

So you wanna be a cult hero, scuttling up and down America to earn a buck cos critical handclaps don't pay the bills. For the last eight years, ever since he released a couple of albums back in '74 for Epic, John Hiatt has had to try and live off good reviews and live gigs.

At the time of this LA phone interview he'd just come off the road as support for Graham Parker. The interview was originally scheduled for the previous week but Hiatt had had laryngitis:

"It was pretty weird, I came off a show and I just lost my voice for four or five days, but it's cleared up. We came off the Parker tour about four weeks ago but we continued to play in Southern California otherwise we couldn't pay the rent."

Parker's new album hasn't exactly been raved about. "I like it, I've been defending it. I know a lot of people were bent out of shape that the Rumour wasn't there but he's a good songwriter and he's singing well. Any doubts about his new material would be put to sleep if you could see him live. He means more here than I do."

That's unfortunate.

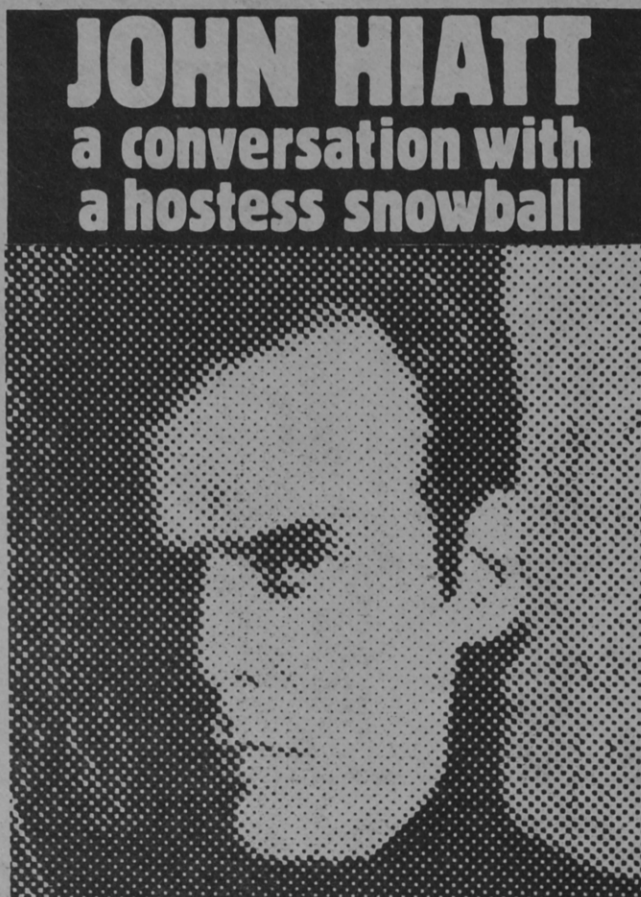
"Maybe we can change it. Listen, George, is that your name? Look I'm detecting subtle differences in accent from North to South. Is that so?"

This guy is sharp and interested. A few weeks ago he did a phone interview with Gordon Campbell so now he's comparing New Zealand dialects. But I tell him that we emigrated from Scotland when I was eleven so what he's picking up is an eroded Scots accent. Hiatt laughs:

"I see. My whole theory just went out the window. I love Scotland. We played there in 1979 in Glasgow. Great rock audiences. A bunch of nuts, no wonder the Romans had to build that wall. Wild people."

This guy is fast becoming my favourite rock'n'roll performer and this interview is turning into a conversation, but who's complaining? But let's try and talk about Hiatt's music. His two MCA albums, *Slugline* (1979) and *Two Bit Monsters* (1980), contained authentic craftsmanship and imagination. Hiatt was a songwriter but too honest and straight-shooting, it seemed, for mass consumption. What about those first two albums?

"I'm proud of them, *Slugline* more than *Two Bit Monsters* as some of the material was a little weak. It was that classic second album syndrome. I made the album under much less than ideal circumstances and I tried to get out of the production agreement as I didn't want the same guy (Denny Bruce) to produce the second record because he didn't do anything except



read the paper and tell a joke every once in a while. A terrific guy but beyond that? And I was quite unhappy with MCA's performance on *Slugline* — the budget was miniscule to say the least, so I had to be a producer, write the songs, watch the clock, literally, and say 'alright lads that's it, the budget won't stand for it'. And the records suffered, but I like a lot of the songs on *Two Bit Monsters* — 'Face the Nation' is still one of my favourite tunes."

What about 'String Pull Job'?

"Yeah, we still play that. We end our shows with it."

And now to his new album, *All of A Sudden*, produced by Tony Visconti, and it must rank as Hiatt's most 'white' album to date, probably because of Visconti's slick dramatic production:

"I suppose it's more caucasian. It's probably those white-bred Californian musicians (laughs). It's more pop. I've always walked that line. I love American R&B and I've always drawn from it and bastardisations of it, which reggae is. But at the same time my heritage is middle American white pop so I thought I'd lean a little more to that and see what happens. Do you know what a hostess snowball is?"

Am I hearing right? A what?

"It's a cake, double fruit cake on the inside and it's got a white gooey outside. One clever college writer accused me of being a hostess snowball, having a black soul and white exterior."

That's clever.

"Yeah, it is, I'm considering doing an R&B album and calling it *Snowball in Hell*, and see if he gets it." Laughs.

