

Joe Pug
***Messenger* (Lightning Rod Records)**
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*“If my thoughts are hard to gather
if I don’t know where to start
it ain’t my mind that matters
for I have an unsophisticated heart.”*

— Joe Pug, “Unsophisticated Heart”

For the moment, Joe Pug has it figured out, career if not life: Just write the songs that have to be written, play them for anybody who will listen, tour as if you had no home. Oh, and give your music away. Which isn’t to say he won’t be selling his debut full-length offering, *Messenger* (Lightning Rod). But free is how he came to make it, more or less.

It worked like this, for Joe Pug anyhow: The day before his senior year as a playwright student at the University of North Carolina, he sat down for a cup of coffee and had the clearest thought of his life: I am profoundly unhappy here. Then came the second clearest.

Pug packed up his belongings and pointed his car towards Chicago. Working as a carpenter by day, the 23 year-old Pug spent nights playing the guitar he hadn’t picked up since his teenage years. Using ideas originally slated for a play he was writing called "Austin Fish," Pug began creating the sublime lyrical arrangements that would become the *Nation of Heat* EP.

The songs were recorded fast and fervently at a Chicago studio where a friend snuck him in to late night slots other musicians had canceled. He was short on money, but his bare-boned sincerity didn’t require much more than a microphone and it dripped off of each note he sang.

The early rumblings of critical praise for the EP were confirmed when his first headlining gig sold out Chicago’s storied Schubas Tavern in 2008. As word spread, Pug struck upon an idea that would later prove to be one of the most significant in his young career. He offered his existing fans unlimited copies of a free 2-song sampler CD to pass along to their friends. He sent the CDs out at his own expense, even covering the

postage. Inside each package was a personal note thanking the fan for helping to spread the word. The response was overwhelming, and to date he has sent out over 15,000 CDs to 50 states and 14 different countries. Without access to radio, Pug managed to turn his fans into his very own broadcast system. The offer still stands, and to this day it's featured prominently on www.joepugmusic.com.

“Look, in the end, I just trust my fans, and the nature of people in general. I need to pay my bills like anyone else does. But I also don't think it's right to ask someone to pay \$15 when they don't know what they're getting. So in a way by sending out these CDs, I'm wagering that they'll like my music, and that if they do they'll come to shows, buy CDs, and help me spread the word even further. And so far I've been proven right. Without question, the more sampler CDs I send out, the more music I sell.”

Nation of Heat took on a life of its own, passing from friend to friend and iPod to iPod. The crowds swelled and the media took notice. Tours with Steve Earle, M. Ward, and Josh Ritter followed, as did invitations to Lollapalooza and the Newport Folk Festival. He crisscrossed the country incessantly, traveling mostly alone in his 1995 Plymouth Voyager with no stereo or air conditioning.

After over 200 shows, Pug took a brief respite to record his full-length debut. If *Nation of Heat* heralded the arrival of a talent to watch, *Messenger* assigns Pug a deserved spot among the finest songwriters of his generation. From the opening notes of the title track that leads off the record, it's clear that the artist has no intention of retreating to the comfortable or the familiar. While the scathing war indictment “Bury Me Far (From My Uniform)” and the sparse, poetic “Unsophisticated Heart” illustrate that Pug is still a master of the guy-and-guitar song, it's the supporting cast Pug brought on board that truly brings out the record's subtle beauty.

From the haunting, ethereal pedal steel guitar that sneaks delicately under “The Sharpest Crown” to the barrelhouse rhythm section that propels “The Door Is Always Open”, it's clear that Pug is as comfortable exploring this new territory as he is solo. “The first record, it was a breeze,” he says. “Didn't even know we were making it, just me and a guitar...the songs completely unadorned. This one, it's like that thing where there's an explosion and you realize how many options there are in the world.”

With his debut album now finished, the options only get more numerous for the 25 year-old-singer. The remainder of 2009 will be spent touring Europe before he returns home to begin promoting *Messenger*.

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