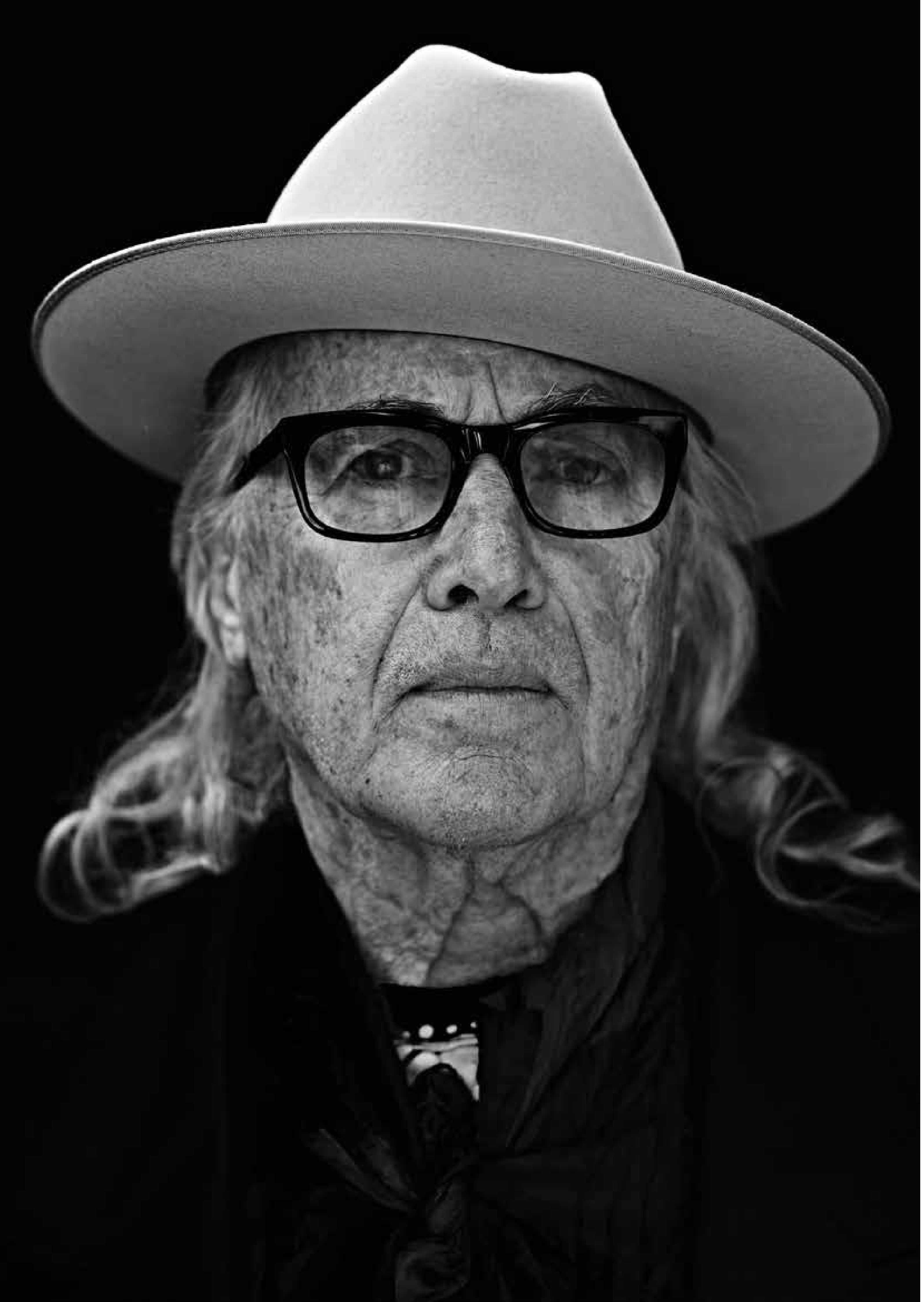


THE MOJO INTERVIEW

Snubbing **fame** (and **the Stones**) for **knowledge** and **craft**, his **guitar** crossed the **globe** and hung with the **underdog**. But only now does he think he might be **making good records**. "It takes years to learn," says **Ry Cooder**.

Interview by **BOB MEHR** • Portrait by **BRYCE DUFFY**

RYLAND PETER COODER ADMITS HE HAS A confession to make.

