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## Mark Oblinger

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It's been an amazing career for singer/songwriter and recovering rock n' roller **Mark Oblinger** — a **Grammy finalist and five-time Emmy award winner**, Oblinger started out his career with all of the fun excesses we've come to expect of the rock n' lifestyle. However, it wasn't long until Mark realized a bit of focus could unveil his true potential, a realization that led to a gig on the road with the **Pure Prairie League**, and seven years of performances with **Firefall** (not to mention all of those awards!). With so much experience under his belt, it's no surprise that Oblinger's current musical approach is complex (yet so approachable) — a mix of instrumentation and genres that defy typical scene logic and also refuse to stay confined to a singular song approach. From ballads to rock n' roll, Mark's latest record, **High Water Line**, has it all.

It's Oblinger's first solo effort, and boy, it's been worth the wait. We asked him to tell us all about it — he said, *"It's a collection of tunes from different times in my life. Some older, some very new...The idea of stepping up and dealing with life head on in 'Let It Roll' and 'Pressure Makes Diamonds' – the questioning of who we are in 'Living Imitation' and 'I Say Love' – the need for connection on the deepest level in 'Hold Me Tonight' and 'Love Is.' There are bright moments like 'Little Bird' but also darker themes like 'No Regrets' and 'Judgment Road' and being able to express those darker thoughts was really key to the balance and honesty I was looking for as a songwriter. High Water Line feels like a pretty complete picture of who I am as an artist right now."* Click to [MarkOblinger.com](http://MarkOblinger.com) to check out *High Water Line* for yourself, and do it soon — he's already at work on the next record. Now, keep reading. There's still so much more to learn in all the answers to the XXQs below.

***PensEyeView.com (PEV): How would you describe your sound and what makes you stand out from others in your genre?***

**Mark Oblinger (MO):** I know it's an overused description but I'm definitely trying to mix different instruments into genres that don't traditionally belong together (mandolin/banjo on a hip-hop groove, banjo over Rock, harmonica over a Latin feel). What were once strict boundaries are now gone so why not explore the possibilities? As a songwriter, I also like using a pretty wide range of musical styles, from edgy blues ("Judgment Road") to very quiet piano ballads ("Love Is"), to get my point across. I think all of this comes from a sense of melody and lyric that was inspired by Paul Simon, James Taylor, and Jackson Browne – mixed with the message, feel and urgency from Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, the later Temptations, even James Brown. You can hear it in the "blue-eyed" soul of Hall and Oates, Robert Palmer, Steve Winwood, Bonnie Raitt, and more recently Jason Mraz, John Mayer, Susan Tedeschi, Sam Smith, and others – all influences that come to bear on writing.



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**PEV:** *Born in Fort Campbell, KY (as an army brat), and moving to Boulder, CO in 1979, you picked up your first guitar at 14. With that, what kind of music were you into growing up? Do you remember your first concert?*

**MO:** My Dad loved Sinatra, Nancy Wilson, Ella Fitzgerald, and all the big bands that could swing so we had a lot of that in the house. And more singers — Nat King Cole, Ray Charles, Keely Smith — the list goes on. Those records “felt” so good and helped me connect emotionally to my feelings and the world. As far as my first concert, we were living in Northern Virginia so as soon as I got my driver’s license, I drove into D.C. and saw Neil Young at the Kennedy Center just after the release of the Harvest album. The opening act was a very young Linda Ronstadt and The Stone Poneys. It was pure magic and set in motion the idea of me being able to express myself through music.

**PEV:** *What was it like trying to break into the music scene when you first started? What was your first show like?*

**MO:** On the local level, we were all trying to find an authentic “voice” that would differentiate us from the other bands. I started playing in college but was too shy to sing any leads for a while so I focused on the guitar. Most of us were playing covers as a way to get work and also learn the craft. I can remember vividly the moment I realized I was a “musician” — we were playing an outside patio gig at a bar and I was soloing on Neil Young’s “Down by the River” and it was almost an “out of body” experience — one minute, I had been somebody “watching” passively from the audience — the next, I was on stage playing. Once that happens, I don’t think you can ever put the genie back in the bottle. Same with recording — now there’s a drug!

**PEV:** *What can fans expect from a live Mark Oblinger show?*

**MO:** Great live energy and connection with the audience. I really love crafting a performance with the right songs at the right time to tell a musical story that reflects my ideas and values as a person and an artist. I love the big, rockin’ moments as much as the quiet, intimate ones and I think you can do that live if you tell the story in the right way. Even if it’s a re-invented cover of another artist’s tune, I make sure it’s consistent emotionally with the vibe I’m working to create so it becomes an extension of me and the story.

**PEV:** *What is the first thing that comes to mind when you step on stage to perform?*

**MO:** Trying to get into the “zone” where I feel as comfortable as I do in my living room — but also willing to reach out and go big enough to grab the person in the last row and connect with them. It’s a dance — and I like to dance!

**PEV:** *What is the best part about being on stage in front of an audience?*

**MO:** The moment. The honesty. Letting your defenses down and being open. That’s the connection I’m looking for as a performer and I think what the audience came to experience too.



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***PEV: What is the underlying inspiration for your music?***

**MO:** It comes from lots of sources. Some of it is pure musical – the joy and satisfaction of creating a well-written melody. Lyrically, it comes from a desire to be “heard” on a deeper level. I grew up in a time when we never really talked about our feelings personally or as a family, so letting those out and connecting with others has been a lifelong journey that I think I’m getting better at all the time.

