

# WRITER'S ROOM

John McCauley of Deer Tick

**B**etween his work with his band Deer Tick and side projects like Middle Brother and Diamond Rugs, John McCauley has established himself over the past decade as one of the most prolific singer-songwriters in folk-rock. This fall, Deer Tick will release two separate albums (*Deer Tick Vol. 1* and *Deer Tick Vol. 2*) — one acoustic, and one electric — that show off the wide spectrum of sounds and styles that the Rhode Island-based band has become known for during their rowdy, unpredictable live shows. We recently caught up with McCauley to discuss his songwriting process and his band's two new records, which mark the longest-ever stretch of time between Deer Tick releases to date.

**Has becoming a father changed the way you go about songwriting?**

I don't think so. I don't feel like anything changed with this record, as far as my songwriting. It's always been the same. I just wait until something hits me and then I can't stop until I'm done. That's usually the thing: I got to finish the song in one sitting, if I can.

**Is there any way to predict when a song will come to you?**

It could be at an annoying time where you've got to stop everything. And if you're in the middle of something that you absolutely can't stop, you just get really frustrated and you hope you don't forget it. I've probably lost a lot of songs that way.

**When that happens, do you try to jot down a note in your phone?**

I do, but I always end up looking back and being confused by my notes. I don't do a good job of note taking, because I have no idea what I'm looking at.

**Is it harder to write loud rock songs or softer ballads?**

With a lot of my songs, if you just take everything away and make me play it on acoustic guitar, they all kind of ... they're all me. When I have the bare-bones of the song, I just make a decision about what direction I want to take it. Some are really obvious, like "Let's All Go To The Bar." I will never do an acoustic version of that song. But for some songs on these two new albums, like "Card House," we had to make a decision. There were moments like that,



Deer Tick. L to R: Ian O'Neill, Dennis Ryan, John McCauley, Chris Ryan

where I had to decide how I wanted to treat the song.

**Do you ever write music and think it could work as a solo song? Or are you always writing with the band in mind?**

If I made a solo record I think it would just sound like Deer Tick. But if there's a song that I don't think needs drums or something, I have no problem saying that. Nobody in the band has ever really put up much of a fuss about it.

**Was your new song "Shitty Music Festival" written after years of living that experience yourself?**

That's the inspiration. I wrote it on piano. It's the oldest song in the bunch. We've been doing that one live for a while now. I had the melody in my head and I was banging it out and thought it sounded like a Springsteen song. I didn't have any words for it, so I just thought it was funny to sing the words "Shitty Music Festival," it just came to me like that. It was like, all right, let's turn this into an obnoxious song about when you get stuck playing the shitty music festival.

**Do you find yourself still learning from your favorite songwriters?**

Oh yeah, my favorite thing to go back to whenever I'm feeling uncreative is Hank Williams. He's a real master of the craft. He's maybe the

best.

**What is Hank's masterpiece?**

"I Can't Help It (If I'm Still In Love With You)." I also really love what Tony Bennett did with "Cold, Cold Heart." That's an amazing performance.

**What do you take from those Hank songs?**

The words are just very deliberate. There's not a wrong or misplaced word. They're really lean. They get right to the core of the emotion that they're trying to express.

**Are you prone to overwriting?**

Being such a Hank Williams fan helps me trim the fat on my own material, nowadays. A lot of my earlier songs were a lot wordier, not in a bad way. I don't think one way is better than the other, really, for myself, but right now I feel like I've settled into trying to be more deliberate with my words.

**Have you ever tried co-writing?**

I was really excited to try it for a while and then, when it seemed like it was actually going to happen, I kind of chickened out. This was about two years ago. I was supposed to write with [NRBQ's] Big Al Anderson, but we never actually got together to write, which was a bummer, but I also felt relieved. I'm not really the most adventurous person. I don't really like to try new things, especially if those new things involve other people. Maybe someday I'll figure it out though. ★

**"Being a Hank Williams fan helps me trim the fat on my own material."**