"I never thought about being a musician," he says, picking his way through a maze of guitar cases and amps in his home studio. "What I really wanted to be was a car pinstriper. Hot rods, that's what I loved. But I couldn't handle the brush well enough. If somebody had taught me, I might've gone that way instead. I'd still be hanging out at drag strip races."

It's a breezy winter morning in Santa Monica, California, and Cooder, 71, is dressed in black house clothes and slippers, his long silver hair falling onto his shoulders. With the exception of a couple of years spent in Hollywood, he has lived in this beach town at the mouth of the Pacific all his life – though he bemoans what the once-quiet neighbourhood has become. "Just these people speed-shifting past here in their goddamn BMWs," he barks, as the traffic zips by outside.

Comic, cantankerous, and a natural storyteller, Cooder will veer into deep historical and technical tangents over the course of the next few hours. Yet he also seems reflective today, having just received word of the passing of his longtime backing singer, the gospel-blues vocalist Terry Evans.

"He was my guy for years. Now I don't know who's going to sing. This musical style is so archaic it's almost gone. Young black people don't want to sing that stuff. They may even think it's a bit of a tom and a shuffle. And you can't go around saying, 'Hey, I'm cool. You guys will be credible.' You can't exactly say that."

He chuckles. "*I* may not be cool," he adds. "That never occurred to me."

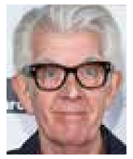
Truth is, Cooder has always seemed cool whilst never trying to be hip. A guitar prodigy of sorts, he began his career amid LA's booming early-'60s folk rock scene, later adding a soon-to-be-trademark slither and twang to Captain Beefheart and The Rolling Stones, Randy Newman and Little Feat. His early solo career was a deep dive into the American roots songbook, while film scores and globe-facing, Grammy-winning collaborations with Ali Farka Touré, Vishwa Mohan Bhatt and the Buena Vista Social Club followed. Recent albums have been narrative-driven concept records, covering everything from the plight of Mexican-Americans in LA to more contemporary politics.

This spring, Cooder returns with a new album, a spare, gospel-orientated collection called *The Prodigal Son*. The project was spurred by his own son, co-producer and drummer Joachim Cooder, who decreed, says Ry, "no more character records, and no exotics, no pignose flute players guesting. Don't go down those side roads. People just want you to play guitar and sing."

➢

WE'RE NOT WORTHY

Nick Lowe on his band-mate and pedagogue.



Getty

"Ry's so completely different from any other musician I've ever met. Even the best can look like they're groping for something. But not Ry – it's like he's *always* been great. Playing with him is an extremely exhilarating experience. And in terms of roots music, he's a teacher; he firmly believes the world would be a much better place if we all knew what he did."

⮜ One of the songs is The Stanley Brothers' 1954 bluegrass-gospel classic Harbor Of Love.

"I know I can't be Carter Stanley," says Cooder. "I can't do that. As a kid that worried me – now I don't care. If I'm going to sing it, I'm going to sing it my way. I've earned that right, I think."

You were born in 1947. Your father was a returning veteran from World War II. Did that have much of an impact on your childhood?

We lived one block away from the Santa Monica airport. It was still partly military and home to Douglas aircraft, who built all the C-47s and DC-3s. When these planes would come in to land my dad would hide under the table. He was so shell-shocked.

My dad was in one of these divisions that had liberated the concentration camps. He'd seen that and came back from it shattered, basically. That was the main problem. He couldn't deal with things, certainly couldn't deal with people. Couldn't hold down a job. Went from job to job and pretty soon he just didn't work at all. So it was tough times. My parents were extremely uncomfortable to be around, not happy and not suited to each other at all. It could've been worse. Anything can be worse. But it was not what you would've liked growing up.

You were three when you had the accident that took your left eye?

Three or four. I can't remember if there was pain. I do remember I was supposed to sit in the dark. I had a little record player, a little set-up. And I'd sit in a dark room and play these 78s by [guitarist] Vicente Gomez. I'd play them over and over, wear them out. It's very visual, that Spanish classical music, beautiful. Really, I just wanted to get out, disappear from the present. Anything beats the present and the situation you find yourself in. Music became the escape for me.

