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ROCK STEADY

**Bonnie Raitt returns with a new
outlook and some hard-won wisdom**

By Chris Neal



Bonnie Raitt is always listening. "My ear's always cocked for a possible direction," she says. "Something that's inspirational, either a song I want to do or a songwriter I want to investigate further. We've got hundreds of CDs in our collection and files on our computer. I take songs with me on my iPhone and listen every day when I go for hikes. I listen in my car, I'm listening while I'm doing the dishes. It's like treasure hunting."

Raitt's skills as a singer, songwriter and guitarist are unquestionable—her sly, keening slide-guitar solos and warm, inviting vocals are two of popular music's most recognizable sounds. But her keen instinct for hunting treasure shouldn't be underestimated. Among the previously buried gems she has turned into hits are John Hiatt's "Thing Called Love," Bonnie Hayes' "Have a Heart," Paul Brady's "Not the Only One," Shirley Eikhard's "Something to Talk About," "Little" Jimmy Scott's "Love Sneakin' up on You" and David Gray's "Silver Lining." "I Can't Make You Love Me" was an unknown tune by Nashville songwriters Mike Reid and Allen Shamblin when she found it; today it's a pop standard recorded by everyone from Prince to Adele. "It's work to find them," Raitt says. "But it's a joy when you've uncovered the ones that are just right."

It's a talent heard in full on *Slipstream*, Raitt's 16th studio effort and first since 2005. The previous years had seen Raitt keeping up a heavy touring schedule while coping with the deaths of both her parents—Broadway singer John Raitt and pianist Marjorie Goddard, who had divorced in 1970—as well as her brother, Steve Raitt. "For most of 2010 I decided to unplug and get in touch with some of the other aspects of my life," she says. "I'd had a lot of loss and illness, so it was good to be able to stay in one place and deal with that."

She emerged from that time off ready to try something new. Raitt called producer Joe Henry who had recently helmed albums for her friends Allen Toussaint and Mose Allison. Recording at Henry's home studio with a backing group that featured master jazz guitarist Bill Frisell, Raitt swiftly cut almost an album's worth of material. She then regrouped with her faithful studio and touring band, including bass player James "Hutch" Hutchinson, drummer Ricky Fataar, guitarist George Marinelli and new keyboardist Mike Finnigan, and headed into Ocean Way studios in Hollywood to cut more tracks. There Raitt acted as producer on a batch of more uptempo numbers, including a cover of Gerry Rafferty's 1978 hit "Right Down the Line."

Slipstream combines eight cuts from Ocean Way and four from Henry's house into a blend of rock, pop, reggae, blues and R&B that is instantly familiar as Raitt's unique territory. It's a plot of musical ground she has been steadily refining and expanding since her 1971 self-titled debut, recorded when she was a 21-year-old California girl rocking East Coast clubs alongside blues legends like Sippie Wallace and Howlin' Wolf. "People say, 'How did you get into blues, being the daughter of a Broadway singer and living in Los Angeles?'" she notes. "It's not geographic, it's not racial, it's not economic. If it speaks to you, it's almost like it's recalling something in your DNA. You get it so bad, it's in you and it's got to come out."

That it did, over a course of albums that found her piling up critical acclaim but attracting little interest from the mainstream. Her astounding second act came in the late 1980s, when a newly sober Raitt launched a collaboration with producer Don Was that produced a series of multiplatinum albums stretching from 1989's *Nick of Time* through 1994's *Longing in Their Hearts*. She followed up by digging into grittier fare with producers Mitchell Froom and Tchad Blake on albums like 1998's *Fundamental*, 2002's *Silver Lining* and 2005's *Souls Alike*. The latter was her final album for her longtime label home, Capitol. For *Slipstream*, Raitt elected to set up her own Redwing Records imprint. "I'm very lucky to be established enough that I could afford to do it," she says. "I didn't have to start from scratch."

We caught up with Raitt at her home in the Bay Area, shortly before she caught a plane to Los Angeles. "The internet makes it possible to have my office in L.A. without living there, so it's great," she notes, settling in for what she says is her first extensive interview in several years. "I haven't formulated some of these answers in so long that I don't know what to say," she

quips with a laugh. Raitt was nonetheless her typically eloquent and easygoing self as she discussed her history, new music and plans for the future.

What are you looking for in a song?

