

No perfect world: Freedy Johnston happy despite missed chance at fame

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Freedy Johnston's career seemed to be on a trajectory to the moon when in 1994, he released the ironically titled, "This Perfect World."

Produced by Butch Vig, whose skills in the studio helped launch Nirvana to super-stardom, Johnston's album featured addictive pop melodies peopled with unlikely characters: a rape victim; a guilty, grieving husband; a too-young girlfriend. Usually, the songs remained cryptic after several close listens but struck home anyhow. Critics were enthralled, including Rolling Stone, which named Johnston its songwriter of the year and called him "an American original," with gifts akin to Neil Young, Simon and Garfunkel and Elvis Costello.

Johnston's world is less than perfect today. It's been five years since he released new material, and his past two albums were generally met with tepid reviews. He also broke off from his former label, Elektra. When Johnston opens for folk phenomenon Dar Williams Saturday at the Westport Country Playhouse, he's going to face a crowd that may never have heard his music. That's a shame, as Johnston remains prolific, emotionally wise in his songwriting and uncannily skilled at writing catchy pop-folk riffs.

Johnston is recording 18 to 20 new songs for release this year on two CDs titled, "Rain on the City." He promised the album last year and says, "I think it would be pretty sad if it's not out in 2006." Perhaps he's a little gun-shy.

"I've been working on it long enough. I think I feel happy about it. It's not going to be some desperate, slicked-up thing, like, 'I'm still here! Listen to me!' I think a lot of my fans wish I were more star-like."

That's not him, he says. Even in the mid-1990s, when stardom came knocking at his door, he wasn't game.

"I wasn't really ready to take advantage of that. The right kind of person could have really converted that, but I'm not really somebody like Ryan Adams. Which is not to put him down. He's, like, a born star."

The last time Johnston played in Westport, it was for free on the library lawn a few years ago. He opened for Marshall Crenshaw, who played 12-string guitar on "This Perfect World" and who, it happens, also contributed to Dar Williams' most recent release, "My Better Self." After the show, Johnston ambled over to a small bar, the former Onion Alley, to do covers of Kiss and Tom Petty songs with a local band. The crowd didn't appear to recognize him or care when he was announced as a former Billboard hitmaker.

"I want to rock and roll all night and party every day!" he wailed to a bunch of largely aloof 20-somethings.

During part of his recording hiatus, Johnston resorted to playing lots of covers at his shows. Dolly Parton's "Here You Come Again." Elton John's "Rocket Man." Wings' "Band on the Run." He even dabbled with the idea of releasing an album of covers until fans sent the message that they wanted to hear his songs.

He plays occasionally with The Know-It-All Boyfriends, a "Trans-Am cover band," which includes members of the band Garbage, including Johnston's former producer, Vig.

"The last time we played was really a step forward," Johnston says. "We played in drag ... as The Know-It-All Girlfriends."

In 2004, Johnston's original record label, Bar None, released a CD of four-track demo recordings from early in Johnston's career, 1986 to 1992. "The Way I Were" is a collection of songs Johnston recorded by himself, "in my bedroom after work, noodling." Fans and a few critics who reviewed it enjoyed the glimpse into Johnston's early creative process, commenting on his originality and stylistic range. But Johnston admits some discomfort with having his early experiments aired. He says he's grateful for the positive reception of the release, but he might have preferred to keep some of those songs in the closet.

"They're really dorky."

Johnston is exercising far more control over "Rain on the City." It's being mastered in vinyl to achieve a particular sound, for instance.

"It wouldn't matter if there wasn't such a clear opinion that it's a better sound. It's not like I'm a kind of Steely Dan audio snob. Audio has an emotional sound. The more you can control it, the better."

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