



**Broadway babe turned blues teen with a bottle on her flipping-off finger, she lived fast 'til Prince put her right. Now, at 72, she sees clearer than ever. “John Lee Hooker was so cool at this age,” says Bonnie Raitt.**

Interview by **BOB MEHR** • Portrait by **MARINA CHAVEZ**

**A**SK BONNIE RAITT ABOUT HER FIRST couple of albums – landmark records on many levels, not least for a white woman playing the blues – and she cringes. “It sounds like I’m so young! I hated my voice. That’s probably why I drank. I was trying to smoke and drink to get my voice lower.”

At 72, looking back over a 50-year career, Raitt concedes that she grew into the role. On this afternoon, as late winter light streams through the windows of her northern California office, catching the corona of those famous red locks, she crackles with excitement as she reels off the current demands on her time: rehearsals for a first tour since 2019 and preparations for the release of her eighteenth album, *Just Like That*.

“It’s been nonstop,” she says. “When I get on the road I’ll have a break.”

Raitt was born in Los Angeles in 1949, the middle child of Broadway star John Raitt and pianist Marjorie Haydock, left-leaning Quakers who emphasised hard work and social responsibility over showbiz glitz. But rather than follow her family into musical theatre, Raitt found her passion in the blues, literally sitting at the feet of the old masters, Son House and Muddy Waters, Mance Lipscomb and Howlin’ Wolf. When she scored a surprise deal with Warner Brothers at the age of 21, Raitt – a gifted singer and slide guitarist – used her platform to champion her mentors, among them rediscovered 1920s blueswoman Sippie Wallace and bottleneck guitar guru Fred McDowell.

Marina Chavez

“That was a privilege,” she says today. “To be able to honour the people who hadn’t been paid right or give them more exposure.”

Real fame and success also found Raitt later, in her early forties, with the release of 1989’s *Nick Of Time*. She was hoping at best for a modest comeback after a fallow decade marked by substance abuse, label woes and dwindling record sales. Instead, it sold five million copies and earned multiple Grammys. Raitt’s 1991 follow-up, *Luck Of The Draw*, would outstrip it, selling 12 million copies worldwide. Her subsequent albums have set successive benchmarks in quality: top-end songs, mostly covers but many of her own, defined by Raitt’s forthright singing and eloquent slide guitar playing.

While Raitt admits a desire to be one of the boys has led her down some darker paths, *Just Like That* will be accompanied by a long run of shows with Mavis Staples and Lucinda Williams. Informally, they’re calling it the ‘Mighty Tight Women Tour’ after an old Sippie Wallace song.

“To say that I’m ready to go is an understatement,” enthuses Raitt, as she settles in to consider the unlikely journey that’s

brought her to this point. “I’m usually always pushing forward, but this feels like a good moment to look back.”

**You were brought up in a very musical environment. What are the first things that you remember hearing?**

My dad was on Broadway at the time when I was little. My mom was his accompanist so there was a lot of warming up and rehearsing going on. My parents would listen to Ella Fitzgerald, Tony Bennett and Frank Sinatra records. And my grandfather was a Methodist minister – he played hymns on Hawaiian lap steel guitar. He ➤

**WE’RE NOT WORTHY**

**Jackson Browne on the greatness of Raitt.**



“I met Bonnie in 1971 and we became really fast friends – she was like Little Orphan Annie and Mae West combined! Plus, her integrity is striking. She does music for the best reasons, and she just keeps getting better and better. Her connectedness has become more powerful over time.”

◀ showed me how to make the chords by just moving the bar across the neck, tuned in open tuning. I thought it was so cool.

**Because of his Broadway fame, your father's influence is often cited. But your mother had a profound impact on you as well...**

She was an incredibly facile and wide-ranging improvisational piano player. She did my dad's arrangements, chose a lot of his concert material. When he played with an orchestra she would conduct from the piano. She'd been an only child and was forced to take lessons and play piano. So she didn't want to make me take lessons. But she wasn't above playing Clair De Lune by Debussy or Slaughter On Tenth Avenue by Richard Rodgers or the Theme From Exodus as I was coming home from school. So I begged her to let me learn piano.

