



Armatrading: talking under ladders

Joan Armatrading admits she spends a lot of time on the road. This is her third tour here in five years. She interrupted her Australian tour to do half a dozen shows in this country, before returning across the Tasman, and then on to Japan. It'll be her first visit to the Far East, and while she enjoys the variety of new places, we wondered how long she was going to keep it up.

"What, till I'm 50? (laughs) I like touring, but obviously there'll come a point where you'll have to say 'I'm not going to do it as much.' I used to, like, maybe a tour a month, then have a month or a couple of weeks off. But the last few years I've just been touring non-stop for six to eight months without any real break. I think I'll probably get back to the way I used to do it, and then gradually phase it out, so there's not quite as much touring."

Joan already has plans for her next album, which will be recorded in Stockholm. She's previously recorded in Paris, Wales, England and America. Why so many locations?

"It's just nice to go to different places, and to be able to get something you wouldn't expect, y'know? So just moving will give you a different bass sound or a different drum sound."

The drum sound is especially noticeable on *Walk Under Ladders*, which was produced by Steve Lillywhite.

"Yeah, it's recorded in a room with stone walls, and that really gives it a different sound. Gives it a very live sound."

How did you come to choose Steve Lillywhite?

"The record company comes up with different people, and if I meet them and we get on, then we work. And obviously if we don't — if I don't think it's gonna work, or they don't think it's gonna work — it doesn't happen."

Joan never records with her road bands (in the studio), and is seldom seen twice with the same band.

"In 10 years I've had 16 bands. I'm *always* changing bands. And I never use the band on an album that I use on the road. 'Cept the live album, and then you have to (laughs) 'cos it's a live album!"

Clarence Clemons, from Bruce Springsteen's E Streeters, guested on *Me Myself I*. How did that happen?

"Well, Clarence was in the studio upstairs and we needed a sax player, and since he was there, we asked him. Plus, he's a good saxophone player!"

You've worked with various producers. As a songwriter, are you content with the kind of control you have in the studio?

"Oh yeah."

Are you given a free reign?

"Oh yeah! (laughs) No trouble! (laughs)"

Do you want to produce any by yourself?

"Well, I produced 'Rosie', that was nice, and I co-produced the EP. But it's a strange scene, production. I mean, I can always say 'I'd like it to sound like this', but I haven't got the technical knowledge to know which button to press. The producer usually knows more about that, especially if he's an engineer, like Steve Lillywhite or Glyn Johns. I say how I want the sound, but I'm not always able to get that sound without somebody's help. But I do all the arranging, and all the music is left to me ... I mean, it's gotta be! (laughs)"

Joan has enjoyed working with Steve Lillywhite, who'll also produce the next album. Her last one showed a big change in style and production.

"The change has been from the EP — that's where you can hear the real change — then *Me Myself I*, and then this one. Steve's really into sounds and effects, and he's really good at getting sort of fullness without mush. It keeps the energy. It doesn't get smoothed out."

Joan has changed substantially from her early, acoustic days, not only in production and instrumentation, but also in songwriting. How does she account for this?

"It's a natural progression, really. You can't just keep writing the same sort of stuff. The songs on *Joan Armatrading* and *Show Some Emotion* are very jazzy, and lots of chords and arrangements are quite complicated. Now, a lot of the chords are much more basic, just sort of straight major-minor chords, rather than fancy bits."

"I've tried to make the arrangements sound a lot simpler, a bit more accessible. Not because I'm trying to sell more records, although that's what I'm trying to do, but I'm doing it because that's how I wanna hear the music. And I wanna hear more rock stuff, so I write it like that."

"It's not like I write a song one way, and when we get into the studio, the producer says 'How about if we do this?' — it doesn't work like that. 'Eating The Bear' and 'I'm Lucky' sound different because I wrote those on the synthesiser."

"The songs generally are more rocky and sort of sound different because since the EP I've been writing most of my songs on the electric guitar, which makes a difference as well. In fact, that's the biggest difference. When you write on an acoustic, it gives you acoustic chords, if you like. So you might play, like, an E on an acoustic, and because it's an acoustic you tend to use a different inversion. And when you get to an electric,

because it's an electric, you use a different inversion again. So just using the different instruments makes you use different chords as well."

So are you going to leave the acoustic behind?

"No, I'm not going to leave it behind, because I enjoy playing and hearing it. I just like the heavier sound just now. I'm also playing electric on stage."

Are there any particular black women musicians who have influenced you at all?

"No, there aren't really any guitarists that I know of anyway. When I was starting, there were no women guitarists to look up to, really."

What about in songwriting?

"In songwriting? There's loads of people (laughs), although when I started, I didn't really have any influences to begin with. There was nobody that I listened to, to get a style or to figure how they did it, which is why my stuff is a bit weird in the beginning, I think. It wasn't sort of following any real pattern, y'know."

Do you manage to write songs while you're travelling?

"I write 'cos I like it. I don't write because I've got an album to do. I write because that's what I like doing. So if I didn't have anything to do when I got home, I'd do a song just to relax, or whatever."

What about your album covers? Do you find it difficult to select the kind of image you want to present on a cover?

"I like the cover for *Back To the Night*, and I like the cover for the EP. Since then, the others have been just like that (laughs), 'cos I really enjoy that."

You've had Annie Leibowitz do some photography.

"She did *To The Limit* and the live album, yeah."

Did you enjoy working with her?

"Yeah, that was nice, although it's very difficult to enthuse about having your picture taken (laughs), no matter how good the people are — it's just not my favourite thing."

Joan has never professed to be a feminist, though many women have taken her to their hearts. Does she have any definite views on feminism?

"No, I mean, I think you should have equal opportunity, and that's as much as I think you need, y'know. A lot of the women I've met that try and sort of get me on to their cause, or whatever, are too radical. They just want reversal of roles, which is stupid."

So why do you think so many of these women have identified with you?

"I dunno. I mean, I suppose they still do it, but it's not such a strong thing as it used to be in the 'old days' (smile). I'm sure they're still there and they're still fans, but it's much calmer now. And a lot of the feminists have changed some of their opinions, and have got things more in perspective. A lot of them were bullying other women, saying, y'know 'You shouldn't want to be a housewife' or 'You shouldn't want to do something for a bloke and look after him', which I think is really cheeky. If that's what you like and you want, you should be allowed to do it. Who are these people to tell you you can't just be a slave to a bloke, if that's what you're really into?"

But whatever they were trying to say, I was doing anyway, y'know, this thing of proving yourself, that a woman is capable of doing whatever. I was just getting on with it. So I didn't feel I needed to join in any of those things."

What about politics?

"Well, I've got my views, but I just keep them to myself. They're nothing to do with music, really."

Joan Armatrading — becoming less elusive, more communicative. To everyone — hungry interviewers and clamouring audiences alike. Her Auckland show displayed this. "More energetic" she'd said, and more energetic it was. People surged to the stage from the opening beats of 'I'm Lucky', and remained there dancing throughout the performance, including two well-worked-for encores (that is, she made *us* work for them, but we were persistent!).

Bounding across the stage, taking the initiative in conversation between songs, and giving the audience the microphone on a couple of occasions, Joan Armatrading exuded energy, excitement and vitality. The backing group said later it was perhaps the best concert they'd ever played.

May Joan Armatrading keep coming here as often as she has for a while yet!

Maryann Street

the JOAN ARMATRADING collection...

after five SELL-OUT shows;
for those who missed her
and for those who were lucky ...



JOAN ARMATRADING
WALK UNDER LADDERS

