

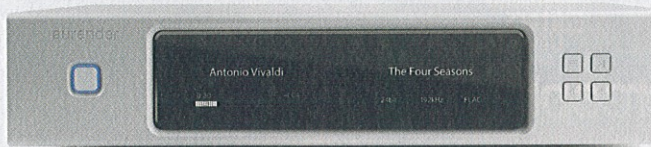
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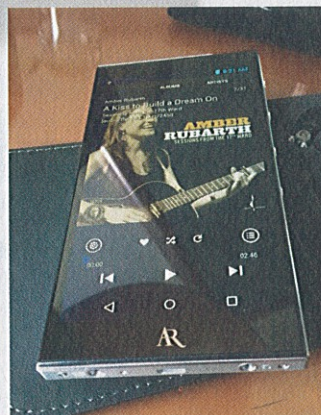
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Women
Be

W S E

**BONNIE
RAITT'S
INEXORABLE
RHYTHM**



by
**ROBERT
BAIRD**

In conversation with Bonnie Raitt these days, one word continually jumps out: *groove*. She's speaking of her music, of course, but the blues singer and guitarist—her gifts as commanding as ever on her latest, *Dig In Deep*—has also survived some family struggles in the past decade that nearly forced her out of her personal groove.

In 2004, Raitt lost her mother, Marjorie; a year later, her father, Broadway luminary John Raitt, died. Four years after that, her



brother Steve died of brain cancer at 61. After a seven-year sabbatical that many fans worried might become permanent, Raitt returned in 2012, sounding re-energized, to release *Slipstream*, which won that year's Grammy for Best Americana Album. Raitt is now fully back in the cycle of recording and touring, the rhythm that has defined most of her life since she began her music career, in the very early 1970s, when she was barely in her 20s. As is often the case with artists, in Raitt's life tragedy has inspired art—including, in this case, new songs on *Dig In Deep*.

"At this age, everybody's droppin' and everybody's got families that are dealing with illness. But for me, the last thing I wanted to do on *Slipstream* was write about that, or spend time going inside. I just wanted to do some music by other people that spoke to stuff that was inside me—but I wasn't motivated to write.

"Then George [Marinelli, Raitt's guitar player] sent me a tune, 'Down to You.' I liked the music so much, but I didn't relate to his lyrics. I asked if could write some of my own. I wanted to do the music to 'Down to You' so badly that it broke my writer's . . . this great time between writing songs."

After the success of *Slipstream* and the ensuing two-year tour, Raitt began to think about her next recording project. She knew she wanted to continue writing her own songs, always with an eye to making them part of her live shows—which, today, is the only way musicians can make any money. "I wanted to come up with specific grooves, and nobody was going to know that better than me. It was a deliberate intention to come up with more of my own songs, if I could. That's a big, all-caps 'IF I COULD.'"

Told that new originals like "If You Need Somebody" and "The Comin' Round Is Going Through" rank among her finest songwriting, she laughs. "Oh, thanks. I'm just starting to talk about it, and you never know. You wonder if people are trying to be nice and diplomatic."

After writing five songs, Raitt cast her usual wide net for work by other writers. Over the years she's recorded tunes by everyone from Tonio K. to Little Jimmy Scott. Like the albums of another star of her generation, Emmylou Harris, Raitt's tend to be impeccably curated collections. "There's always an ongoing search for good material. It is often a function of what the songwriters

send me that year that I like. I always go back to people I've connected with before. I listen to my peers. I go back through all my record collections. I've got so many cool world-music artists and jazz, all kinds of music from every continent that I listen to, in case there's a spark and a song that hits. And then there are certain songs I have in my back pocket that I've been waitin' to pull out, like the INXS song that I knew I was going to cover, I just didn't know when."

Besides the five Raitt originals, *Dig In Deep* features a trio of all-stars: Pat McLaughlin's "I Knew"; Michael Hutchence and Andrew Farriss's INXS hit "Need You Tonight"; and "Shakin' Shakin' Shakes," by Cesar Rosas and T Bone Burnett, from the Los Lobos album *By the Light of the Moon* (1987). In Raitt's hands, the tune includes some of her patented slide-guitar work—it may sound incongruous, but it adds a new dimension to this well-known number.