Later, I found KXLA, which was the hillbilly radio station out of Pasadena that had been created for all the defence plant workers. They did all their own commercials, and it was this Southern speech and these weird-sounding names: Cal Worthington and the Squeakin' Deacon. "Come on down and git with us at the Riverside Rancho Friday and Saturday night. Merle Travis appearing with Cliffie Stone and Speedy West on the steel guitar – *beeeeeooow*." It was a world unto itself. I thought, "Who are these people?"

But I so hated school. If I said I was sick and I stayed home from school I could listen to KXLA and get this information that was the right thing from Webb Pierce and Wynn Stewart. I said, "This is what life is! This music, this is telling you something." So there was the radio, and there were Woody Guthrie records that friends of my parents – who were communists – gave me. They also gave me my first guitar. I could see this is the real stuff. This shit they're teaching in school is garbage – I don't need this. Got in a lot of trouble as a result.

Was there a specific song that really made you want to pursue the guitar?

When Johnny Cash showed up on the radio with Hey, Porter. I was eight years old, in fourth grade. And what's worse than the fourth grade? I remember standing out there in the playground, the teacher yelling at me, "*Ryland*, you are not paying attention – we're playing kickball. You just let the ball go by!" And in my head I'm going, "Hey porter, hey porter, would you tell me the time…" I just thought, "Who is this guy with the echo in his voice and the boom-chick guitar?" Really, it was Luther Perkins' guitar playing that struck me first. Perkins' playing was simple and in your face. That did it for me.

You know, [in May] Rosanne Cash and I are going to do four nights up in San Francisco of all Johnny Cash songs. She's never done this, she's always avoided it for obvious reasons. But she's got a residency and asked if I would come and play. I said, "Yes, but we gotta do your dad's tunes. People don't get to hear them, and you playing them, it's gonna have a big impact." And then I get to be Luther Perkins – which I've wanted to be since I was eight. I asked Rosanne, "Where's Luther's guitar?" And her brother John Carter Cash has it and said I could use it. In another week I'm gonna fly to Nashville and bring it back. *Bring*. *It*. *Back*. After a lifetime of being crazy about Luther, to play his guitar? Well, that's choice. Son of a bitch. That's gonna be fun.

As a teenager you became part of the Los Angeles folk scene centred on the legendary Ash Grove club – how important a place was that?

The Ash Grove became where you congregated and where the real musicians came. Flat and Scruggs, and The Stanley Brothers, and all these people from the South. That was really something – you could actually divine the secrets of this rural-type music, with these people playing just a few feet away from you. It wasn't about the notes. The notes didn't matter so much, it's how they went about it. That had something to do with them as people. They were very different than the people out here. That's a real key thing. It was a study, you see. If you're from some country town in Appalachia, these people are your relatives, they're your uncles. As I've always said, there's no uncles in Santa Monica. The only way to learn was to be around those musicians. In those days you could sit with these people and ask them, ask Jesse Fuller "How do you that?" Everyone was very self-effacing and modest.

Around that time you backed up Bill Monroe didn't you?

That was by accident – his band had not come in. Actually, I don't think he'd brought them. Think he figured he'd pick up some local people and keep the money (*laughs*). I didn't do well, but I did get up there and played three-fingered banjo, Scruggs style. I'm sure it was terrible. But I was still learning, fer Chrissakes – and here I am playing with Bill Monroe.

Your first professional gig was backing Jackie DeShannon?

Jackie, who I'd never heard of 'cos I didn't listen to pop music, she wanted to sing folk, 'cos she thought there was a future in it. Ed Pearl, who ran the Ash Grove, got me and this other guy to back her up. It wasn't any good but it was work – I mean I was 15 and someone was paying me to do this. Then when I was 16, me and Taj Mahal had our hokey little group [Rising Sons]. That's about when The Byrds had Mr. Tambourine Man and the folk rock thing hit, and everything changed overnight. That's when I started getting calls for sessions and I met the musicians who'd played on that song and others. Once you got into the studio you saw how it was really done.

How does a teenager fare in the studio with a bunch of seasoned professionals like the Wrecking Crew?

The producers always wanted you to come with something – "what's your bag?" If you had the ability to do something interesting, you were good. For me, bottleneck was obviously the way. That made a sound that was interesting, kinda gripping, dramatic and different. In those days it was unusual, not many people did it. Now babies are born knowing how to play bottleneck. Something like that helps you stand out and get called for the next gig.

How did you get involved with Captain Beefheart and come to work on *Safe As Milk*?

