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Indiana's John Mellencamp
talks about his new album

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By Tamara Warren - Photography by Mark Cornelison

JOHN MELLENCAMP, INDIANA'S FAVORITE MUSICAL SON, REFLECTS ON LIFE IN A SMALL TOWN AND HIS NEW ALBUM.

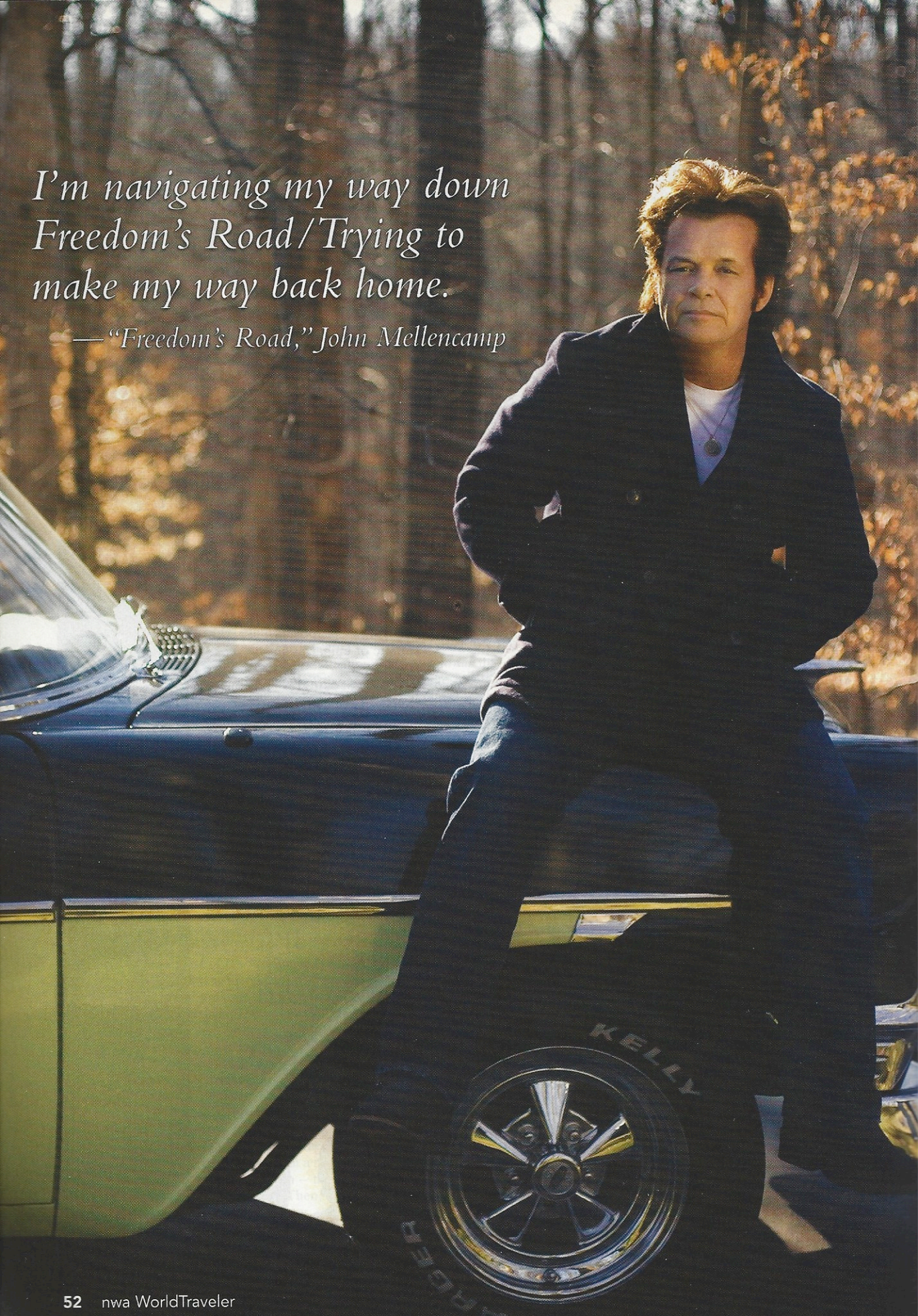
Tucked away on a patch of Indiana property beyond a winding country road, 10 miles away from the Big Ten college town of Bloomington, is a forest green house that sits on an incline, surrounded by tall, protective trees. It's quiet here, the kind of quiet where thoughts have time to gestate, where hard work is a source of pride. Inside the house, nuances of modernity



and culture abound—a flat-screen TV set on a cable news channel, a coffee table scattered with books, a white cloth couch, white walls and white floorboards. Splashes of color jump out from a framed Johnny Cash poster and oil paintings depicting hollow, angry faces. A didgeridoo leans against the wall. The cozy home is not what it seems—it's the Belmont Mall studio of multi-platinum and Grammy Award-winning recording artist John Mellencamp.

*I'm navigating my way down
Freedom's Road/Trying to
make my way back home.*

—“Freedom's Road,” John Mellencamp





It's **quiet** here, the kind of **quiet** where **hard work** is a source of **pride**.