"Being from L.A.—the Los Lobos guys are as well—we've all grown up looking over our shoulders at the earthquake scourge. I just thought it was a really clever set of lyrics. Musically, the chance of playing that particular groove with this band....

"[The slide guitar] it's really fun. That's the fun part about playing electric guitars, when you just crank it and get those whistles. I think we did it in one take. I couldn't bear to stop. I let it go all the way to the end so everybody could ride along with us!"

Once Raitt had assembled the songs, she booked a studio. She brought in her road band of Marinelli, bassist James "Hutch" Hutchinson, and drummer Ricky Fataar, and, as has been the case for many years now, sat in the producer's chair herself.

"I've had a partner in producing, but I was never, quote unquote, produced by someone else. When I worked with Paul [Rothchild] and Jerry Ragovoy [1974's *Streethlights* through 1977's *Sweet*

Forgiveness] they were driving to a great extent, because I was in my mid-20s and that was kind of how you did it. I respected their work, but it still had to be a mutual decision. And again, I found the songs, and I'm the one that has to like all the musicians we put in the room."

Raitt's partner on *Slipstream*, and now *Dig In Deep*, was engineer Ryan Freeland, who for *Dig In Deep* worked at his Stampede Origin Studios, in Culver City, California, and at Henson Recording Studios, in Hollywood. Freeland tends to work in Americana, having recently cut tracks with Bettye LaVette, Wynonna Judd, and Ray LaMontagne. He and Raitt met through another Americana star, Joe Henry. In fall 2010 and the following spring, she ended up cutting a number of tracks with guitar heavyweights Greg Leisz and Bill Frisell, produced by Henry at his studio, The Garfield House, in Pasadena. Five of them made it on to *Slipstream*. Another, "You've Changed My Mind," is on *Dig In Deep*. The rest of *Slipstream* was recorded at Ocean Way Studios, in Hollywood, in summer 2011. Raitt approached Freeland to join the two halves into a single record.

"Ryan and I have a really great connection, as he does with the band. It's a partnership, another set of ears, a cheerleader and a pastor: somebody that files the contracts and goes out and talks to musicians when something is not working—your diplomat, someone who will go out and go, 'Men . . .'

"I told Ryan, I said, 'I love what you're doing, and the way you think about music'—he's also a keyboard player. [For *Slipstream*], I asked him if he thought he could integrate the sonics of what I recorded in a regular studio [the tracks from Ocean Way], with some of the Joe songs. The results, I think, are seamless."

"If those two worlds were gonna be on the same record," Freeland said in a recent interview with me, "I guess they thought it would be a good idea to keep the engineer the same, so that the sonic perspective would have some cohesion to it."

Asked about his mission on *Dig In Deep*, and about what he and Raitt discuss when it comes to recording, Freeland is direct. "Her relationship with the engineer and the sound of her records has always been a very, very important part of the process to her. It's no small thing. The sonics of the record is no small part of the impact it

has on the audience. My mission was to capture what's going on and not be too heavy-handed with manipulating what's already great. Which is harder than it sounds. Sometimes, capturing that stuff takes a lot of nuance."

Some of those nuances are in the recording of Raitt's voice. Freeland, recording in Pro Tools using Apogee A/D converters, took a novel approach in recording Raitt's vocals. "It's a little funny to admit this, but I ended up using three mikes [simultaneously], which I think is kind of silly. But I used a Neumann M49 and then an AEA A440, and that's what I've been doing on almost everybody for the last few years. Bonnie also uses a Telefunken 251. It's a brighter mike. It works really well on her voice. In my mind, I thought I would end up picking two of them, but then we got so deep into it on takes that I was, like, 'Ah, screw it—we'll just keep all three up, I guess.'

"The fun thing is that because they all have such different tonalities, you can kinda reblend them to get different sounds on a per-song basis. If it's an edgier song, you can kind of push the brighter mikes; if it's mellow, you make it woollier and fuller. It's kind of fun, as an engineer, that instead of messing with EQs or anything like that, I can kind of blend microphone choices."

