



## Rental Car Rock'n'Roll Star...

Ry Cooder is, I guess, as unlike a rock'n'roll star as you'll ever find in the contemporary music business. He rolled into his Auckland press conference dressed sedately but easily in a black and brown checked sports jacket with blue corduroy pants and blue canvas shoes. After his concert, he disdained the use of the chauffeured limousine in favour of a rental Holden. You see all he wanted was to get back to the hotel to finish his evening meal.

His manner reflects his dress, or perhaps that should be the other way around. He's relaxed but surprisingly guarded. His attitude to the press is somewhat mixed. He told one rock paper that critic's praise was the only thing that kept him going. "That stuff means something — even to businessmen. I suppose without that I wouldn't be recording at all." Yet he makes no secret of the fact that he doesn't like doing publicity work and answers questions politely but warily.

When one interviewer asks Cooder how he reacts to being called "the guitarist's guitarist", Ry's dumbfounded.

"Uh, well... it's a nice tag." He thinks about it for a moment, "I don't generally think about those kind of things. Some guitarists might not agree with that. It's not a universal statement surely? It's OK with me if people want to say that..." He trails off with "I suppose."

Yet for many people that tag holds true. It was Cooder's reputation that won him an invite to play with the Rolling Stones on the sessions that were to produce *Let It Bleed* and *Sticky Fingers* — originally intended as a double album. According to legend, an argument developed with Keith Richards over who invented the opening guitar riff to "Honky Tonk Women" and Cooder left the sessions early — although his mandolin work is still present on "Love in Vain", as is his bottleneck playing on "Sister Morphine".

The Stones' sessions are a subject Cooder understandably doesn't care to talk about. His contribution was small and the years have only exaggerated it. As he said at the time, "I never was and I'm not in any way an integral part of the Rolling Stones or their music... there's really no story. I just happened to be there, that's all."

Modesty continues to be one of Cooder's traits. In fact it almost leads him into denying the worth of the music he has recorded. When I asked whether Cooder felt in any respect a "mission" to bring the ethnic musics he has consistently recorded to the attention of the great American record-buying public, Cooder smiles at me indulgently. This is a man who would not admit to anything as pretentious as a mis-

sion even if he was John the Baptist. But he politely explains why he does what he does, though he's a little unsure himself.

"You have an opportunity to make a record see. And then you have to do what you want to do the most."

"What's important to me or, what I should say, what I like to do, is to experiment and keep furthering myself a little bit. I could do a solo album but I don't think I'd care to do it. I know I can sit down and play a song and then another one — on stage that's one thing because you feel the immediacy of it. It's kinda fun. But in a recording studio, when you're confronted with all the possibilities, it seems like the least interesting thing I can do."

"When you get an opportunity to go into the studio and somebody's paying for it, you ought to try to do something strange. You know, try your imagination out a little bit."

Over the seven albums that Cooder's released, he's exercised that imagination on

the Chicken Skin project, Cooder has now weighed in with his latest work, *Jazz*, which, in the words of the sleeve-note which Cooder penned, attempts "to provide a thread of alternative jazz settings to some great music that falls within the one hundred year scope of jazz in America." All the songs on the album are either jazz pieces from between 1880 and 1930 or spirituals played with a jazz-style parade beat.

Sounds like a kind of concept piece but, if it is, Cooder insists it's purely accidental. "Well, I don't know... I just do what I like really. This new record isn't folk music hardly at all, it's just that you get interested in things and then you look for a reason to sort of study something and making a record is like a good excuse to get together with people and try something."

"What that's gonna be you never know until you do it. You say, 'Well, here we are sitting in a room what'll we do? Somebody think of something.'"



a variety of music. He has appeared to consciously work away, mining various facets of the American musical heritage. On his first four albums this took the form of random shots at blues, folk and country with casual swipes at reggae, calypso and the popular song. But with the Chicken Skin band and album, Ry began to concentrate on one style — the application of what's known as a Tex-Mex sound, utilising accordions, to his choice of country and R & B songs.

Following a live album, which continued

The Tex-Mex project was the exception to Cooder's haphazard planning. "There I had the idea, then I had to find the songs to suit it. The songs were just a vehicle for the instrumentation. It was an awful lot of work but it turned out to be real good on record. That was a good discovery to make."

So why is Cooder touring solo at the moment?

"Well I mostly tour alone. The band thing I've had for three years as a project — the Tex-Mex Chicken Skin band — and it was just a financial..." Cooder pauses and

chooses the next word carefully, "... problem. Put it that way." He decides to put it more plainly: "I ran out of money. I couldn't support it and those guys had their own careers to pursue. So we were together for a while and it was interesting but it's not a thing you could do forever."

On stage, Cooder is a changed man. I accepted as an already proven fact his mastery of the acoustic instruments he played, so the surprise on stage was the crazed sense of humour that he'd kept largely hidden at the confrontation with the press. In front of an audience, he uses this wit to provide telling introductions to the songs and a repertoire of grotesque faces provide punctuation for the humorous songs in the set. Those were the pluses.

On the debit side for my taste, there were a few too many undistinguished blues tunes occupying space that could have been better used on some of the stronger songs from Cooder's archives. And there was an absence of any one chilling moment such as he achieved on the recorded versions of "Dark End of the Street" or "Rally Round the Flag" but then, playing as a one man act requires him to be both accompanist and soloist. So the limitations are inevitable.

A satisfying show nonetheless that would have been stronger with the addition of the band that Cooder can't afford. That's the problem when you're a cult figure. You don't make that much money.

At the interview I'd reminded Ry that he'd once said that an album of accordion music (such as *Chicken Skin Music*) was not exactly the highest priority on any record company's list of commercial endeavours. So surely a record of 20's and 30's styled jazz would rank similarly in profit potential.

Well no, Cooder explained, he'd had a call from Warner Brothers in the States and they really liked this one.

With US sales at around 50,000 per album, just what was his relationship with his record company like?

Cooder puts it bluntly: "They tolerate me I guess." And in one of his few off-guard moments, he admitted, "After all there's some reason for me to be doing these things and I guess that's why they let me make records."

As Jonathan Cott put it in *Rolling Stone's* Tenth Anniversary issue — "Cooder plays guitar, mandolin and banjo just like ringing a bell, preserving and synthesising, modestly and clearly, everything valuable in authentic American music."

It's real nice to think his record company knows that too.

Alastair Dougal

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