contractual obligations of what he thought would be his last stand in any recording studio, the aptly titled *Nothin' Matters and What If It Did*, when a single from the Riva debut, "I Need a Lover (Who Won't Drive Me Crazy)," unexpectedly took off in Australia. After Pat Benatar's subsequent cover, as well two hits spawned by *Nothin' Matters*, "This Time" and "Ain't Even Done With the Night," Mellencamp was suddenly provided with something other than the one-way ticket back to Seymour he'd been expecting.

And yet Mellencamp considered his first taste of success anything but sweet. "The singles were stupid little pop songs," he told me in 1983. "Hell, as long as you sell a few records and the record company isn't putting a lot of money into promotion, you're making money for 'em and that's all they care about. They thought I was going to turn into the next Neil Diamond."

But success, as well as four albums' worth of experience in the studio and his chafing beneath the constraints of producers and industry suits who wanted him to be anyone other than himself, gave him both the confidence – and the clout – to create and self-produce his breakthrough, 1982's *American Fool*. The results were songs like "Jack and Diane" and "Hurts So Good" – perfectly crafted thumps of churning pop that tore from the heart of his own teenage experiences



Astride his favorite means of conveyance, 1981



and resonated thunderously with everyone else's. He had also assembled a great band, composed of Indiana pals: guitarists Larry Crane and Mike Wanchic, bassist Toby Myers, and the astounding drummer Kenny Aronoff, who'd landed in nearby Bloomington as a student at Indiana University's prestigious music department. In the studio, they re-created the natural, huge sound and energy of the live show they'd perfected while winning over often hostile audiences as the opening act for veteran hard-rock arena headliners. Mellencamp's voice, like every other instrument surfing the mix, was imbued with a new authority, and *American Fool* was a dead-aim sizzle of guitars and snare crack both jubilantly traditional and sleekly modern at once – like the Bobby Fuller Four revving full-throttle into the new dawn of the MTV era.

The spirit of songs like "Jack and Diane," which insists we hold on to early desires and dreams despite the vicissitudes of life, resonated mightily with sixteen-year-olds of all ages. Perhaps the lyrics reflected many of the changes Mellencamp himself was experiencing: While on the West Coast, he fell in love with the daughter of a veteran Hollywood stuntman, with whom he was soon expecting a child, and divorced his first wife. But Mellencamp did not abandon his roots as much as embrace them. His new family was soon installed in Indiana, where he has always maintained his base of operations. There, he built a state-of-the-art recording-and-rehearsal facility where many members of his family, including his first wife, took an active role in his day-to-day business operation.

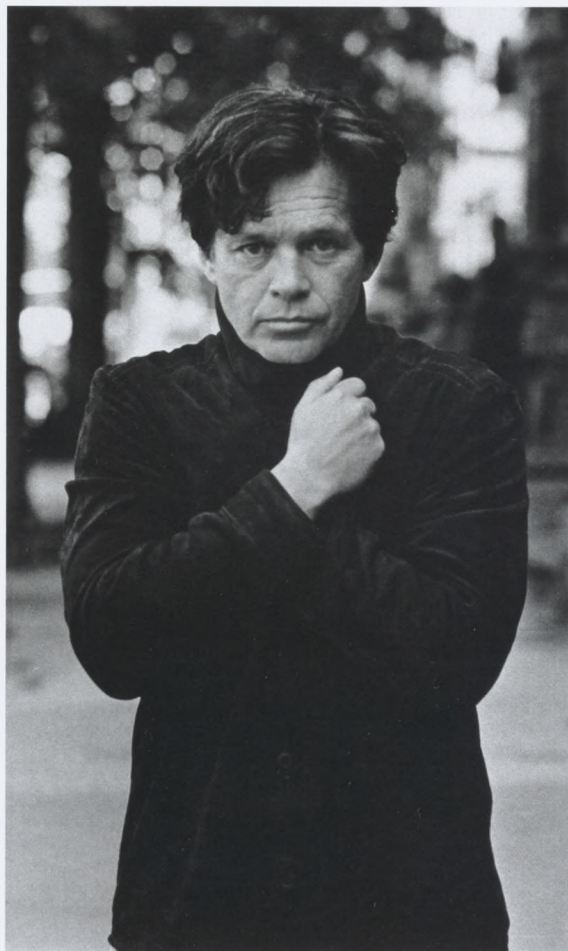
But it was with his next album, 1983's *Uh-Huh*, that Mellencamp began to flex his muscles as a writer, metamorphosing from sly commentator on the teenage condition to astute observer and mature chronicler of the human – particularly the American – one. It was apropos that *Uh-Huh* was the first album upon which he was allowed – or perhaps felt comfortable enough – to reclaim his name, if not embrace it completely: The record was credited to John Cougar Mellencamp. Songs like "Pink Houses" and "Crumblin' Down" married the loose vibe stirred into him by the Stones' *Exile on Main St.* with his own wry insights about the people, places, and things he still holds self-evident. "Ain't that America for you and me?" he asked, as video clips of his own community rolled across screens around the world.