I can't say the lyrics mean more than the music—it's a combination of both. Sometimes I can rearrange a song that musically is not in the style I would do it in. But the lyrics have to be something I want to say. After so many records I have gotten around to saying a lot of the same things in different ways. But it's important to find a new direction musically as well as lyrically. My fans are waiting



Onstage in Rancho Mirage, Calif., 2009

'You just can't compare with how a great song can touch your heart.'

for something, and have come to expect a certain range of material and depth—and I expect that of myself, too.

How did you get to know Joe Henry?

I was a fan of his records and production—and he was always somebody I thought would be nice to be able to do something with down the line. I took that break, and when I was thinking about suiting up again I thought he would be one of the first people I would call. I already had a couple of his songs I wanted to cut. It would be a nice departure to do at least some of the record with him, because I knew I wanted to do a lot of the more R&B and uptempo, funkier tunes with my band.

What were those sessions like?

The vibe in Joe's house downstairs is warm—it's a beautiful old craftsman's mansion in South Pasadena, in what used to be the kitchen for the family that lived upstairs. He turned it into a clubhouse with a lot of warm rugs and couches. There are a lot of stones in the foundation of the house, he's got a lot of beautiful old lamps and amplifiers and cool old instruments. It was refreshing to be in a whole different city. I felt a bit like I was cheating on my band, but it was satisfying. We initially went in to do just two or three songs—we booked it around Bill Frisell's ability to come out to California—but we kept going and got eight or nine. I'm planning to release those down the line on my label as well.

How about the Ocean Way sessions?

Basically my touring band and I framed the music. I show up with a bunch of tunes, and we don't like to work them too hard. When I get my guys together it's exciting to be able to let everybody have their input. It's an organic way we play the music, without thinking about it too much. I don't rearrange it, except for things like "Right Down the Line"—I had this guitar part that characterized how the song was going to sound. By the time I have a feeling for what instruments I want people to try—which guitars, which organ sound, whether it's electric or acoustic piano, that kind of stuff—the songs just play themselves.

Is self-production difficult?

I'm pretty good at separating myself into the producer and mixer mode. I know what's working. I think most artists are pretty picky. I'm not a perfectionist about my vocals, but if something's a pretty good vocal and I want to save it, there are ways to save it. I'm not averse to tweaking it here and there,



All portraits by Matt Mindlin. Performance image: Buzz Person



Onstage at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, 2007

'I learned from my dad to make every show count'

tuning-wise, to save a great vocal. I try to stay out of my own way, because once I make the records I don't listen to myself sing.

How did you determine which tracks to include on the record?

There you have it—that part was very tricky. At one point I was going to put one CD out with my guys and one CD out with Joe. The tone of the sessions was so different that I didn't want to have people feel like they had to choose between one or the other. Ultimately I picked four songs that I thought would go well with the other music that I was doing with my band. Then it was a question of which ones to put where. I did 17 different sequences, plugging in different songs in different places. Once I landed on a sequence that was right, it just felt perfect that way. It took a couple of weeks.

Is sequencing still important in the digital age?

For me it's the way it's always been. I'm always going to make albums, and I'm always going to sequence them as if someone was sitting down and hearing them all at once. It's the same way you put together a show. There's a certain way you want to open a show, then there's a dip down to a ballad, then you go back up again. You can't put three or four ballads in a row—I'm sure people do it, but I haven't been able to. I've got such a wide range of tastes that it's tricky to not shake people up too much by putting a rocker tune close to something that was just ripping your heart out. It's like planning a great meal or a great date: You've got to know what to do first.

What do you think of modern music?

There's something about the importance of melody. I love hip-hop, but I know that sometimes I wish there was more melodic stuff going on. I understand that sometimes there are different agendas, and a ballad is different than a groove. My friend Etta James just passed away. "A Sunday Kind of Love" came on the radio the day she passed—god, they don't write 'em like that anymore. Maybe Paul Simon or Sting or Paul Brady does. But man, you just can't compare with how a great song can touch your heart like that.

How do you approach soloing?

