



Joe Pernice
Sunny, I Was Wrong

“When a song comes, I make sure I don’t let it go by,” says Joe Pernice. “Maybe it’s my age. Get it all out while you still can.” *Sunny, I Was Wrong*, his first studio album of new material under his own name, was born during a period of concentrated inspiration and productivity. Songs were coming almost more quickly than he could get them down on tape, as though they’d been waiting to pounce at just the right time. With a little help from his friends, Pernice fashioned a handful of them into a beautiful refinement of all the qualities that have distinguished him as a songwriter over the years: his facility for aching melodies, his penchant for arrangements that nod to pop’s past without getting mired in nostalgia, and a deep empathy for the characters who inhabit his verses.

Pernice has been catching songs for thirty years now, first with the alt-country legends Scud Mountain Boys and then with the indie-pop mainstays Pernice Brothers. In both of those groups he etched bittersweet stories out of songs that echo Jimmy Webb, Burt Bacharach, and Paul Williams. Instead of the Pernice Brothers moniker, he emerges as a solo artist with *Sunny, I Was Wrong*, his first studio album under his own name (after two solo efforts home-recorded and self-released during the pandemic in 2020: *Richard* and the Barry Manilow tribute *Could It Be Magic*). “It was always just me and other people, but in this case there’s almost none of those other people. My brother Bob sings one vocal, and Patrick Berkery plays one drum track. They’re the only two left who I was playing with regularly. It felt like it was time to move on.”

Not long ago, Pernice found himself with time on his hands. “For years I coached baseball for my son,” he says, “but when he became a little more independent, I stopped coaching and suddenly had all this freedom.” With so much time at his disposal, he revisited past obsessions, especially bicycles. Pernice had been an avid life long cyclist, but found that pastime incompatible with touring life. Now it provided long stretches of calm during his otherwise busy days. “My mind is always going, which can be good and bad, but riding a bicycle is really the only thing that shuts my brain off. It gives me clarity and focus, so I was able to write like crazy.”

Ideas arrived quickly, sometimes as full songs and sometimes as snippets that he pieced together over weeks and months. He overloaded his phone with voice memos of stray strums and hummed melodies. Pernice kept guitars all over his home so he always had one in reach whenever lightning struck. “One Saturday I woke up and wrote four songs

in one day. There was nothing special about that day. It was just when the songs arrived.” Two of them appear on *Sunny, I Was Wrong*, including “I’d Rather Look Away,” a rueful romantic negotiation featuring Teenage Fanclub’s Norman Blake.

Gradually, an album came into focus—or at least an idea of an album. “I knew I wanted to make a studio record, and I knew I wanted to make a *record*. I didn’t want just a hodgepodge of tunes. I didn’t want to make a concept record, but I wanted something that needs to be heard from start to finish. I wanted it to be a destination. An event.” Overwhelmed by the flood of songs—enough for a triple or even a quadruple album, which he briefly considered—Pernice turned to his old friend and confidant Warren Zanes, author of *Deliver Me from Nowhere: The Making of Bruce Springsteen’s Nebraska*, among other rock tomes. “I sent him 20 or 25 songs and asked him if he thought there was a record in there. He helped cut some songs and find the flow. Some of those cuts were painful, but I know by now that if you don’t listen to somebody who has a good idea, then you’re not doing service to the songs. You don’t have to be a mad scientist who controls every aspect.”

Pernice opened up his process even more by hiring a band of Toronto players he trusted to add life and nuances to these songs, including Barenaked Ladies’ Jim Creeggan on bass, Mike Evin on piano, and Mike Belitsky on drums. “I sent them demos and we sat around in Jim’s beautiful studio working them out. We talked arrangements and instrumentation, then we rehearsed it and recorded it on the spot. It felt like we were all in the zone.” After years of recording piecemeal—one track in this studio, one part in someone’s living room—it was a thrill to record live in the studio, which lends an intimacy to these songs, akin to hearing a small jazz combo jamming in a basement club. Songs like “The Black and the Blue” and “It Won’t Be Me” (featuring Rodney Crowell) have a fresh spontaneity, as though the band is writing the arrangements in real time. “There might be one or two takes where the tempo moves here or there. We could have done it again, but there’s a *thing* to it. You always want to go with that rather than beat the song to death.”

Another song that arrived on that fateful Saturday was “Deep Into the Dawn,” a bittersweet reminiscence of youthful exploits and the perspective that age brings. Immediately upon writing it, he realized it needed another voice, a very specific voice: Aimee Mann’s voice. “Something that has always attracted me to her music was this kinship of melody. I think we mine similar territory in some ways.” A fan ever since he saw Til Tuesday open for Hall & Oates in 1984, he reached out and was elated when she said yes. His relief turned to surprise when she sent in her part, which was identical to Pernice’s original demo. “I just sent her the track with my lead vocal. I didn’t send her the demo, because I wanted her to do her thing. But the harmony she sings is exactly the

harmony I sang on the demo—that ooh oooh oooh part in the background. I couldn't believe it.”

Sunny, I Was Wrong ends with “It Got Away from Me,” which features none other than Jimmy Webb playing piano. “He’s like my Beatles,” says Pernice of the man who penned “McArthur Park,” “Up Up and Away,” and “Wichita Lineman.” “My earliest memory is hearing ‘Galveston’ when I was maybe three years old. I was visiting my grandmother in East Boston, and I’d just gotten a Big Wheel for my birthday. I was riding it up and down her hallways, and that song came on the radio and stopped me in my tracks. That was the first time in my life I can ever remember music arresting me.” Webb’s piano comes in about halfway through the song, like liquid filling in the edges of the music. It consoles even as it cajoles, adding commentary to Pernice’s bittersweet assessment of missed opportunities and gnawing regrets. But his contribution extended beyond just his instrumental part. “He actually called me up and we talked for a bit, which was exciting. He asked if he could give me a little production advice. Of course! He told me to start the song with the back end of the chorus rather than just starting right in on the verse. We re-edited it and he was right! I might get hit by a bus tomorrow, but Jimmy Webb plays on a song I wrote. Nothing can change that.”

“I blew half my life on things I can’t explain, left so many cakes out in the rain,” he sings over Webb’s sympathetic piano. “Like a song that’s not bound by time or key, it got away from me.” While he might rather die than let a song go unconsidered, *Sunny, I Was Wrong* tallies up all of those things that do get away from us: friends and lovers we haven’t seen in decades, old promises broken, cherished dreams forgotten, best-laid plans unrealized.

“Making music is not always easy, but it's still magical for me when you find that thing that makes the song pop. I don’t think I’ve made a better album than this one, or one that pops like this one. It feels like I’ve made a big leap.”