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Music was the furthest thing from John Prine's mind a year ago as he recovered from cancer.

Still, he ended up writing the song of his life, "In Spite of Ourselves," the title track of his new country album, which features duets with Emmylou Harris, Iris DeMent and others.

"It was the first thing I did that even resembled work," said Prine, now fully recovered, in an interview from his Nashville home. "I had so much radiation in my throat area, I couldn't sing. I could talk, but didn't have any power in my voice. I was itching to get out of the house. And writing a song wasn't what I wanted to do. I wanted to be on the road."

"In Spite of Ourselves" was written for the upcoming Billy Bob Thornton film "Daddy & Them," in which Prine and Thornton play the sons of Andy Griffith. The dark comedy was shot in September 1998 in Little Rock, Ark.

In yin-and-yang twangs, Prine and DeMent sing:

*In spite of ourselves/We'll end up sittin' on a rainbow*

*Against all odds/Honey, we're the big door prize*

*We're gonna spite the noses right off of our faces*

*There won't be nothin' but big old hearts/Dancin' in our eyes.*

Prine, 53, a Maywood native, begins a four-night homecoming stand Friday at the Chicago Folk Center. DeMent will open the show, but also will join Prine and his band for the duet material.

Before he became ill, Prine had been kicking around the idea of an album of duets with different female artists. "In Spite of Ourselves" includes a mandolin-driven version of the George Jones-Tammy Wynette classic "(We're Not) The Jet Set," sung with DeMent. Melba Montgomery teams up with Prine on "Milwaukee Here I Come" (the only song ever recorded by Jones and Brenda Carter). And Prine and Lucinda Williams deliver an eerie, stark Hank Williams-inspired medley of "Wedding Bells/Let's Turn Back the

Years."

"I made a list of the girls first," Prine said. "I tried to figure out two or three songs per girl, in case they didn't like the first song. I had a list of 35 girls. I only expected one out of five would want to do it. But the first nine I called all said yes."

Jim Rooney's sparse production sparks the spirited exchange so essential for a good country duet. Prine's raspy voice is a perfect complement to the empathetic phrasing of Trisha Yearwood (on Roger Miller's "When Two Worlds Collide") and Patty Loveless ("Back Street Affair").

Rooney, who also produced "Infamous Angel" and "My Life," DeMent's first two albums, developed his minimalist style while working under former Sun Records engineer Jack Clement at the Cowboy Arms Hotel and Recording Studio in Nashville, where Prine met the producer.

They began recording "In Spite of Ourselves" in September 1997, two months before Prine was diagnosed with cancer. "We had to put the record on the shelf after cutting the first six things," Prine said.

For his cancer treatment, Prine was shuffled between doctors until Knox Phillips, the son of Sun Records founder Sam Phillips, intervened. Knox had been diagnosed with a similar cancer.

"I hadn't talked to Knox in 10 years," said Prine, who in 1979 recorded his rockabilly "Pink Cadillac" album at Sam Phillips Studios in Memphis, with Sam, Knox and his brother Jerry co-producing. "I hadn't talked to Sam since 'Pink Cadillac.' But Knox and Sam got to talking. I already had my doctor chosen, but Knox called out of the blue and said I absolutely had to go to this place in Texas (the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston). I knew he had been through a lot, but what was he doing telling me my doctor was no good? Knox picked up that he couldn't reason with me.

"So Sam calls me the next morning, it's like the voice of God on the phone. He's all fire and brimstone. I have all the respect in the world for Sam. So I said, 'Mr. Phillips, I'll call these people first thing tomorrow and see them.' And he said, 'Good, because if you don't, I'm coming to Nashville, and I'm going to kick your a- - every inch of the way to Houston.' "

Prine bowed to the voice of another entertainment god on the set of "Daddy & Them." He loved working with fellow Grammy Award winner Griffith, who won in 1997 for his

gospel record, "I Love to Tell the Story. "It was like working with Abraham Lincoln," said Prine, who previously acted in the John Mellencamp film "Falling From Grace." "He found out I was a musician, so he'd sidle up to me every time we cut and tell me road stories about his first guitar, things like that. I felt like Opie's step brother."

In the film, which was written and directed by Thornton, Griffith plays the head of a dysfunctional household. "They have no communication," Prine said. "They're talking all the time, but not to each other. There's a lot of drinking going on. There's Bloody Marys, beer, coffee and eggs at breakfast."

After making the movie, Prine finished up the album. Despite his cancer treatment, which included radiation therapy, Prine wasn't too worried about his voice, which at its best sounds like a freight train chugging through downtown Maywood.

"The radiation doctor was going to put lead shields around my vocal cords to block them off while he was doing the rest of my neck. I said, 'Hey, have you ever heard me sing? Just go in and sweep the area.' If I can talk, I can sing."

Since April, Prine has tested his voice out in concerts. He thinks that the radiation has lowered it a bit. "It took me a while to get back into singing, but now the more I sing, maybe my voice is even a little less raspy," he said. "I quit smoking after 34 years of a pack a day. I used to stand onstage, smoke and occasionally sing a song in between cigarettes.

"I quit the night before surgery. The doctor said, 'I can't truthfully tell you your cancer has anything to do with smoking, but it would be a great time to stop.' And I did."