

MELLENCAMP

SUNDAY MORNING WITH

WITH THE PREMIERE TOUR LOOMING FOR GHOST BROTHERS OF DARKLAND COUNTY, HIS THEATRICAL COLLABORATION WITH STEPHEN KING AND T BONE BURNETT, THE ROCK AND ROLL HALL OF FAMER SAT DOWN AT HIS LAKESIDE HOME WITH BLOOM'S MIKE LEONARD TO TALK ABOUT HIS LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE.



IT'S

a steamy Sunday morning on Labor Day weekend and pickup trucks towing boats are lumbering to and from Lake Monroe on the winding stretch of road near John Mellencamp's hillside home.

I pull up to the intercom outside the imposing iron gate at the entrance to the Mellencamp compound, announce myself, and a pulley system grinds and grumbles as it pulls the gate back to allow me inside. It's a pleasant, verdant drive through woods to his home, meandering past the remodeled old house Mellencamp now uses as a painting studio and around a corner to where a wooden gazebo sits and Adirondack chairs are neatly arranged on a grassy patch offering a panoramic view of Indiana's largest lake.

A house attendant opens the castle-like doors and I step inside and hear Mellencamp shout a hello. His 18-year-old son Speck passes shirtless through the kitchen off to the left, fixing himself a bowl of cereal; he'll soon be headed out to the Rhode Island School of Design where he was accepted for his painting acumen. Son Hud, 19, a sophomore, is already off at Duke University and a member of the football squad. He recently phoned his father to report that even though a walk-on, he hopes to soon be playing on special teams.

With girlfriend Meg Ryan out of town and just father and son in residence, the Mediterranean-style home feels vast and peaceful. Dressed casually in a navy blue T-shirt and grey full-leg

athletic pants, Mellencamp is relaxed and hospitable.

We step out onto the patio above the pool that overlooks Lake Monroe, but Mellencamp decides that the sound of frequently passing motorboats might drown out parts of the interview I'll be recording. He directs me instead to the billiards room where the table is neatly set with a rack of red snooker balls. He closes the sturdy, glass-pocket doors behind us.

THE PLAY'S THE THING

The familiarity formed from numerous past interviews makes "How's it goin'?" a natural place to start. He asks me if I'm going to keep my "Boomers versus Seniors" charity basketball game going since there is no longer much

'ART IS NEVER DONE. IT'S ONLY ABANDONED'

distinction between the two age groups. I complain that I can't reliably make a layup anymore. He responds by recalling that he set the school record in the 100-yard dash at Seymour High School. Now, he says, he asks his trainer to stand in one place so he can be sure that he's moving when he runs sprints as part of his workout regimen. "My mind's doing all the shit that makes me think I'm running fast, but now it's like, that's terrible. You can't do shit," he says with a grimace.

The purpose of my being here is to talk about *Ghost Brothers of Darkland County*, the "play with music" that begins a 20-show regional tour October 10 at the Indiana University Auditorium and passes back through for a

second night on October 23. I chuckle and recall an interview we did years ago at his Belmont Mall recording studio when I watched him excitedly pull out lyric sheets for this same project and call out to band leader, Mike Wanchic, to play a couple of audio demos they'd recorded. "How long ago?"

"I think we've got thirteen years on it," Mellencamp says. "The reason it's taken so long is because we still view it as a work in progress. We've had one offer to make it into a movie already. We turned it down because we don't think it's ready." He's also received an offer for a limited Broadway run this winter. Same response. "Not ready," he says. Still evolving.

"You know," he adds with a matter-of-fact tone, "Art is never done. It's only abandoned."

The quote originates with Leonardo da Vinci and accurately describes the 13-year process of taking an idea to writer Stephen King, envisioned as a theatrical piece, and then moving the concept along through wholly unfamiliar territory. Mellencamp has compared it in the past to Sisyphus pushing that boulder up the hill—but without the "deserved

punishment" component of the Greek mythological tale.

