

## BEHIND THE CLASSICS



Bonnie Raitt

**WRITTEN BY:** MIKE REID & ALLEN SHAMBLIN  
**RECORDED:** CAPITOL & OCEAN WAY STUDIOS, LOS ANGELES  
**PRODUCED BY:** BONNIE RAITT & DON WAS  
**BONNIE RAITT:** VOCALS  
**JAMES "HUTCH" HUTCHINSON:** BASS  
**TONY BRAUNAGEL:** DRUMS  
**BENMONT TENCH:** ORGAN  
**BRUCE HORNSBY:** PIANO  
**PAULINHO DA COSTA:** PERCUSSION  
**ARNOLD MCCULLER, DAVID LASLEY:** BACKING VOCALS  
**FROM THE ALBUM:** *LUCK OF THE DRAW* (1991)



Matt Mirelin

## “I Can’t Make You Love Me”

### BONNIE RAITT

It began with a newspaper article. “I was reading the morning paper,” says songwriter Mike Reid, “and there was a story about an old country boy who had gotten tanked up on moonshine. He went a little nuts and started shooting up his girlfriend’s car. He was arrested, and when he appeared in court, the judge asked him, ‘What have you learned from this experience?’ The guy said, ‘I learned, your honor, that you can’t make a woman love you if she don’t.’”

“Allen [Shamblin, Reid’s co-writer] was coming over that day, and we started writing it—but we never sat down and really burrowed in on it. We just kicked it around as an uptempo bluegrass song for about six weeks. It was something I imagined Ricky Skaggs would do.”

But the pair never finished the song. “One morning, I came home from taking my children to school,” Reid says. “That was a good time to sit at the piano, because when they were very little there was something about having them in the car—my defenses were gone. And this melody just came out. I improvised a verse into the tape recorder, and it seemed to make

sense for the bluegrass song. I called Allen and said, ‘You better come over and check this out.’”

“We worked on it, and once we understood who the character was in the song it only took a couple of days,” Reid says. “When we finished, it was a beautiful moment. It was one of the few songs I’d ever been involved with where I looked at it and thought, ‘There’s nothing to change.’ Though I felt certain there were only a handful of places to go with it. Linda Ronstadt or Bonnie Raitt were the only singers that came to mind.”

Raitt cut it in a spare, piano-driven arrangement that spotlighted the song’s heart-wrenching emotion. “I was stunned the first time I heard her version,” Reid says. “It seemed she understood the song more clearly than Allen or I. Bonnie Raitt is a true artist, and the great gift of having a true artist record something you’ve written is that often it reveals things in the song that you as the writer hadn’t noticed.”

After the song became a hit, fans began accosting the songwriters. “People seem compelled to talk to Allen and me and tell us how it’s affected them,” Reid

says. “One guy told me, ‘That song really helped me through a difficult time when I was going through a divorce.’ He said he knew he was finally able to get on with his life when he could listen to that song and not be shattered by it.”

In the years since its release, the song has only grown in stature, with covers by artists including Prince, Adele, George Michael and Kelly Clarkson. “I don’t think either Allen or I ever stand back and say, ‘Gee, we wrote that.’ That’s not the deal,” says Reid. “For anything you write, the best thing that can happen is that people use it in their lives. They don’t view it as a piece of artifice, but as something that they integrate into their lives that means something. You empty out the bags of your own life into the work, you participate in it. At that point, that’s when the writer disappears and the dance is between the singer and the listener.”

Bonnie Raitt felt the same way. “Of all the songs in my career, that one is the greatest gift,” she said. “Just the fact that I got to sing it first and not someone else.”

—Bill DeMain