I never have thought about it, ever. I just go, "Oh, whoops, my solo!" It's totally instinctive.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

In recording her guitar parts for *Slipstream*, Raitt used the same invaluable instrument she's been relying on for most of her career: the brown 1965 Fender Stratocaster she bought in 1969 for \$120. "I liked it because it didn't have any paint on it," she recalls. "I was 19, it was 3 in the morning and my friend said, 'I've got a guitar I'll sell you after my gig, meet me at the corner of something and Cambridge.' It's sounded incredible ever since I first got it. Stratocasters feel good on the body as well, so I've got to say I don't switch too much." In 1995 the instrument became the model for Raitt's signature Strat. For the new album, Raitt played through her own Bad Cat amplifier (which she also uses live), as well as a Top Hat amp owned by her guitar tech.

When it comes to playing slide, she prefers glass to steel. "Glass just feels better on the strings, and I like the way it sounds," she says. "I've always used glass. I didn't know any better. When I was a kid and I looked at the back of my *Blues at Newport* album on Vanguard it said 'Bottleneck guitar by John Hammond.' I had never seen anybody play it, I was too young to go to clubs. So I just soaked the label off a Coricidin bottle and put it on my middle finger, which seemed to make sense. Actually it isn't the most convenient one to use, but by the time I saw people actually play slide it was too late for me to change it. I'd already developed a way to play all those songs by listening to records and teaching myself."

Performance image: A.J. Sisco/UPI/Landov



But the template I tend to like is that in the beginning of the solo you start lower on the neck, so you can save something to go up to. That's the only emotional arc I'm aware of, and even that's not tried and true. Sometimes I'll end up on the low strings.

Do you feel a need to have hits?

I never felt the need to have a hit record. I just want it to go over well. I didn't have hit records for the first 20 years, and I was always frustrated that I couldn't get a leg up the way some of my contemporaries could. There's a lot of politics and managers, and you have to look a certain way. I didn't have the absolutely babe-alicious package to zoom up to the top—that does help. But if you've got the goods eventually your fans will find you. I earned my following by touring a lot and having every show be as important as the one we just did. I learned from my dad and other artists I admired to make every show count. I couldn't understand in the '70s why I wasn't getting more traction, but I got used to it. So it was a treat and a surprise when *Nick of Time* did as well as it did.

Did you handle fame better because of that?

Absolutely. I think it happened because of the clarity I had at that point. There were a lot of things in the music business lining up, too—VH1 was there, and there was more of an appreciation for roots music. Robert Cray had a hit record, Tracy Chapman had a hit record, there was a lot more naturalistic music crossing over than in the early '80s. But you know, I got sober in '87 and I had ... not that my music was terrible before that, but I had matured a little. I was appreciative to get a new start. Everything was lining up, but I was able to take that success because I was 40 and not 20—and I'm sure glad I was sober for it, because I probably would have blown it if I wasn't.

What's your goal at this point?

I'm still musically exploring. There are more collaborations with people I admire that I'd love to do. I've been blessed to work with so many of my heroes—my dad, John Lee Hooker, Charles Brown, Tony Bennett, one after the other, and there are still people I want to work with. I'd love to go a bit more into jazz and African and Celtic music. This is going to sound trite, but I would have to say that my goal is to keep deepening, keep growing and stay curious. To be present in right now and not think about the future or rue the past. It's hard to stay encouraged in a world that is so disheartening. But I'm going to try to find my center so that I can be of service. **M**

RAITT AND LEFT

A lifelong activist, Raitt is eager to point fans toward causes she believes in, from her opposition to nuclear energy (she co-founded the *nukefree.org* website with Jackson Browne and Graham Nash) to the Boys and Girls Clubs of America (one of several charities aided by her 2009 tour with Taj Mahal). But she is wary about mixing messages into her music. "When I'm doing an out-and-out benefit I'll do certain songs that are a bit more political," she says. "In general, political songs can be fruity and pedantic, not hip enough or well-spoken enough." (Among the exceptions she notes: Browne's "Lives in the Balance" and Sting's "They Dance Alone [Cueca Solo].")

"My politics has to do with fundraising, primarily," she says. "We designate a certain number of fundraising seats, sometimes there are receptions after the show, I do a fair amount of benefits and I certainly tithe a portion of my tour and my income to support all kinds of causes. But I don't like to hit them over the head with anything from the stage. I don't think my fans are coming to hear me for politics. I probably have fans of all different political stripes. I'm sure there are people who don't buy my music because they think I'm too progressive or liberal or left-wing or this or that, and that's their prerogative. I'm not going to change my politics because of that. But I know people are there to hear my music, not be preached to."