TOUGH GUYS DON'T DANCE

Laid-back morning aside, Mellencamp seems genuinely excited by the prospect of launching the latest incarnation of *Ghost Brothers* at the IU Auditorium in his adopted hometown. "What you're going to see in Bloomington, it's 180 degrees different than what we put on in Atlanta," he says. The theatrical production opened there to mixed but predominantly positive reviews in a month-long run at Atlanta's Alliance Theatre in the spring of 2012.

"We put on a traditional Broadway show-ish thing in Atlanta," he says. "We found out from Atlanta that having people act out the story is not necessary. What's necessary is for the audience to hear the story. So we've turned it into the equivalent of a modern-day radio show. So there'll be actors on stage, obviously, and they'll be in costume, and they'll be saying that they're going to be telling the audience a story."

"It's a very complicated Stephen King story," he continues. "Very complicated, a lot of charac-

ters, and, you know, we had to take so much out in Atlanta. People had to physically walk from here to there, and that took time. So all this physical movement was just, come on, get on with it."

While Mellencamp has acting experience, including having starred in and directed *Falling From Grace*, a 1992 film written by Larry McMurtry, he does not plan to perform in any incarnation of *Ghost Brothers*. It is not an acting vehicle for him.

At various points in our rambling conversation he emphasizes, lowering his voice for a deadpan delivery, "There's no dancing."

A TERRIFYING TALE

This particular melding of story and song has been a bit of a horse of a different color from the beginning.

It started with Mellencamp being enthralled by a chilling story he was told after he bought an old country house—colloquially, a cabin—near what once was a small lake in the area dammed and flooded to create Lake Monroe. After the sale, he says, the seller casually mentioned that



(l-r) T Bone Burnett, John Mellencamp, and Stephen King.
Photo by Kevin Mazur

the place was believed to be haunted by a tragedy a generation earlier, involving rival brothers and the woman both wanted. One brother accidentally killed the other, then he and the girl died in an accident while driving toward town to report what had happened.

A genuine Greek tragedy in the Hoosier state.

King was intrigued by the eerie story and the opportunity to develop a plotline about relatives of the brothers possibly destined to re-enact the same fate with a sibling feud and a femme fatale. The Rock and Roll Hall of Famer and the literary world's master of the macabre met up several times and threw songs and scripts back and forth as they continued on with their own albums, tours, books, and screen adaptations that mostly define their respective careers.

"It's kind of like a hobby-job for us," Mellencamp says. "I wouldn't trade the experience because Steve and I have become like brothers. We have great admiration for each other. I'm not a collaborator and Steve's not a collaborator, and we've been able to work together for thirteen years and never have a harsh word with each other. We both think it's funny."

Mellencamp smiles and chuckles as he talks about the process. He still smokes, despite a 1994 heart attack. "You know," he says at one point, "Johnny Carson said cigarettes never hurt his health, either, until they killed him."

Whether it was just this particular lazy Sunday morning or an indication of true change, Mellencamp smoked fewer American Spirit cigarettes than I've ever seen him do in the past. Over our 90 minutes together, he even had to relight a few times. Years ago, it wasn't

uncommon to see him smoke a cigarette down to the end and light a new one off the butt.

"At first I really felt funny telling the greatest, or at least the best-selling, author, maybe ever, 'Hey, your story's not working here. I'm not seeing it,'" he says about his collaboration with King. "And he'd go, 'Yeah, it is.' And he'd tell me why it's working, and I'd watch it and go, 'You're right. It works.' And vice versa, he'd go, 'John, I don't know about that song.' And my response was always the same: 'So fuck that, I'll write another one. I'm not married to that song.' That's kind of both of our attitudes. 'Okay, I'm not married to that. Let's change it.'"

For two accomplished artists not accustomed to collaborations, the give-and-take has been easy.

