

newport folk festival

SUNDAY, AUG. 2 | **JOE PUG** | WATERSIDE STAGE, 12:50 P.M.

Singer-songwriter doesn't follow the script

BY MATT KEEFER

A voice comes out the stereo, haggard and worn, lamenting the deaths of so much youth in war. "A Thousand Men" is typical for Joe Pug, and upon hearing it, I was certain to find an old, calloused farmhand who gargled gasoline and watched the shallow stream pass by.

But from over the phone comes a youthful voice. Later I'll see his photo on the Internet: shags of unkempt hair, preppy clothes, crushing the impression his singing voice must give to those unfamiliar with him.

"My main band was Nirvana. That was my band," said the 25-

year-old Chicago-based singer-songwriter. Pug has only two EPs to his credit and already a slew of offers to perform.

He reflected on some of his earliest performances in his early teens: "Probably half the set was Nirvana covers and originals that were, you know, sort of cheap ripoffs of Nirvana. It couldn't be more disparate, the genres (of folk and grunge), but the feeling and the intent, in my opinion, are pretty similar."

As crazy as it sounds, there seems to be some truth in it. Pug's already had plenty of comparisons to Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen and contem-

porary Josh Ritter, and he has hit Paste Magazine and NPR, among others. Not bad for the first year of his debut EP.

Pug got his start by ending his studies to be a playwright at the University of North Carolina. "Strangely enough, I was mainly writing comedies and broad farce," he said. "One of my favorite playwrights was Moliere. I think in some ways, in comedy, the writing has to be a lot clearer. If you write a comedy, and you're sitting in the wings watching it performed, you can literally hear how well it's going over. You step up your

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Joe Pug, snug in a tub. C'mon and buy a T-shirt. The man with two monosyllabic names needs to eat. PHOTO BY AMBER MEAIRS

Down-and-out, lonely and broke — 'It's great'

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game a little bit."

He recalled that his plays had "mostly not performed well."

"With any sort of live performance ... I think you succeed probably about 25 percent of the time and fail miserably 75 percent of the time."

With only a year of school left, the young man headed West, and his luck has improved. "I've gotten to a point where I have a nice set that goes over very nicely. But it took me a long time to get there doing that. I've been out knocking boots and playing for cigarette machines for about three years now."

But there's little hint in his voice of how quickly he's fallen upon good graces. Since the 2008 release of his EP "Nation of Heat," the past few months have found Pug opening for Josh Ritter, as well as several dates at folk festivals, including Winnipeg and Vancouver, Lollapalooza in Chicago, and, of course, Newport. "If 10 years from now I'm mopping the floors of Burger King," Pug said, "I'd be able to tell my kids 'I played the Newport Folk Festival.'"

Why all the hubbub over Pug? Possibly it's entrapping down-and-out lyrics ("I've come here to get broke/ And maybe bum a smoke" in "Hymn #101"), or the hollow timbre of a voice aged in wood barrels, or

even just the fact that he's comfortable talking shop about music as a business as well as an art.

(Let me remind you how important all those shirts and trinkets at the merchandise booth are: "I'm really sort of living and dying by the T-shirt sales at this point," Pug said. "Mainly living, though.")

With all his hard-knock songwriting, and the fact that he's living by his bootstraps, the traveling guitarist has difficulty attributing the extra age in his singing voice and lyrics. "There are no particularly difficult life experiences that no one else sorta goes through," he said.

Except for failing at writing plays. "Oh,

absolutely! Nothing will put more gray hairs on your head than watching something you put so much time and energy into flop.

"You know, it's difficult, and it's lonely, and there's not a whole lot of money to be made doing it," he added. "But ... it's great. I was standing in the airport today coming down to Cleveland and I had my guitar in one hand, and my merchandise in my trunk, just sort of laughing to myself. This is what I was born to do."



Matt Keefer is a fan of raw folk and free music. Check out www.JoePugMusic.com to get your free EP.