**You eventually moved on to guitar – was it because you wanted to find your own musical identity?**

As you become a pre-teen, your relationship with your mom has a little more pushback. And at that point I was such a Joan Baez fan – because she was Quaker, like me. I just romanticized her and folk music in general: Joan, Odetta, Pete Seeger. Also, I went to a summer camp on the East Coast, where folk music was a big part of the culture.

**You essentially grew up in Hollywood but it doesn't sound like you lived a real Hollywood existence.**

Even though my parents were both raised really poor, they didn't care about the trappings of show business or amassing great wealth. They had Quaker values and I really admired that in them. The coolest thing for us, was that they knew [crooner] Vic Damone (laughs). But [John Raitt's Broadway co-star] Doris Day was my hero. I had my hair cut just like her in The Pajama Game. She refused to

cover up her freckles and I was so conscious about mine. But in general, my parents, they didn't drink or hang out, and they weren't hip. They didn't care about being hip. Plus, we lived on top of Coldwater Canyon. I didn't have any social life except my guitar and my dogs.

**Your father might go years between big roles in Broadway hits like Carousel or The Pajama Game. Was that an early education in the vagaries of show business?**

He toured 25 consecutive years doing summer stock – that's where he would make his living. He would play eight shows a week, travel on the one day off, block the show in the next place – sometimes in tents with no air conditioning. That informed my entire career. All I wanted to do was work steady on the road, like my dad did. I learned from him to treat every night like it's opening night, so they'll come back and see you.

**You were a teenager when you first discovered the blues, through the Blues At Newport '63 LP.**

I had never heard anything as wonderful as Mississippi John Hurt. I literally was, like, thunderstruck. That record was iconic as well because John Hammond and Dave Van Ronk were on it and they were white. I flipped the cover over and was like, "Look! You don't have to be 100 years old and black to do it!" I thought maybe I could play this music. So I taught myself to play every song on that record.

I stripped the label off a Coricidin [cough medicine] bottle and used that for a slide. Growing up with brothers, I wanted to be tough, I was a tomboy, so we'd flip the bird all the time. That's how I still hold the bottleneck, it's exactly the same: middle finger isolated. (Laughs) Later, when I met real blues musicians, they said, "No, no, it makes more sense to put it in on your ring finger or little finger so you have the other fingers free to play."

**You eventually moved back East and**

**attended college in Cambridge, majoring in African Studies at Harvard. What were you planning on doing?**

I was going to work for the American Friends Service Committee, which is like the Peace Corps but more neutral, it wasn't sponsored by the government. All those African countries in the '60s threw off the yoke of colonialism. In Tanzania, [president] Julius Nyerere was cherry picking the best of social democracy from Sweden, and the best of entrepreneurship and capitalism from the West, and he was fashioning something that was brand new. America was so messed up and I just always loved Africa, so I thought it would be exciting to go there. The idea of forming brand new countries is what appealed to me.

**But you met and began dating promoter Dick Waterman, a key figure in the 1960s blues revival, who looked after Son House and Mississippi Fred McDowell as well as Buddy Guy and Junior Wells.**

Dick was working with all the blues guys and they would come and stay with him. Arthur Crudup would come or Robert Pete Williams, or Mississippi Fred, and we'd meet them at the train station or at the airport and put them up and I'd get to go hang out at gigs. It was unbelievable. I would go to these incredible festivals and get to see Sleepy John Estes and Mance Lipscomb and Lightnin' Hopkins, who'd never met each other, hang out. I mean, just to witness Son House as a human... Son was dignified, as well as an alcoholic. I got a lot of life lessons.