T BONE COMES ABOARD

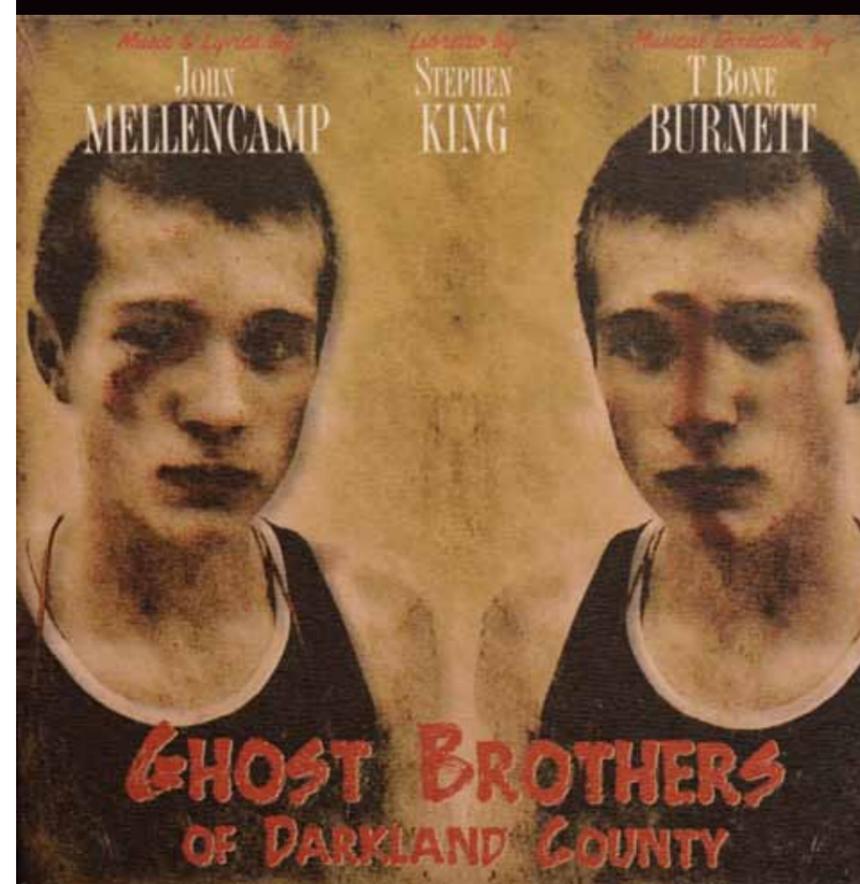
Still, Mellencamp and King both have said in interviews that bringing on musician and producer T Bone Burnett was what really pulled the music and story together. "T Bone's been great for *Ghost Brothers* because he's been able to take, you know, what he does with my songs and my records and he's been able to do that with *Ghost Brothers*. He's been able to kind of round them up and put them all together so they make sense together."

Mellencamp explains that he never really had a producer with whom he could communicate musician-to-musician until he teamed with Burnett for his 2008 album, *Life, Death, Love and Freedom*. Long admired both for his own music and production skills, Burnett's production resume has steadily grown in stature. His film credits include "musical archivist" for the 1998 film *The Big Lebowski* and musical director and producer for *Crazy Heart*, *Walk the Line*, and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*—all giant hits notable for their music. His work on albums includes the Robert Plant and Alison Krauss collaboration on *Raising Sand* and the

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platinum-selling Tony Bennett and k.d. lang duet album, *A Wonderful World*. Twelve Grammy Awards are ample evidence the guy knows what he's doing.

The *Ghost Brothers* CD released in June not only demonstrates Mellencamp's ability to write songs that don't sound like Mellencamp songs but showcase a "who's who" of artists who give each song their own signature stamp. Elvis Costello was a natural choice for the devilish character The Shape, Neko Case is the brassy character Anna, and Sheryl Crow surprises with the sweetness with which she sings as Jenna. Artists including Kris Kristofferson, Rosanne Cash, Taj Mahal, and Ryan Bingham also contribute to the singular sound of the album.