Balls—as in sonic *cojones*, some punch, maybe too much, in the mix—seems to be the most attractive word for describing the mix of *Dig In Deep*. "As you've heard, it's a tough record. It's got a lot of balls," Freeland said. "I wanted to make the sonics tough, but it's still beautiful, and has all those things that really work for her music."

"I wanna work up to using the word *balls*," Raitt says in a separate conversation. "He's able to be... he can follow whatever style of music, and my range is pretty broad. He's true to the spirit of the song, and he really gets it. He not only gets the musicians and the instruments they are playing, but he mikes them in a great way. His choice of microphones is impeccable, as is his mike placement. Ryan is just able to create a fantastically organic and live sound. He gets everything sounding exactly the way it's coming off the instruments. And he's able to make my voice sound great. He's got balls..." [breaks out laughing]

Dig In Deep will be released as a CD, high-resolution downloads and as two 45rpm, 180gm LPs. Kim Rosen was the mastering engineer, and the lacquers were cut by Cameron Henry at a studio



called *Welcome To 1979*, in Nashville, a choice Freeland suggested. He heartily approves of the results.

"It's a much more musical sound. Sometimes I get [lacquers] back from guys, and it doesn't have the same soul as the original file. They changed it. You have to make certain changes to get into vinyl, but, like any other art form, there are ways to do it that can retain the integrity of the original concept."

"People who were getting ready to market us, said you know there's a growing market for this audiophile format and we think it would be great if you'd put it out [in that]," says Raitt. "I had a quick learning curve. I said 'Are you sure people who listen to me would want to hear it like that?' and they said sure. I wasn't even aware that it was possible, so I'm so happy that after how much effort we put into it, it's gonna to have audiophiles flippin' because it will be... better than we sound live."

Dig in Deep's too loud CD mix—which is odd considering her audience is not MP3 listening teens—suits the album's many up-tempo numbers. In the brilliantly titled "The Comin' Round Is Going Through," Raitt thankfully shows no signs of slowing down to live in a more ballad-oriented world. She still likes to rock. She also remains committed to the political activism that has always been a part of her music.

"With 'The Comin' Round Is Going Through,' I knew I wanted to musically add another kind of a Stones, four-on-the-floor rocker, because this band just kills that groove, whether we do 'Me and the Boys' or a [Fabulous] T-Birds tune—that's one of the places we go. I was trying to think what would go with that style and I knew I had been brewing to write a song about how pissed off

I was at how the system of democracy is broken in this country and hijacked by big money and corporations. Regardless of which side of the aisle you're on, everybody agrees—the system is broken, and people at the top are making too much. And so I just kinda made it pretty general, verse by verse, just getting the outrage and bile out, so I could go onstage and sing it every night, especially in an election year. It's really healing. We got in the studio and just let it rip, and it really felt good."

The moderately rocking "What You're Doing to Me" is a gospel-flavored tune on which Raitt plays piano—and works into her lyrics the term *Sturm and Drang*.

After all that sturm and drang I gave up long ago

One too many times around and nothin' left to show

"I was hoping somebody would ask me about it! [much laughter] I knew I was either gonna get grief for it, or somebody was going to say 'Cool!' I've used that expression for years, maybe from growing up in the theater or something. And every once in a while I'll just throw it out there.

"'What You're Doing to Me,' even if it's wishful thinking or a fantasy, it's something everybody deals with when love can get kinda thorny or you just had a long dry spell. I mean, I've been in a relationship for a long time, but it's really fun to be able to sing lyrics like that, about how somebody makes you feel."

When it comes to feelings, the familial deaths that filled Raitt's life in the early aughts have returned in the form of friends passing. Several days before Raitt and I spoke, Glenn Frey, of the Eagles, died suddenly, preceded mere weeks before by the deaths of David Bowie and Allen Toussaint.

"Oh, man. B.B. [King] as well. And I knew Otis Clay. It's just been way too many. I really was tight with Allen, ever since we first met in the early Warner Bros. days. And the Meters and I—we were all close. And I loved his records. And I'd see him every time I played Jazz Fest [the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival]. We'd go to each other's gigs and sit in. It was a true, soulful connection and deep friendship, and it was such a shock, but I'm so grateful he went out doing what he loved. What an incredible, unique contribution. What a unique, integrous person he was." ■