That happened because Beefheart was hanging around this teenage fair, held in the parking lot of the Hollywood Palladium, around 1966. People were just figuring out how to market to kids and Martin guitars were trying to introduce these thin-body electric guitars – which were so terrible, they were all feedback. They got me and Taj Mahal to set up in this booth with these damn Martin guitars and we played some blues. Anyway, here comes this funny guy in a top hat, it was Beefheart. He started talking to me in this deep voice: "I got a group – you ought to come and check us out."

> "**Webb Pierce** and **Wynn Stewart**: this is what **life** is! This music is telling you something."

They were going in to make *Safe As Milk* and they needed to organise and get it together. He had written these fairly complex tunes and the band wasn't sure how to interpret them, how to play them. They asked me to rehearse them, help them out. One thing I could do was translate. Beefheart would go to the bass player and say, "The bass line goes do-do-do-do-do-do-babababa-do." The bass player's shaking his head, going, "I dunno what that means." I'd say, "I think he means this…" And I'd find the part and show it to him. And Beefheart would be, "*That's it!* That's it."

So you were the Beefheart whisperer!

Yeah, maybe so (*laughs*). But that's how things happened in those days in LA. The scene was so small. There was maybe a couple hundred people doing this stuff.

Hip producers of the era like Terry Melcher and Jack Nitzsche called on you a lot. In part because you were a young guy, but also really serious about your craft?

I was, I was very serious. Might've been better if I'd been a little more frivolous and hipper. A guy at Warner Brothers once told me, "Get a pair of leather pants and get hip to yourself." What the hell does that mean? Another time, Terry Melcher said to me, "If you keep doing things the way you're doing it, it's gonna take you too long. It's going to take you 20 years to get anywhere." He was about 20 years off. It took me 40.

You were in The Rolling Stones' orbit in the late-'60s. There's always been questions about what you played on and how much you contributed to certain things they were doing. I gather that's not a favourite topic of yours?

I have learned the very hard way to shut up about that. History is about whoever's telling it and by the time you've told it twice it's different – you've made all kinds of ornaments and rococo bits out of it. Besides, it's not one of the things that matters to me, personally.

Well, it's just interesting that you worked with a lot of groups during that era, including The Rolling Stones, but never really joined one.

I didn't think bands were good; it seemed like a snake pit. What I had seen, it was a dynamic between people that didn't appeal to me at all. They bicker over everything and someone stomps out. And the music – it's like, do ➢

A LIFE IN PICTURES

Hot Cooder stew: Ry through the ages.

1 The teenager on the scene: "I was 15 and someone was paying me to do this."

2 In 1966 with Rising Sons, "our hokey little group": (from left) Gary Marker, Ry Cooder, Taj Mahal, Kevin Kelley, Jesse Lee Kincaid.

3 Circa 1970's self-titled debut album: "I don't know what Warner Brothers thought they were getting when they signed me."

4 Ry in Amsterdam, 1973: "I was very serious. Might've been better if I'd been a little more frivolous."

5 With Buena Vista Social Club's Ibrahim Ferrer (left) and Compay Segundo, 1999: "Didn't intend to do it. Just down to luck and timing."