He does not paint while in recording mode, but there are parallels in Mellencamp's approach to both. "I'm a problem solver. That's what I do," he says. "Painting is just solving problems. Writing or editing songs is

problem solving."

Mike Wanchic, Mellencamp's guitarist, musical director and band leader, has known Mellencamp since 1976. He is the only other member of Mellencamp's band who lives in

the Bloomington area. "You write what you know," Wanchic says of Mellencamp's material. "I think staying grounded in our community has been a big advantage for us as human beings, for our families and



Mellencamp relaxes with a guitar outside his home studio in his native Indiana.

Wanchic has watched the songwriter's growth. "When I first met John, it was obvious he had 'It.' He had star quality," he says. "As a young writer he struggled with writing, but in the last 20 years he's emerged as one of America's best songwriters.

"He's never been satisfied about where he's at, which makes perfect sense—that's the mark of a true artist," Wanchic continues. "A true artist is never finished, a true artist is constantly trying to move to the next level. The emergence of John as a storyteller is a sign of a mature and very evolved writer."

Simple, early songs like "Jack and Diane" are whimsical and melodic, but the 1985 album "Scarecrow" marked a turning point for Mellencamp. His most recent recordings span from straight rock to Woody Guthrie-inspired roots music, incorporating more complex rhythms and guitar patterns. "John and his music are the essence of the common man, not just the mid-American cliché," Sykes says. "It's decent, honest and painful, but filled with hope."

R.O.C.K. in the U.S.A.

On the new album's title track, "Freedom's Road," wisdom, cynicism and discontent are embedded in a metaphor about a journey and what's at stake to get there: "This car just don't want to roll/Freedom's Road must be under construction." On the track "Ghost Towns Along the Highway," the lush vocal background is haunting. "It's how we allow things in our life to pass us

by," Mellencamp says of the song's context. "There's a hollowness in individuals as they get older, if they feel they haven't achieved goals."

The next phase in this album promotion is touring, which is more of a job for Mellencamp, involving vigorous rehearsals. "There is a creative part of it in the beginning," he says, already sounding weary as he talks about the upcoming tour. "The first 10 to 15 shows are always fun, but you see what you're made of after 125 shows." "Freedom's Road" concerts throughout the Heartland and South are being planned for late summer and fall.

With a wealth of material in the back catalog, set lists can be daunting. "For me to get on stage and sing 'Jack and Diane,' a song that's 30 years old, I have to really dig deep to sing it with any conviction," he says. "If you're charging people money to hear you sing that song, you damn well better try to sing it with some conviction."

Mellencamp is most passionate when he plays for a cause. In 1985, he co-founded Farm Aid, an annual benefit concert that launched and sustained a massive movement to support small family farms.

He serves on the board of Farm Aid along with musicians Willie Nelson, Neil Young and Dave Matthews. The concert is held each fall in a different U.S. city or farming community. (For information, visit farmaid.org.)

Walk Tall

The Midwestern lifestyle has afforded Mellencamp the time and space to be a family man, but Mellencamp is also Bloomington's most prominent celebrity. He redirects this attention toward

(continued on page 78)

children. That's where a lot of the personality of the music comes from, and that's why Middle America, the Heartland, can relate to us."

Over time, Mellencamp has earned critical acclaim to match his massive 30 million records sold. "When I got my first record deal, I had never written," Mellencamp says. "I was the singer in the band. For me it was more of a growing process. So many songs when I was young were written in one setting, in 10 or 15 minutes."



(continued from page 57)

Indiana University, as a season ticket holder for football and basketball, and occasionally as a guest lecturer. (He holds an honorary doctorate from IU; he graduated from Vincennes University with an associate's degree in broadcasting.) He also helped fund the new IU football practice stadium named John Mellencamp Pavilion.

Despite his reputation as a down-home guy, Mellencamp and his wife, Elaine, a model and professional photographer, and their two children, ages 11 and 12 (he also has three children from two previous marriages) balance the songwriter's celebrity with the life of a typical Middle American family. "I sometimes wonder what I'm doing here," he says, but then stresses, "We live here."

The artist notes that at this moment, his wife is picking up their sons from football practice. The family mixes suburbia with the demands of fame, such as a photo shoot for *Vanity Fair*—by his wife—completed just the day before.

Mellencamp, for all his success, remains humble, reflective and focused. "I have a friend who is a pretty famous songwriter, and he said, 'Man, I'm really blocked right now. What do you think I should do?'" Mellencamp recalls. "I said, 'Look out your window. There's so much to write about it. Look out the window, man, you'll find 50 things to write about.'"



The songwriter and his wife, Elaine, have two children, ages 11 and 12.

careful attention to his environment, but at times seems oblivious to his own impact. He reflects for a moment on the countless concerts behind him, and the touring road ahead. "I never heard the crowd," he says softly, shaking his head.

After a solid hour of candid conversation, Mellencamp leaves the studio and heads back toward his

secluded home on a nearby lake, pulling on his jacket, retreating into the crisp Indiana afternoon sunshine.

Detroit native Tamara Warren has written for Rolling Stone, Vibe, Drib, Clear and Forbes Autos. She lives in Brooklyn, N.Y.

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