



SONG FEST FEATURES FREEDY JOHNSTON PAST ROLLING STONE MAGAZINE'S SONGWRITER OF THE YEAR

by Chris Berggren, CDL Administrative Assistant

According to Freedy Johnston, the 2018 Chelsea District Library's Song Fest headliner, you've got to be a little obsessive to succeed. Johnston freely admits that without this attribute, he wouldn't have made it in music. "I'm sad to tell you," he says with a laugh, "those are the only people who really get good at things." For Johnston, that meant sticking with his routine of playing guitar, writing music, and recording his early songs on a 4-track recorder, despite the feedback from others and his own acknowledgement that he wasn't very good. "Honestly, I would have stopped if I could've, but I couldn't," he admits. Then, in 1992, something changed while writing and recording his second album *Can You Fly*. He suddenly got better. "Up to that time I was almost like this guy with a bad habit, but I got better to the point where it was like, 'Alright, you're actually okay now,'" he says. *Can You Fly* became somewhat of a hit and led to Johnston signing with Elektra Records, a major label. "That was a strange time and I remember thinking, 'I'm really a musician now and I don't know how that happened.'"

In lots of ways, Johnston is the least likely of musicians. He grew up in the rural Kansas town of Kinsley, which was void of any music or record shops. This was back in the 1960s and 70s when there was no internet or cable TV — back when isolation really meant isolation. His connection with music was through magazines. He ordered all the big music mags and read them cover to cover. At age 16, he ordered an Ovation guitar from a magazine mail order, partly because his younger brother was playing guitar for the school band and he felt, being two years older, he deserved a guitar more. He remembers it arrived via UPS on a Saturday morning in a coffin-shaped box. For a few months he was too intimidated to pick the instrument up, but eventually he learned to play by trial and error. When Elvis Costello's *My Aim is True* came out, Johnston read a review and then talked a friend into driving him 45-minutes to Dodge City to make his first record purchase. At age 18, he moved to Lawrence, Kansas, and experienced a culture shock. There were so many important books and movies, and even genres of music, that he had zero knowledge of even existing. He soaked up as much as he could — making up for lost time—and then half a decade later, in 1985, Johnston pawned his guitar to help finance a move to New York City, where he hoped to break into the music industry.

Can You Fly was critical for two reasons: the album's success basically fostered Johnston's career, but also it was the ultimate gamble on himself, admittedly before he should have been gambling on himself. After the failure of his debut album, *The Trouble Tree*, in 1990, Johnston made the decision to sell his portion of the family farm

back in Kansas to finance the cost of his second album. In retrospect, he admits it was an unwise decision, but it also worked. Two years after *Can You Fly*, Johnston released *This Perfect World*, which became a massive critical and commercial success, and led to a Rolling Stone Magazine Songwriter of the Year award, beating out the likes of Kurt Cobain. This was the height of Johnston's fame: it was MTV videos, being discussed in major music magazines, and playing packed venues, but it was also somewhat of a case of too much too soon. Johnston says he now understands Elektra wanted to make him a big star, but he just wasn't ready for it. And not only that, but the industry was about to go through a massive change. "It was the last gasp of the old record deals," he reminisces. "It's kind of weird to think of it like that, but I was one of the last artists to be given the full throttle."

Johnston saw out the final three records on his Elektra deal without the same level of fanfare, and then put out a few live albums and a record of his early 4-track recordings, before returning full-fledged to the studio in 2009 for *Rain on the City*. He'd become the type of Indie artist that he was much more comfortable with and he followed up with 2015's *Neon Repairman*, his most well-received work in years. *Neon Repairman* marked two major changes in Johnston's recording process. The first was funding the album with a Kickstarter campaign and the second was self-producing the record. Crowdsourcing is something Johnston believes is now a reality for Indie artists—in fact he compares it to electricity, in that there just isn't another viable way; but he says he won't dabble in self-production again—that was a one-time deal. Currently, Johnston is working on purchasing the sole rights to *Can You Fly* and releasing *This Perfect World* on vinyl for the first time. He's also back in the studio recording some of the strongest material he believes he's ever written.

In terms of his songwriting process, Johnston says he writes music on the guitar and then records to tape. When he fills enough tapes, he listens back and chooses the songs he likes best, and only then starts putting words to the music. He admits it's a long, arduous process and the songs go through multiple iterations before becoming a finished product. For instance, two of the new songs he's just recorded, he says, have been worked on for possibly as long as 15 years and at the very least five. For that reason, he wouldn't particularly recommend his writing process to anyone else, but stresses finding what works best for the individual songwriter. The one piece of advice he would offer, however, is to find people to play music with. "Try to find a band and do your best to stick with it. That's the only advice that I would give my former self. If I'd done that I would have been much further ahead," he says.