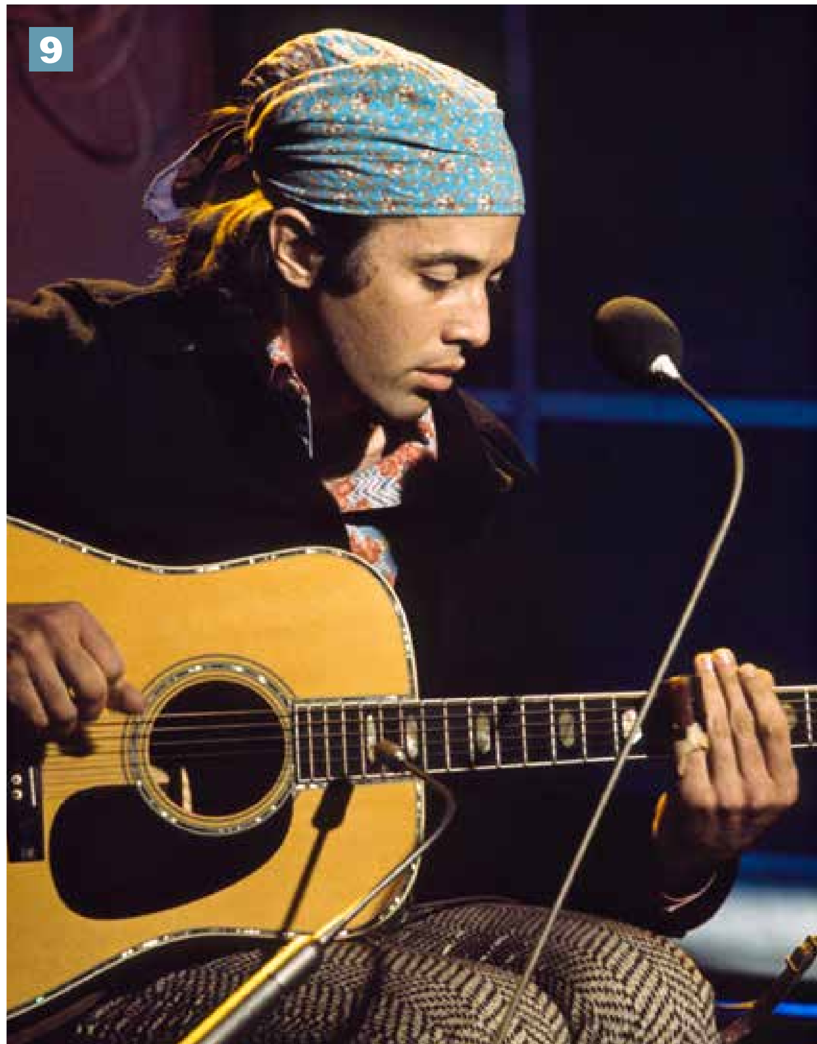
6 Holding his Best Instrumental Pop Album Grammy award for *Mambo Sinuendo*, Cooder's 2003 collaboration with Manuel Galbán.

7 John Lee Hooker keeps an eye on Ry at the Bread & Roses Festival, Berkeley, CA, September 8, 1990.

8 "The records didn't sound like I wanted them to sound…": Cooder circa 1974's *Paradise & Lunch*.

9 Genie in a bottleneck: Cooder performs on BBC TV's Old Grey Whistle Test, March 1973.

Getty (7), Rex, Alamy



Last man standing: Ry Cooder at home in Santa Monica, California, February 6, 2018.

Bryce Duffy

> “A guy at **Warner Brothers** told me, ‘Get a pair of **leather pants** and get **hip to yourself**.’ What the hell does that mean?”

◄ you ever get around to do it? Rock’n’roll in general is very distorting – it’s like a bad lens, a trick mirror in a funhouse. I liked blues, I liked hillbilly music, but that was really not *au courant* at the time. This ‘Americana’ thing hadn’t happened yet, hadn’t been codified. I’m not saying I was smarter than anybody or ahead of the curve, far from it. If anything, I was more backward than anybody. If I’d been a little more like the guy with the leather pants idea, been a little more on that tip, I would’ve made more money and things would’ve been different – though not necessarily better.

And so you sign to Warner Brothers and begin your solo career in 1970 with your self-titled debut, and turn out eight LPs during the decade.

I don’t know what Warner Brothers thought they were getting when they signed me. I was going to do these old tunes I liked – which I didn’t write. That right there was considered a little below par, because at that time you were supposed to be a “singer-songwriter”. James Taylor had proved that. I’m sure they wondered, “Why aren’t you writing about yourself?” God, what could be worse? I felt like these people have said these things perfectly already – Woody Guthrie was perfect, Washington Phillips was perfect. These are beautiful songs, they have meaning. I liked all those old tunes and I thought they would make good records. Gradually, it became apparent to me that it wasn’t what the record company was selling. They weren’t in the business of this – and yet they kept letting me make records. Kept me around for other reasons than sales, though I don’t know what they were. I mean, I used to go on these tours, it was a complete waste of time. You’d come back shattered and in ill health and broke, in the hole to airline companies and bus companies and God knows who else. Why am I doing this? Every goddamned time.

The first record, I made it and I held it in my hands and said, “This is nothing – this didn’t happen. Why? This experience is not mine any more. It’s been taken away. Something feels wrong to me.” I couldn’t put my finger on it. The second record, the third, same thing – “when am I going to be happy with this?” (*laughs*). The records didn’t sound like I wanted them to sound. I didn’t know about recording then. It takes years and years to learn. I only recently feel like I’ve learned.