**You had a close association with Sippie Wallace. She would have known everything about being a woman in a bluesman's world.**

I really learned a lot from Sippie about that. She was never bent out of shape by stuff. Of course, when I was around her, she was being feted and people were coming up and saying

how much they loved her. Can you imagine for all those blues people who were ignored or retired and forgotten for so long, to be brought out like that and lifted up like that? It was fantastic.

**You toured with The Rolling Stones in 1970 – how did that come about?**

I was on my [summer] break from college and working as my dad's dresser in a production of Zorba The Greek in San Francisco for a month. Buddy Guy and Junior Wells were opening for the Stones in Europe and Waterman called me and said, "Hey, there's room for one more – you want to go?" And I went, "Excuse me? Yeah!"

I remember we were in Sweden or somewhere and somebody brought Buddy a National steel guitar. Buddy didn't play slide, but I had my picks and my bottleneck with me. And Dick said, "Here, try this" – and I tuned it open tuning. I'm playing backstage in the arena, and after a while I look up from my guitar and see these pointy-toed lizard skin boots in front of me. Keith, and I think Mick too, had come around the corner, wondering, "Who's playing that?" My stock went way up after that.

**That tour proved fairly pivotal for you.**

They actually extended the tour and so I missed my registration back at school! (Laughs) If I wasn't going back to college my parents said I had to support myself. That's when I decided to start playing [professionally]. I auditioned for a little folk club, and then Dick put me on a show with Cat Stevens. I got to open for John Hammond and Chris Smither and Fred McDowell. Little by little, I built up my following. It still wasn't really a career. I had every intention of going back to school.

**All of this snowballed into a record deal...**

I had a really good lawyer, Nat Weiss. He was Brian Epstein's American counterpart, represented The Beatles in the United States, and worked with Peter Asher and James Taylor. I think he made some phone calls, 'cos I played The Gaslight and there was a Columbia Records scout and a Warner Brothers scout and each saw the other guy was there. So Nat dragged up a [competition], and then he negotiated me a deal with Warner that was ridiculous – he got me complete artistic control.

**"I had never heard anything as wonderful as Mississippi John Hurt. I literally was, like, thunderstruck."**

**Your early albums, 1971's Bonnie Raitt and 1972's Give It Up, featured wide-ranging covers – Robert Johnson to Jackson Browne – overlaid with your evocative slide playing.**

I love playing Fred McDowell songs, and Robert Johnson songs, but my slide style is probably more like Ry Cooder or Lowell George. It's more languid, more like a human voice. It's all about tone and hanging the note in the right place. What was maybe different about me was my choice of songs and how I put them together. It's the mix of this rocker and this blues song with that ballad, or this jazzy thing. I don't do it deliberately; it's just my taste is broad. I put the slide on songs that you wouldn't normally think would have slide. But I don't try and overuse it.

It's kind of like BBQ sauce – you don't want to put it on everything.

**You returned to Los Angeles around 1973, to make your third album, Takin' My Time. What brought you back?**

I wanted to make a record with Lowell George and Little Feat. Lowell and I were involved. I didn't know he was married at the time – I've said that publicly. So has Linda Ronstadt [who also had a relationship with George]. Like Taj Mahal's first two albums, what Little Feat were doing with the kind of roots music I loved was so thrilling to me. I started doing the album with Lowell and then [Orleans singer] John Hall and Taj came and helped me finish it.

I really loved being back in Los Angeles at 23, where I could finally drive and be Queen of the Hop. It was a killer time to be young and single and have a record deal and be a burgeoning rock star. I am not gonna lie. I did six albums in seven years, and I stayed on the road all the time. I look back now and I go, "How the heck did I do that?"