As subsequent albums *Scarecrow* (1985) and *The Lonesome Jubilee* (1987) attest, Mellencamp was hardly an outsider on Main Street but an insider – very much a man of his own place and time. The masterful *Scarecrow*'s songs were devoted to the dilemmas of the family farmers Mellencamp knew only too well. When he sings in an understated, conversational tone, "Rain on the scarecrow blood on the plow/ This land fed a nation this land made me proud/ And son I'm just sorry they're just memories for you now," he's talking not only about his neighbors but about his family. His great-grandfather's farm was sold to pay debts after his death, and the family legacy was lost. Family farmers can be broken by one bad season or one bad loan. More and more, Mellencamp found it imperative to use his voice to speak for them and their concerns before they were completely disenfranchised or, worse, ruined.

*Scarecrow*'s significance goes beyond the sum of its excellent songs: Upon hearing it and recognizing a kindred champion for the plight of American family farmers, Willie Nelson

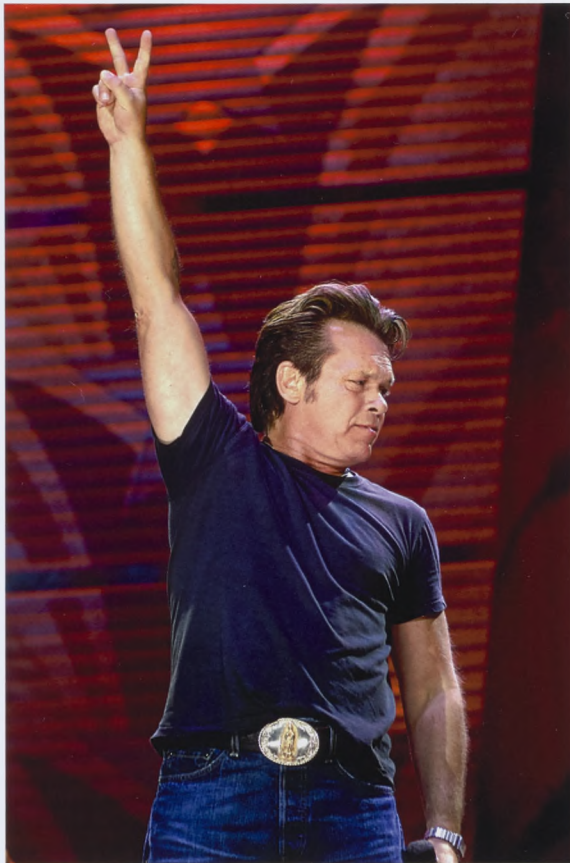


Another tour, another hotel room: With acoustic guitar, 1985



Bundling up in 2001





Farm Aid days: Onstage at Randall's Island, New York, 2007



Back home in Indiana: Performing in Bloomington, 2004 . . .



and in Indianapolis, with guitarist Andy York and drummer Dane Clark, 2007



With fellow Farm Aid board members Willie Nelson, Dave Matthews, and Neil Young, 2005



