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Steve Noonan: Paisley Park and Pachyderm engineering pro takes the mic in his own right

by Austin Gerth · [March 26, 2015](#)

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courtesy Steve Noonan

Local singer-songwriter [Steve Noonan](#) released his newest record, *I Could Be Anywhere*, last month. It's his first full-length record following two EPs, *Steve Noonan* and *A Mile Long*.

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Though Noonan's career as a songwriter began around 2008, his work in the local music scene extends quite a bit further back. He attended Berklee College of Music in the late 1980s, followed by engineering school, after which he spent several years working as a recording engineer. His clients included the local alternative band Trip Shakespeare, long-lived prog rockers the Moody Blues, and, from roughly 1991-1993, Prince.

Acquiring the job involved a considerable degree of serendipity for Noonan.

"A friend of mine was already working at his studio," Noonan said, "and they were looking for an assistant. I had been working at Pachyderm down in Cannon Falls, and then I made the switch to Paisley Park. It was kind of right place, right time. And also, just being local helped."

Unlike a lot of other people who've had working relationships with Prince, Noonan won't supply you with stories about the man's eccentricities. Instead he focuses naturally on what he learned and what the work itself was like.

"He liked to work long hours," Noonan said. "But I understand that as a songwriter: once you get going on something you want to get it done. He was just committed to the music."

Though Noonan takes more overt musical influence from 1970s singer-songwriters and from 1980s post-punk groups like the Cure, his time engineering for Prince shows through in subtler ways.

"I learned good song construction and good recording from Prince," Noonan said. "He was good at adding emotion and drama to songs."

Noonan's pop-conscious writing style seems to grow naturally out of that desire for drama.

"I like to get in, make a statement, have the high point of the song be the chorus, and wrap it up," Noonan said.

Noonan's songwriting career was sparked by his adoption of the 12-string guitar as his instrument of choice. Primarily associated with the mid-1960s folk rock of the Beatles and the Byrds, along with the Delta bluesman Blind Willie McTell, the instrument is tastefully deployed as one of the dominant sounds across all three of his records, its uniquely chiming chords complementing Noonan's New-Wave-inflected arrangements and baritone vocals.

"The tone and sound of it, the octaves on the low strings, it just has a full sound, and I just think it adds a lot to accompany my voice," Noonan said.

Noonan's comparatively stripped-down self-titled EP, which was released in 2009, includes some of the first songs Noonan wrote on the 12-string, and was planned initially just as a way "to land some gigs around town."

"I was happy enough with it that I could release it as an official record, which I did," Noonan said.



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Though Noonan has come a long way since his time working with Prince, he certainly doesn't hide the association. Another Paisley Park luminary, Tommy Barberella, played piano on Noonan's new album.

"I first met him when he played with Prince," Noonan said. "So that's kind of a full circle."

Austin Gerth is a member of the class of 2016 at Concordia College. He also writes for Concordia's student blog, [The COBBlog](#); and Concordia's student newspaper, [The Concordian](#).

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