The soundtrack cover of *Ghost Brothers of Darkland County*.

Mellencamp likens himself and King to a couple of old bulls in a slightly raunchy old joke. The moral of the story is that with age comes patience and wisdom. To illustrate the point, Mellencamp tells me that King first wrote a version of the novel on which the hugely successful TV drama *Under the Dome* is based in 1972. He revised it a decade later, went after it again in the latter part of the last decade and finally saw it published as a novel in 2009. "Now, it's the most successful show on television," Mellencamp says with a back-and-forth nod suggesting, "go figure."

"Steve just knows that the world does not turn on our time schedule," Mellencamp says. "How could he have ever dreamt that four years, five years ago, it would be the number one show in the country, maybe the world?"

King, 66, has told interviewers how much he enjoys the collaboration and spirit behind *Ghost Brothers*. Like Mellencamp, who turned 62 on October 7, he is a firm believer that new challenges keep his mind and skills sharp. "John can make rock and roll records and I can write books for the rest of our lives," he notes in the preface to the *Ghost Brothers* libretto. "But that's the safe way to do it. You dig yourself a rut and then you furnish it, and that's no way to live—not if you want to stay creative."

Mellencamp insists that people who know his work, including me, and others who might have preconceived notions of what they will see, should just throw those notions out the window before coming to the theater. "I can assure you, you are wrong," he says. "Because we couldn't even imagine where we're at now. We couldn't have made this thirteen years ago. Just couldn't have done it. It's like me writing something off *Life, Death, Love and Freedom*. I couldn't have written those songs when I was 23 years old. Just couldn't have done it. I didn't have the experience."

"My first half dozen records, I was just trying to entertain people. It took me time to find my voice. So *Ghost Brothers* is the same way," he goes on. "It's started to find its voice and it's unique and it's different and it's something we won't give up on. It's not art abandoned. We will not abandon it until every avenue is closed down." 🍀

Mellencamp performs only one song on the soundtrack and sings with his most gravelly, sage tone on "Truth," which serves as a kind of epilogue to the play. It is enhanced by the unadorned harmonies of Lily and Madeleine Jurkiewicz, sisters from Indianapolis.

The best line regarding the making of the soundtrack album comes from Dave Alvin, however, who was chosen for inclusion in the musical mix with his brother, Phil, in part because of the legendary feuds they had as leaders of the roots rock band, The Blasters. "I get to kill my brother and Sheryl Crow is my girlfriend? Sign me up!" he told *Los Angeles Times* in June.

THE PLOT

Ghost Brothers of Darkland County is set in tiny, fictional Lake Belle Reve, Mississippi, a place with more natural Gothic overtones than college-town Bloomington. Mellencamp's songs do not move the plot along, per se, as often occurs in operas and plays. They are more like character studies—sidebars, in a way—that give insight into the contentious and prideful McCandless brothers, who perished 40 years ago, and their living relatives, who could be headed down the same path. In *Ghost Brothers*,

the surviving sibling, Joe McCandless, gathers his family to tell them the backstory of what really happened in 1967 with the hope that, with knowledge, they can avoid the same, awful fate.

The ghosts and the living occupy the same stage and engage in dialogue and song throughout the play. The ghosts are clearly defined by the focused stage lighting—a blue glow surrounds them in the stage directions in the libretto. Enlivening the drama are two additional characters: a boisterous radio announcer called The Zydeco Cowboy, and the crude and irreverent The Shape, who functions like mischievous Puck in Shakespeare and English mythology and wisecracks like the devil directly to the audience.

With ghosts, a feuding family, otherworldly characters, and macabre plot twists, it seems safe to say that Stephen King is in his element even if musical theater isn't his usual art form. His characters are well drawn and their dialogue is feisty, realistic, and to-the-point. That's no surprise, given that the prolific writer has penned a passel of bestsellers and sold more than 350 million books, with many of his stories adapted for movies and television.