**One of the writers you have a deep connection with is the late John Prine, who penned what's considered your signature, Angel From Montgomery. That's an anthem for women stuck in unhappy marriages and emotionally crippling domestic situations. But your own life in the '70s was the opposite of that.**

I wasn't even thinking about ever having to settle down. I was a career woman first and I was having a blast. And I had sequentially monogamous relationships – seven years here, four years there – but no interest in getting married or having a family. I just had too much respect for what it would take to raise a child. I wasn't successful enough to come off the ➤

## A LIFE IN PICTURES

Special Raitt: Bonnie down the years.

**1** Eight-year-old Bonnie Raitt with brothers David and Steven, and father John at the helm, April 26, 1958.

**2** Raitt in 1972, circa second album *Give It Up*.

**3** Blues buddies: Raitt and Keith Richards in Toronto during The Rolling Stones' Voodoo Lounge tour, 1994.

**4** The slider: Bonnie giving it some middle finger, London Hammersmith Odeon, August 6, 1977.

**5** In the mood: Raitt with John Lee Hooker, 1990.

**6** The time of her life: Raitt at the Shrine Auditorium, Los Angeles, with two of the four Grammys she took home on February 21, 1990, including the award for Best Album.

**7** Endless flight: Raitt with John Prine, author of her signature song *Angel From Montgomery*, on-stage in Los Angeles, 1993.

**8** Kindred spirits: Raitt with her childhood idol (and fellow Quaker of Scots ancestry) Joan Baez, at the We The Planet Festival in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, April 20, 2003.

**9** "I'm proud to be a role model": Bonnie Raitt, 'badass blues mama', at the Greek Theatre, Berkeley, September 3, 1977.



2



3



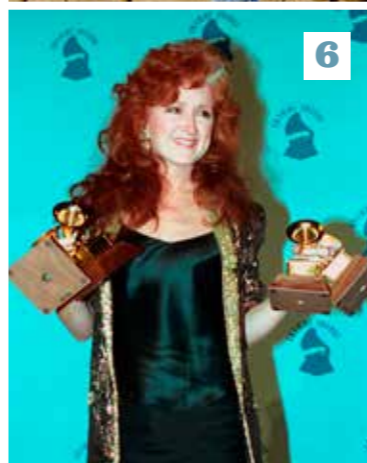
1



4



5



6



7



8



9

“Getting sober was to lose weight to look good in a video. Who knew it was going to be such a profound change?”



◀ road and have a kid. I made my living from touring, not from selling records or writing songs. I never had the calling either.

**And yet you sing Angel From Montgomery with such empathy.**

When I heard John's song I thought about that whole generation of women that stayed in marriages whether they really wanted to or not. It's such a perfect portrait of what it's like to be in a relationship that's not fulfilling. Every time I sang it I had tremendous empathy for

the women who had to make those choices, between family and career, and for the opportunities lost. I sing it for women, I sing it for our place, and it's changed over the decades depending on where I'm at. I sang it for my mom for years.

**You say there are a couple of story songs on the new album that are inspired by John Prine's writing. It's remarkable to think he came up with Angel when he was so young, and while delivering the mail.**

It's unbelievable. He's even more precious now than when he was alive and I couldn't have loved him more. We just loved each other so much. His passing is just the greatest tragedy. I loved Toots [Hibbert] too – we were really close and we were supposed to do a duet of a song of his on my new record. I know they say it's this time of life, but Covid has added to it, robbed us of so many wonderful people.

**By the early 1980s, after almost a decade recording for the label, things began to**

**sour between you and Warner Brothers...**

That really started [in 1978] after they matched [CBS Records head] Walter Yetnikoff's offer to get me to come to Columbia. Warners, who had kind of ignored me, didn't want to be embarrassed like they had been with James Taylor – who'd moved to Columbia and had the biggest record of his career. So they matched Walter's offer, which he'd written on a cocktail napkin. But then they didn't promote me. I had artistic control, but if you don't do the record they want then they can just not put the records in the stores. I mean, I used to go into the Warner building and people would duck when they saw me because they felt bad. It wasn't the same company by then. It was no longer the family label. But I didn't really make commercial records either, so there you go.

