

John Hiatt On the Road

Rather fittingly, John Hiatt's holed up at the American Hotel in Amsterdam ("I don't see anything American about it," he jokes, "other than it's got rooms that are kinda dark and cave-like... you could do a good winter hibernation here!"), and he's in an infectiously good mood. And why not, when you've just finished the best work of a 20 year career — an album Hiatt's called *Walk On*, which he financed himself after leaving his previous record company, A&M.

"I asked to be let out of my contract at A&M 'cause they kinda had me on a smaller scale than I thought, and they thought I should be happy to be there while I felt like I should be going a bit faster."

A personal Hiatt favourite, 'Real Fine

Love', offers up a potted autobiography in its first verse: 'Well I never went to college / I did not have the luck / Rode out of Indiana in the back of a pick-up truck.' Fact or fiction?

"Yeah, pretty true, except I didn't roll out in the back of a pick-up truck, I rode out driving a Corvee which cost me \$35. I bought it from a buddy and it didn't have any floorboards, and I drove it down to Nashville... in fact, I still drive an old truck, but hey, I'm drivin'! I'm not riding on the back!"

Do you think you've come out of that confessional mode of songwriting that began with 87's breakthrough LP, *Bring the Family*?

"Oh, yeah, absolutely. I think that inventory taking which started with *Bring the Family*

is gone... which isn't to say I won't be back there again some day.

"The stuff I've written for this new record was all written on the road during the last tour. We were out for about 14 months, which was the most extensive touring I'd ever done. It was almost out of necessity that I started writing songs on the road — just to write for my own sanity — the tedium of touring being such that you need contrasts, and I think that's what these songs provided. They're also a bit more acoustic, almost like folk songs, which was kind of a direct contrast to the music we were making last year.

"I've gotten a lot more flexible in terms of my writing style and how I go about it. It's much less disciplined — more spur of the moment. I like that. Also, there's a lot going on in these songs because I was aching for hearth and home."

There's always seemed to me a tension in your work between being the family man and being the outsider.

"Oh, absolutely — it's a hard thing to balance, but maybe that's what keeps both them going."

The opening track of *Walk On*, 'You Must Go', (which, like much of *Walk On*, possesses a glorious, celebratory undertow) puts it another way: 'You must go and you must ramble / Through every briar and bramble / Till your life is in a shambles / Maybe then you will know / You were born to blunder / Born to wonder / Born to wander...'

Suffering makes it beautiful?

"Well, there's probably not as much autobiography as people would imagine in my songs."

So, the private life's calmed down a little?

"Oh, yeah. In the early days, after the show my first priority was to get more drunk and stoned than I already was. Isn't that what's expected of us rock 'n' rollers? Nowadays it's almost in vogue to be clean and sober. Oh, my god!"

OK, you've got a new song just written — who do you trust with it?

"Oh, my wife. Definitely. But once I've written a song, it's kinda like they're not mine any more. They're kind of like children — you've got to give them up."

How do you feel when someone covers one of your songs?

"Well, again, it's like someone saying something nice about one of your children: 'Oh,' you know, 'he's got such good manners!' Ha, ha, ha."

And who's treated your offspring the best?

"Oh, gosh, there's so many that I like, but 'Icy Blue Heart' by Emmylou Harris is divine, and Johnny Adams, a New Orleans singer, has done a couple of my tunes which I really like. Oh, and Bob Dylan did 'The Usual'. I wrote a bunch of songs for him especially, but he chose not to do them so he took that one off a record. That's never been available on CD, by the way."

When I saw you perform as opener for Robert Cray some years back, I was surprised by the theatricality of your performance.

"The fact I'm just basically a ham, you mean! Performance for me is part and parcel of the songwriting. It's sort of the last step in the process, and I like that exercise of

trying to get out of yourself. I've heard James Brown describe performing that way, and that's what I try to do too — although I don't always make it."

The band you had for the last LP, *Perfectly Good Guitar*, were a bunch of young guns, weren't they?

"Ha, ha, ha. Well, everyone's picked up on that but, in fact, they weren't that young at all. The bass player was 39, the drummer was 35, and the only young guy was the guitar player. He was 27, which is still old enough to know better. It's funny how youth figures in pop music these days more than it ever has, even though a lot of these older acts just seem to keep going on and on."

How did you hook up with the photographer Robert Frank, who took the photos for *Stolen Moments*?

"He's fabulous, from Switzerland, and I'd always admired his work. Someone at the art department just dug him up. It was one of the most fascinating days of my life, walking around Los Angeles with Robert Frank. Unlike a lot of photographers, he doesn't take very many pictures. Frank takes like one every five minutes, and it almost look like it hurts him to take the pictures. He winces as he squeezes the trigger."

What other artists have inspired you?

"Edward Hopper, Jim Harrison, John Cheever, Flannery O'Connor. Women inspire me... wonderful women, damn them! We had a songwriters evening, a guitar pool, over at my house just before I left to go on tour, and I heard some of the most amazing songs I'd ever heard — just a bunch of writers that had found their way to Nashville, and a lot of women writing great songs. I don't know what that is, but it's true."

How about Nashville at the moment?

"It's being run by the wrong guys right now, and it's like selling shoes. They're just trying to find the next guy in a hat who's young enough and dumb enough to go out and collect pay cheques for them — the Fabian phenomenon. But it'll come around. I mean, real artistry is already bubbling up. There's a guy called Ron Sexsmith on Interscope records that I really like. And Michael Franti, who writes with Spearhead, I like him a lot."

Although there's some pretty dark stuff on *Walk On*, there's a joyousness about it.

"Well, I paid for this record myself, which was an enormously liberating feeling... but yeah, I feel good about what I'm doing work-wise, and I feel like my best work is my next songs."

Then someone in the American Hotel in Amsterdam informs John Hiatt that time is up, and this most American of writers returns to his winter hibernation muttering that no, he doesn't consider his songs poetry — that's "a whole other kettle of fish" — but that one of his greatest wishes would be to have Ray Charles cover 'Lipstick Sunset'.

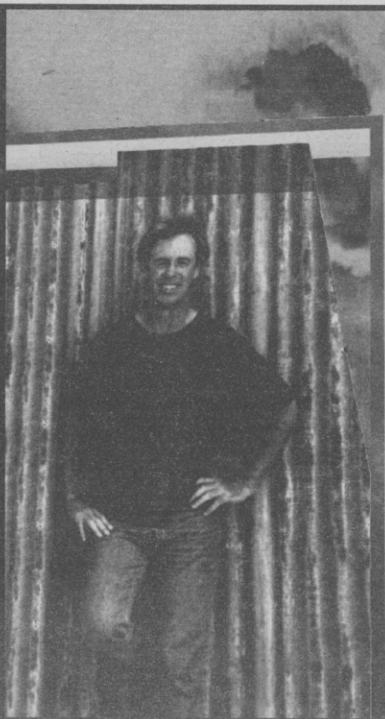
I've heard your work described as being that of a patriot. How do you feel about that description?

"I'm proud of where I'm from, and like that in other people, people that are proud of their homelands... absolutely. But then, you know what Bob Dylan says about patriotism — that it's the last refuge of the scoundrel!"

GREG FLEMING

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