But if you look at something like 1976’s *Chicken Skin Music* – you playing with Flaco Jiménez and his band, and the black gospel singers in the mix – that was a unique alchemy there: ‘world music’, before the term existed.

With Flaco, the big door opened. The norteño sound with the accordion was the answer for me. I knew Latin music was a very liberating thing. Latin music was the way out. People in Europe went crazy for it. But in America, no one got it. In those days you were supposed to be white, blonde, wearing Levi’s jackets and cowboy boots, and if you didn’t show up that way and play that way and be that way… it just didn’t happen.

Randy Newman’s great remark to me was, “Ry – Mexicans in leisure suits? Warners is not going to let you do that.” But there again, they didn’t say no. Nobody said anything.

Newman was another of Warners’ ‘prestige’ artists, but ended up having a hit with Short People. It seems a hit could’ve been an albatross for you.

The trouble I ran into was with that song Little Sister [off 1979’s *Bop Till You Drop*]. That was on the verge of being, not a hit, but if you’ll pardon the expression, ‘popular’. And I didn’t even like it. I mean, I liked the song, but I didn’t like my recording of it. And I thought if I get stuck with this I’m in real trouble. ’Cos I can’t even play it on-stage, it didn’t work somehow. But hey – no worries (*laughs*). I’ve always managed to avoid having a hit.

You left behind your solo career for much of the ’80s and ’90s to work on film scores.

That was down to [director] Walter Hill. He liked indigenous music, he liked those ambiences. He didn’t want orchestras, it wasn’t his style. He liked the score to be part of the natural timbre of things, especially for something like [1980 western] The Long Riders. So I did that film and another one and another one, and kept doing them. Each time I’d come up with the solution to what does this location *sound* like, what’s it *feel* like? Same with Wim Wenders on Paris, Texas, or Tony Richardson with The Border. But I started hitting a wall and couldn’t do it any more.

See, the more you learn, the more dangerous something can become, unless you’ve been to school and know composition and theory and harmony. I didn’t know anything about that. Shit – I don’t know one note from another, only if I hear it. Once Walter said to me, “You don’t think so well, just play” (*laughs*). I learned a lot doing films and had a lot of fun up to a point… then it’s not fun any more, it’s just frightening. I wouldn’t do it now. I wouldn’t go near it.

You did finally join a band in the early-’90s: Little Village with Nick Lowe, John Hiatt and Jim Keltner. Why didn’t that last?

We thought, “Let’s just try this.” It was a good songwriting experience, ’cos we sat in this very room and came up with those tunes and recorded them in here. But the bad idea was going on tour. Shouldn’t have done that. Warners wanted us to go out and it was a mistake. Touring is so weird. If you’re going on tour you better be happy about it, ‘cos otherwise you’re going to go mad, go insane. Of course, I say that as I’m contemplating going back on the road myself.

You’ve always been a great collaborator. I recently saw a clip from 2009 of you and Bob Dylan performing Woody Guthrie’s Do Re Mi on-stage. Is there a story behind that?

Not with the performance, no. God, should I tell this? Well, it’s cute. As you might know, Bob goes around very incognito. He was going to ask me about doing Do Re Mi, and so he came to the house here – but he misread the address. Instead, he went next door. And the people who lived there, the woman answered the door and here’s this guy in a ratty-looking sweatsuit with a distressed leather jacket over it, all bundled up and covered up. (*Imitates Dylan*) “Does Ry Cooder live here?” She says “What?” And then the next neighbour down sees him and thinks he’s a homeless guy looking for money (*laughs*). He comes over, “Is this guy bothering you?” And Bob’s going, “I just want to know where Ry Cooder lives.” Oh, OK. So they finally directed him here. Later on, I see the neighbour and he says, “Is that someone you know? Is that a friend of yours?”

Commercial success came belatedly and unexpectedly for you in the form of the Buena Vista Social Club project.