**You hit a bad patch in the mid '80s, personally and professionally, and with substance abuse.**

I was always very high functioning. I would never jeopardise my gigs. But I was on the road so much, I was relying too much on drinking and drugs. It affected me physically. I got really heavy. I had a break-up in my relationship. I got dropped by Warner Brothers. It was a rough time.

**It was Prince who inadvertently helped motivate you to get clean?**

Prince called and said, "The way Warners has treated you is terrible. Come over here, we'll make a record together." The turning point was knowing I might have to make a video with Prince. My fans probably don't care if I'm fat or not. But I wanted to make a sexy record with him and I knew it wasn't going to work in a video if I was looking like pork pie over here [laughs]. Initially, getting sober was a career move to lose some weight to look good in a video. Who knew it was going to be such a profound change?

**And that was compounded by the fact that you were forced off the road after you hurt your hand?**

You can't go to AA if you're not home, and I was always on the road. The accident made me have to stay in a cast and not play for two months. So I didn't have any more excuses. I attended this musician's [AA] meeting and went, "Wow, these guys are having a blast." It's not like some Moonie, Christian cult thing where you have to sign over to Jesus. Within about three days, I heard my own story over and over again. And I saw people that had looked like shit for years, suddenly look like they had gotten their blood changed [laughs]. They were in shape, they lost weight, they were playing great.

**But, even so, you weren't totally convinced you were going to stay sober.**

I felt like I still gotta hold up the candle for the badass blues mamas – what kind of artist would I be if I were completely happy and straight? But then Stevie Ray Vaughan came out of rehab in Atlanta when I was playing a gig there and he sat in with us. And it was the first gig he played after rehab and he just burned a hole in the set. And I went, "That's it. I want that." Stevie Ray was instrumental, so was John Hiatt, [longtime Raitt keyboardist] Mike Finnigan and the guys in Little Feat, Paul Barrere in particular. They led me to sobriety. I could see it. They say it's a programme of attraction not evangelism. I just said, "I want what they have."

Marina Chavez

**The proposed project with Prince never came out, but you did end up doing some work with him, didn't you?**

When I got [to Paisley Park] he played three

songs and I went, "Hey man, thanks a lot but this is like five keys too low for me." I still tried to sing them. But one of the lyrics was, "You mess around all over town, honey/But we're still cool because there's something I like about being your fool". I said, "No way! No fucking way would I sing that." [Laughs] I don't think they were really written for me.

**Another critical moment was when you worked on the [1988] Hal Willner-produced Disney tribute album, Stay Awake, where you connected with your future Nick Of Time producer Don Was.**

Hal inviting me to sing with Was (Not Was) – that was a spark of great inspiration. Bonnie Raitt and Was (Not Was) doing Baby Mine from Dumbo – who in their right mind would have thought of that? That was important for me at that time. The esteem with which I was continuing to be held within the musicians' community saved my ass, really.

**So, then you sign with Capitol and you finally have a breakthrough hit with Nick Of Time. Why do you think that one connected with such a big audience?**

## HIGHLY RAITT-ED

Three Bonnie beauts across six decades. By Bob Mehr.

### FINDING THE FORMULA

#### Give It Up

★★★★  
(WARNER BROS., 1972)

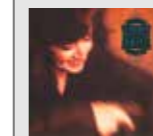


After her downhome folk-blues debut, Raitt would solidify her musical mélange on her second, a record that twines R&B grit with canny pop nous. Raitt showcases a broad range and sharp instincts, serving up New Orleans funk (Barbara George's I Know), smouldering blues (Chris Smither's Love Me Like A Man) and supple balladry (the Eric Kaz/Libby Titus weeper Love Has No Pride) on an album that would serve as a stylistic blueprint.