***PEV: Thinking back to when you first started out, do you ever look back on your career and think about your earlier days and how you’ve arrived where you are today?***

**MO:** I’m surprised that I made it! My first 10 years in the business were full of “Rock and Roll” excesses and I realized eventually that I wouldn’t be around very long if I continued. So I got sober and it was like Dorothy opening the door to Oz. Within a year, I was on the road with Pure Prairie League, followed by seven years of touring with Firefall. I also met my soulmate, Linda, started a family and began working with some of the finest folks in the music business that helped me earn the awards that I’ve been so fortunate to receive. Sure, things could have been different – namely me being more of an advocate for myself as an artist along the way. But part of getting to where I am now has been learning to forgive myself, move on and not to play the “what if” game. As Joe Walsh said, “Life’s been good to me so far” and I couldn’t agree more.

***PEV: What’s one thing we’d be surprised to hear about you?***

**MO:** I love bees! As a beekeeper, we’ve had hives over the years and would have one right now if a bear hadn’t raided ours and gleefully munched up all the honey and comb!

***PEV: What happens when you hit a brick wall when writing? What are your methods to get over it?***

**MO:** Writing music has always been pretty easy for me and I usually do that first. Matching a lyric to the feeling that a specific melody or chord progression evokes can be the hard part so I try to sing along and record even the “place-keeper” lyrics to inform me what “sings” well over the melody. Paul McCartney’s famous “scrambled eggs” place-keeper lyric for “Yesterday” is the classic example. When I get stuck, I often move to another song and put the song that’s stuck gently (and playfully) on the back burner to slowly bubble up and percolate. “It” knows it has my attention and is usually asking me to dig deeper. Once I “get out of the way” as the writer and identify the core thing I’m trying to say, a bunch of possible lines usually come out. Then it’s just being a good editor.

***PEV: How do you think the industry has changed since you first started out?***

**MO:** When I first came up, record companies controlled all the major distribution outlets so unless you were a “signed” artist, you had no way to get your music heard. That model has been broken wide open with the Internet, allowing independent artists to post and share their music much easier. The downside of course is that



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streaming services are not paying musicians royalties anywhere near the amount of revenue that was traditionally made from record sales. If there is an upside to that, you see a lot of artists that would have retired from touring out on the road these days and get to witness their incredible talents.

**PEV: What can fans expect from your latest release, a debut solo album titled *High Water Line*? What was the writing process like for this work?**

**MO:** It's a collection of tunes from different times in my life. Some older, some very new. I heard Jackson Browne once say something like "all songwriters have 5 or 6 songs or song forms that they continue to rewrite" and I think you can hear that on *High Water Line*. The idea of stepping up and dealing with life head on in "Let It Roll" and "Pressure Makes Diamonds" — the questioning of who we are in "Living Imitation" and "I Say Love" — the need for connection on the deepest level in "Hold Me Tonight" and "Love Is." There are bright moments like "Little Bird" but also darker themes like "No Regrets" and "Judgment Road" and being able to express those darker thoughts was really key to the balance and honesty I was looking for as a songwriter. *High Water Line* feels like a pretty complete picture of who I am as an artist right now. With that said, I'm really looking forward to getting into the studio again soon and building off of this in some new and challenging directions.

**PEV: With all your traveling, is there one area you wish you could travel around and play that you have not yet?**

**MO:** I lived in England and Germany as a kid but never played there so I'd love to go back – guitar in hand!

**PEV: As a Grammy Finalist and five-time Emmy Award-winning composer/producer/performer, how have all your friends and family reacted to your career?**

**MO:** None of those awards could have happened without the support and love of my family – specifically my wife and kids. They made so many sacrifices along the way to allow me the time to create the works that won those awards. And a lot of those awards came from being lucky enough to work with some of the most talented and generous people in the business that just happen to be my friends. It just doesn't get any better than that.

**PEV: What can we find you doing in your spare time, aside from playing/writing music?**

**MO:** Riding my bike, growing and eating great food, reading engaging books, going to see other musicians play, being VERY politically active. VOTE!

**PEV: Name one present and past artist or group that would be your dream collaboration. Why?**

**MO:** There are so many artists I would love to collaborate with! From the past, Lowell George from Little Feat would be at the top of the list. He had such a sophisticated lyrical sense and would lay his point of view over the chunkiest, swampiest gumbo of funky grooves you could imagine. Every member of every band I was in ALWAYS



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wanted to be in Little Feat! As far as artists still working, it would probably be Neil Finn of Crowded House. His lyrics are more image-driven than literal and I seem to gravitate to that style more and more. Same with Paul Simon, Peter Gabriel and Paul Buchanan from The Blue Nile. Beautiful stream of consciousness work.

**PEV:** *Is there an up and coming band or artist you think we should all be looking out for now?*

**MO:** She's not up and coming really anymore but Maggie Rogers. Absolutely knocks me out. Fearless. Immensely talented. Completely comfortable in her own skin and invites you to feel the same about yours.

**PEV:** *If playing music wasn't your life (or life's goal), what would you do for a career?*

**MO:** A carpenter. I love to build stuff with my hands!

**PEV:** *So, what is next for Mark Oblinger?*

**MO:** Another album – soon!

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