Clapping along with Young, 2001

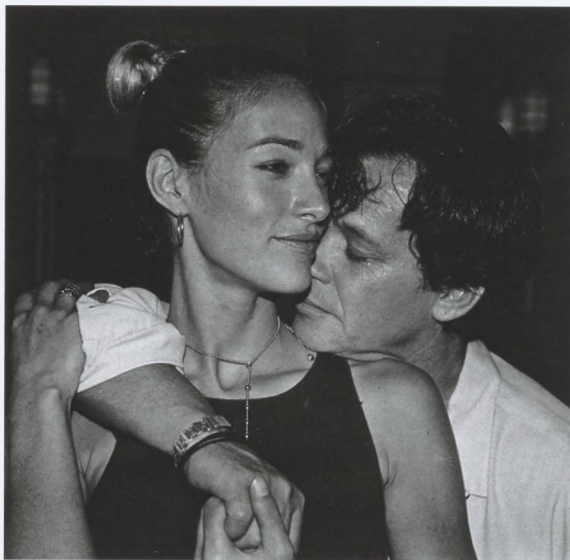
invited Mellencamp to cofound Farm Aid in 1985. In the two decades—plus since, Farm Aid has helped distribute desperately needed funds to farmers and to forestall foreclosures around the country. But Mellencamp doesn't just show up at the big photo op once a year; he regularly appears at grassroots gatherings wherever farmers' livelihoods or homes are threatened, or opens his personal checkbook. He doesn't refrain from challenging a commentator like Bill Maher over his "farmers are the biggest welfare queens in America" statement or the policies of even bigger fish, like the current administration, on even more controversial issues like the war in Iraq. Such positions have hardly endeared him to all of the public all of the time; after he came out against the war, his family was subjected to threats and obscenities outside their own home, and former Vice President Dan Quayle stomped out rather spectacularly at a recent concert where Mellencamp introduced a song with remarks critical of George W. Bush. Even more recently, Mellencamp helped John Edwards cap his Iowa campaign with a "This Is Our Country" rally in Des Moines. As John Nichols noted in *The Nation*, Mellencamp, whose endorsement has been courted by numerous candidates, was hardly hopping on any bandwagon: "He has a long relationship with Edwards. He has an even longer relationship with the issues that Edwards



is talking about. Indeed, his credibility is grounded in the recognition that Mellencamp has repeatedly taken career-risking anti-war, anti-racist, and anti-poverty stances that other celebrities of his stature tend to avoid."

Yet Mellencamp's involvement with real life or the world has not come at the expense of his music. He has ventured beyond the anthems and bombast of the arena to develop—as he began on *Scarecrow's* worthy follow-up, *Lonesome Jubilee*—a distinctly new and intrinsically American sound, which owes as much to the fiddles and accordions of kinder, gentler traditions as the whomp-ass rave-ups of his youth. On *Cuttin' Heads* (2001), he traded licks with such atypical partners as Chuck D and India.Arie; as on his earlier cover of Van Morrison's "Wild Night," a memorable duet with Meshell Ngejécello, he has continued to defy previous expectations and define a truly inimitable character and voice. On 2003's *Trouble No More*, he returned to the crossroads of Robert Johnson, dipping deeply into the well of the blues. The remarkable *Freedom's Road* ties up the loose ends of his personal obsessions. His next record, a collaboration with T Bone Burnett (the rare moment he's conceded the reins to a producer since his emancipation from Riva Records) promises in 2008 to plow even further ahead.

During the past decade, Mellencamp has also devoted his time to his third wife, model Elaine Irwin, their growing young family, the aforementioned political and charity causes, and a burgeoning fine-art career, as well as the music from which he still demands meaning. With *Freedom's Road*, he has finally painted himself into a league entirely of his



Mellencamp and wife Elaine Irwin, 2001

own. He still considers himself a "hayseed," who maintains, "I come from a humble place, and it's important a person stays in that place and not become something else." But as the headline of an October 22, 2007, *New York Times* editorial suggests, the mountain can come to Mellencamp. It reads: AIN'T THAT AMERICA.

To which we can all respond: Ooooooh, yeah! ♪



The pride of Seymour, Indiana, who never fears to speak his own mind, 2001