### MUSIC FOR THE MASSES

#### Luck Of The Draw

★★★★  
(CAPITOL, 1991)

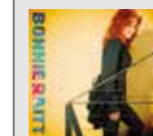


Buoyed by the momentum of her career-making *Nick Of Time*, a reassured Raitt returned with an even more refined soul-pop platter, delivering irresistible grooves and hooks across a dozen tracks. Highlighted by the playful R&B of Something To Talk About and the heartrending lament I Can't Make You Love Me, the album is somewhat coloured by its early-'90s production tics, but remains the platonic ideal of Raitt's radio-ready roots'n'roll.

### STILL GOING STRONG

#### Slipstream

★★★★  
(REDWING, 2012)



A recent classic on which Raitt's mature voice becomes an even more expressive instrument, offering moving renditions of Dylan's *Time Out Of Mind* twosome Million Miles and Standing In The Doorway, while giving reggae flair to Gerry Rafferty's Right Down The Line. Perhaps the most fully realised record since her '90s chart peak – credit to co-producer Joe Henry – it brought her a Grammy for best Americana album, her tenth overall so far.

Well, [the Raitt-penned] Nick Of Time was a different kind of song. It was looking at that baby boomer generation ageing and what that was like. Also, VH1 appeared around then, at a time when MTV would not have played me. I was nervous about making a video [for the single Thing Called Love] at age 40, so I asked Dennis Quaid to play my boyfriend so I could flirt with him on camera and present, on purpose, a kind of sexuality that didn't involve unbuttoning five buttons on my shirt. That wasn't going to work for me because I was an older person and not that foxy. The foxiness happened in that chemistry. And VH1 played it because of Dennis Quaid.

But the biggest reason of all was my sobriety and having a new record company that gave a shit. Joe Smith and a lot of the Warner people came over to Capitol and were really behind me. And I did tons of press. Even before I got nominated for a Grammy, it had sold a million copies. It was just the right place at the right time for me and that record.

**The 1990 Grammys became a coming out party for you, where you won four awards and turned into this incredible feel-good story. Do you think it was almost a blessing that success came to you later?**

If it had happened earlier it would've totally derailed me. I wouldn't have wanted that pressure. That's ultimately why I moved out of LA; I can't handle the showbiz thing. Or even Nashville – it's always, "Are you writing? Are you writing?" And it's like, "No, I'm hiking, I'm living." I got that from my parents, too.

**You're considered to be one of the iconic female guitarists. Do you feel there's been progress made in recent years in terms of how women are viewed as musicians?**

There's a number of great women guitarists and musicians – there always has been. I think Shawn Colvin and Joni Mitchell are two of the greatest guitar players I know but they don't get as much credit for that. Prince and Beyoncé have had all-women bands. People like Susan Tedeschi and St. Vincent are fantastic avatars for women kicking ass on the guitar. More and more women are playing all kinds of instruments. And I'm proud to be a role model for slide guitar. But women as engineers and producers and in executive positions in the business, that's where we're still lagging behind.

**You're 72 – roughly the same age as Sippie Wallace, Fred McDowell and your blues heroes when you met them as a teenager...**

That's frightening! [Laughs] Actually, people like Sippie, Fred and John Lee Hooker were so cool at this age. They were just wise and funny and balanced. That's how I feel about Mavis Staples too – she is a huge influence on me, how she inhabits her spiritual life. That is my dream, to be like that. To approach the next 20 years of my life with that kind of gumption and sass and fun and to not worry. Of course, you look around and there's the pandemic, George Floyd, democracy being threatened and the climate. This is the scariest, the most depressing time of my life. But I'm grateful that I have the emotional balance and security to take it on.

That's why I'm so excited to get back on the road. For me, going out on that stage is the most life-affirming, fun, rejuvenating thing you can do. Not being able to tour, when you take that away – I watched what it did to my dad. It was heartbreaking. But when he had a gig it was like, Oh my God – there he goes again! There was no arthritis, no pain, nothing but joy. You know, George Burns said he couldn't die because he was booked. Well, I hope I'm booked until I drop.