It was an accident. Didn’t intend to do it. But fate took a hand there, and it’s good, because otherwise I don’t know where we’d be today. ’Cos I hadn’t made any money before that. Probably be living in [far northern LA district] Pacoima. Me and Nick Gold, who instigated the whole thing, we went to Cuba and worked for eight days and three of those days the tape machine didn’t work, and for four of those days we didn’t have Compay Segundo because he didn’t feel like coming. Finally, I said, “We’ve got to have him, he’s the oldest guy – you got to have the old guys.” Then Ibrahim Ferrer showed up, and it clicked. Even when we got home and listened to these tapes, I thought, “Well, it’s OK – something about it’s nice.” Nick says, “Yeah, we’ll just put it out and see what happens.” Then – bang! – the phones light up and off we went. It became this huge success. It was just down to luck and timing. People have to have some curiosity or some willingness to follow a story like that. They were willing to listen at that point, for some reason. The media was interested. They wouldn’t be now. No one is interested in other people, other cultures. Certainly dark-skinned people are viewed as a problem – let’s get rid of them. You could not do Buena Vista now, not in this current climate.

THE SLIDEAREA

Three shots of Ry.
By **Danny Eccleston**.

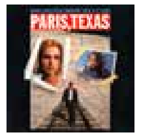
THE AMERICANA TEMPLATE

Into The Purple Valley
★★★★
REPRISE, 1972

Hard to choose just one of Cooder’s first five albums for Warners. *Boomer’s Story* is the best rock’n’roll record (Jim Dickinson at the controls), *Paradise And Lunch* the most immediate. But this is Cooder coming into his own as a roots curator and social historian, bottleneck *in excelsis* on Woody Guthrie’s Vigilante Man, with calypso among folk styles celebrated. A magical, tingling spell of a record.

THE SLIDE MASTERCLASS

Paris, Texas OST
★★★★★
WARNER BROS, 1985



Cooder’s most famous soundtrack is also one of the greatest ever – not simply an evocation of the movie’s desert skies but the creation of a vast ambient mind-space full of terrifying possibility. And while the sizzles of solo slide guitar grab the headlines, the ensemble work is just as good, with David Lindley and Jim Dickinson subtly exquisite and Harry Dean Stanton’s heart-wringing vocal on Canción Mixteca the cherry.

THE LATIN LESSON

Chávez Ravine
★★★★
NONESUCH, 2005

The first instalment of Cooder’s So-Cal trilogy tells of a Mexican-American community bulldozered in the ’50s, ultimately making way for Dodger Stadium. It’s the excuse for some of his richest, most soulful and multi-layered music, mixing latin, funk-blues, noir-jazz and God-knows. The ringmaster of terrific talents, he comes into his own as a Waitsian half-singer, half-actor – only 35 years after his first attempt.

In 2005, you began making solo records after an almost 20-year gap. What was the genesis of your ‘Southern California Trilogy’? Although they were historical narratives, they felt like personal projects for you.

I don’t know it was any one thing. With the *Chávez Ravine* record, I saw the picture book by Don Normark [Chávez Ravine, 1949 – A Los Angeles Story]. I looked at the photos and I remembered all this stuff. Hadn’t thought about it in a long time. LA’s changed so much that some of these stories are buried. But it’s real fascinating because it’s all about politics and power structures here and this idea of gentrification that we’re dealing with all the time.

After that record came out, I was sitting with our cat in the vet’s office. By the time I got home from the vet, I had the whole concept for *My Name Is Buddy*, the characters in that record [who are anthropomorphised animals] and looking at the labour struggle. After that, I thought, “I’ve written about the Mexicans, the communists and socialists – what don’t I have? I didn’t have the hillbillies, the Southern California rednecks, the do-it-yourselfers, the hot rodders.” And that’s my thing I dearly love the most. So I created the character Kash Buk for *I, Flathead*. One project led into the other. But those records are really about solidarity. Solidarity is a hard thing to find. That’s what we’re all looking for.

For someone like you, the era of President Trump must be a waking nightmare.

All the worst things have come true. But they were always there lurking. This is like germs in the earth that are finally floating to the surface. If anybody thinks this is new they just haven’t read their history. I quote it often, but Pete Seeger’s final remark as he lay dying was, “I have no hope. I could be wrong.” And that was the most optimistic man I’ve ever met. At the end, even he was not optimistic.

And yet, your new album is actually a hopeful work. You almost sound at peace.

Gospel is the best music to sing. When you sing it and play it, I always felt you go to some other place physically and emotionally. I don’t know if catharsis is the right word. But I really like this new record, I like the way it sounds. It’s got some nice statements, the poetry is good, and the songs are not too preachy. Maybe age has got something to do with that. You live through certain experiences, you keep looking for something, and maybe you’ll find it. I think I have.

Ry Cooder’s new album, The Prodigal Son is out on May 11 through Concord/Caroline.