You must have had apprehensions that Visconti could have proved too strong a personality or influence in the studio?

"I was looking for just that. I needed help in the studio and I wasn't getting it on the MCA albums. I was left to my own devices on those records and I'm not a producer so I wanted someone who could help me through the terrible traumas of the studio. I think it worked really well. Doing an album with your first producer is like your first date. You're both a little apprehensive and a little shy about how far you can go and unfortunately you only figure that out toward the end. But Visconti and I struck up a good relationship and it looks as if we'll do the next album together. He took the terror of going into the studio out of me, I used to dread it because it baffled me. Visconti has put the songs in a more brilliant setting but the album's a little bit dense — there's not a lot of air there."

A new producer maybe, but Hiatt's songs on *All of A Sudden* continue his attitude of cutting through the crap:

"I like to get to the heart of the matter as neatly as I can with the least amount of blood spilt. I like taking ordinary people and putting them in extraordinary situations, which I feel reflects real life. I constantly amaze myself with the kind of dilemmas I get into, and how-the-hell-did-I-get-here. It's like John Cheever said (American short story writer and novelist, check *The Wapshot Chronicle*) 'Fiction is not about what's symptomatic, it's about what's astonishing'. I totally subscribe to that."

So you obviously have no time for rock'n'roll as escapism?

"It's a form of entertainment, ultimately and for me it's a lifestyle and I think for the honest rock fan it's a kind of blood. I'm not talking of the Dave Marshs of the world, the assholes of *Rolling Stone* magazine who wouldn't know rock if it bit them in the ass, but I am talking about the average kid in the street."

This *Secret Life* from *All of A Sudden* sounds like a desire to get out, to get away?

"It's funny you should bring that one up. I was reading this fictional book of letters by Mark Twain called *Letters From Earth*. I get into this story called 'The Great Dark' and about sixty pages in the editor comes in and says that Twain never finished it. I just about died when I got to that place, but anyway the story, set in the 1880s, is about this family whose entertainment is to look through a microscope at various slides and the guy has this dream where he and his family have this voyage in this drop of water. It sounds like a forerunner to *Fantastic Voyage*. It's beautifully written and marvellously weird, and 'This Secret Life' came from there."

Women have given you a tough time?

"I've been married for two years now and all I can say is that love is hard work but it's nice work if you can get it."

'Forever Yours', your strongest vocal on the album, seems to be a straight love song?

"Yeah, I tried to come clean on that song, it's basically pledging my love, re-written."

Do you feel awkward with ballads as you've done so few?

"No, I don't, I like the ballad style. I think I'm good at it and I don't do it enough. The last three or four years didn't seem to be the time for that sort of song but I'm writing more of them, but you can't have a full album of ballads or people would fall asleep."

Costello seems to have done OK with his ballad format.

"Yeah, he's the Frank Sinatra of our generation."

You've said that nobody's writing songs anymore. Whaddya mean?

"I was kicking at a certain group of people, but it is true. A lot of what you hear these days just seems like a groove with some guy grunting over the top of it. I don't hear the attention to detail that you got in the golden era of Motown or back in Tin Pan Alley. All I hear is this overblown crap like Journey and Foreigner."

"Costello's the exception, he writes great songs and there are some people working that territory mining that gold — Nick Lowe, Joe Strummer writes great songs, and so do John Cale and Prince. But we're talkin' only of a handful of people."

On *All of A Sudden* Hiatt's development as a vocalist is quite obvious. Do you worry about your vocal delivery?

"Oh, yeah, always. I think I'm singing better on this record than on the MCA records. I'm consciously wanting to be a good singer. Del Shannon is a good example of no gimmickry yet he just kills you. With black singers it's another story, we could go on for days about how they've got a gift we seem to have missed."

I've read somewhere that you've gone anti-guitar?

"Yeah on the new album I was trying to get away from the 'guitar is king' attitude that rock has, but the guitar is still king, you can't get away from it and so I've gone back to it. There's still kids out there standing in front of the mirror with their new electric guitar mimicking Angus Young, maybe."

Rumour has it that your new album will feature a new more streamlined approach to your songs?

"I'm attempting that only because my favourite recording artists have always changed up and as a music fan I've always appreciated that so I'm trying to do the same thing. I've got a whole batch of new songs and they fall into several categories and I'm trying to decide which one to pursue and nail it down to shape the next album."

"I write quite a bit, it's not easy but basically that's my job. I'm at my happiest having just written a new song or giving a performance. I live for those two things. It's like a drug, I guess."

Hiatt's music has been covered by artists ranging from the Searchers to Maria Muldaur. Last year he left MCA, and no wonder, and signed with Geffen so his hopes of a breakthrough seem to be closer than ever. And why not? His music is commercial and accessible but the strict American radio format won't give him an outlet. Are people happy with that situation?

"No, on the road with Graham Parker we talked to people and the populous still gives a shit. They've been so underestimated in America but as far as the electronic media here is concerned we're a bunch of complete idiots. We can stand a song that makes us think about something but it's so hard for the single voice to be heard in this country."

The Human League recently topped the American Top 40 and there's no reason why next month it can't be John Hiatt. It would be better than being a cult hero?

"I don't want a cult following, I've always wanted to cover more ground than that. I appreciate the critical acclaim but I was never in it for that. I'm interested in people hearing my music."

Buy this guy's records.

George Kay

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