



**Pernice Brothers**  
***Who Will You Believe***

“I think of myself as mostly a songwriter,” says Joe Pernice of the Pernice Brothers. “You can produce songs in different ways, but I’m always hoping that the song itself—not the production, not even the performance—holds up and provides a stable foundation. Otherwise, you’re just making noises.” *Who Will You Believe*, the band’s eighth album and first since marking their 25th anniversary by reissuing their 1998 debut *Overcome By Happiness*, is full of stable foundations: Songs that convey complex ideas via catchy melodies and clever rhymes. Songs that leave no doubt to why they were written. Or, as he sings on “Look Alive,” songs that “make the ordinary extraordinary.” The album, which Pernice produced himself, is a testament to the joy he finds in the act of creation. “I write a lot of songs because it’s really fun. It always makes me feel alive.”

Pernice has been writing for a long time—most of his life, in fact—and has crafted a remarkable catalog that boldly reinterprets and recasts classic American pop. *Who Will You Believe* may be his most moving and nuanced album yet; it’s certainly his timeliest.

“These songs were all written during the same time period,” he says, “and they all seemed to tap into a mood I was in at the time. I go through spells where I’m a certain way for three or four months. I might be more reticent than usual, or more outgoing. With all of my records—and especially with this one—the songs all feel like they belong together, probably because they all arrived during the same stretch of time.” The spell that produced *Who Will You Believe* was a period of intense creativity Pernice hadn’t experienced in a few years. “My teenage son had recently retired from playing high-level youth baseball. Somehow I got drafted into coaching back in 2013 or so. I knew less than zero about coaching, but I sure learned. Turns out I’m not half bad at teaching kids how to drive baseballs. And for six or so years I was on a baseball diamond five or more days a week, April to October. Plus indoor training in the winter! Me, Joe Pernice. Hard to imagine. I wouldn’t change a minute of it, but when it all ended I can’t say I wasn’t stoked to have a chunk of my life back. I went deeper than ever into songwriting.”

But it was definitely not all fun and games for Pernice. In a single six-month stretch he was left reeling from the deaths of three close friends, including David Berman, poet and songwriter for Silver Jews and Purple Mountains, and Gary Stewart, the Rhino Records co-founder and tireless Pernice Brothers supporter since their first album in 1998. “That was such a bad patch when David and Gary both took their own lives. And my cousin Joe Harvard, who started Fort Apache Studios in Boston and was like a brother to me—he died, too. It was such a tough year. I was thinking about them a lot and watching how divided America had become. I was doing my best to try and take nothing for granted.”

Those tragedies inspired “The Purple Rain,” which concludes the album on a dramatic note and immediately ranks among his finest songs. “It’s an homage to some friends and family I lost, but it’s also about the dread of losing things that I thought would always be there.” Or, as the song goes, “The purple mountains won’t always separate the shining seas.” It opens with a strummed guitar and a lone, lost voice, then builds gradually and climaxes with a somber, star-spangled choir. It’s a choice that risks glibness, but is instead deeply moving: a reminder of each listener’s place in a larger world.

Pernice heard that mass of voices while he was writing the song, but it took a lot of work to capture the sounds he heard in his head. He reached out to the Toronto organization Choir! Choir! Choir! to sing the song’s climax—“I’ll remember you to the sea-bound train, I’ll remember you to the fruited plain”—then multi-tracked their voices to create a throng of harmonious voices as expansive as spacious skies. “They just nailed that moment,” says Pernice. “It was pretty powerful to hear when we were working on it. It’s not especially loud, but it’s heavy and thick.”

Featuring contributions from longtime bandmates Patrick Berkery, Laura Stein, and actual brother Bob Pernice, as well Joshua Karp, Liam Jaeger and Michael McKenzie, *Who Will You Believe* balances such moments of solemnity with warm humor and camaraderie. “I Don’t Need That Anymore,” a country-pop duet sung with Neko Case, was inspired by a stray remark from Pernice’s mother. “My wife and son and I visited my folks in Boston for Christmas last year. I was sitting on one side of the living room reading a book, while my wife and mother were leafing through my mother’s 1957 wedding album. My wife said, ‘Wow, Mary, you sure had some figure back then.’ And my mother—without skipping a beat—said, ‘I had it when I needed it.’” Recognizing a good hook when he heard it, Joe Pernice quickly typed the phrase into his phone and soon started tinkering with lyrics and melodies. “Songs don’t usually come like that, where I get the lyric hook first. But I just knew I had to write that song. And I knew it had to be a duet. Neko was kind enough to sing it with me.” Pernice traveled to Case’s studio to cut the vocal track. “You see Neko singing on a stage, and it’s fantastic. But it’s another thing entirely when you’re sitting seven feet away listening to her nail the part. It’s pretty breathtaking to witness.”

Pernice has been releasing albums for over 25 years. And with age comes a greater patience and an immense appreciation for the act of creation. “I trust the process more. I might not know exactly where a song is going when inspiration shows up, so I know to just relax and keep going. I know it’s going to get there, even if it doesn’t happen immediately. I think I’ve become a lot more chill in general.” That speaks to the irony of getting older: Despite having less and less time on Earth, he’s happy to let things run their natural course, however long it might take. As he sings on the spare, bittersweet “How Will We Sleep,” “Growing old seemed like death to me when I was young, now I want to grow old and I want to belong.” It’s a bit of heavy wisdom married to a hummable melody and delivered in a warmly determined voice. “I try to stop myself every day and tell myself that one of these days is going to be my last. It sounds morbid on the surface, but I don’t think it is. It helps me live in the present, and that’s pretty uplifting, actually. Once you get past the scary part, it’s actually a very peaceful feeling.”