

# Bonnie Raitt's New Morning

How the singer-songwriter overcame personal loss and made her first album with new songs in a decade

BY PATRICK DOYLE

**I** LOVE THAT DOUBLE-TIME shit!" says Bonnie Raitt, grinning behind a piano. The singer-guitarist has just led her longtime band through a furious impromptu take on Ray Charles' "Mess Around." Raitt, 66, has a reputation as a tenacious perfectionist, but today at her rehearsal studio in North Hollywood, she's loose and mischievous. At one point, she sets aside a sheet of lyrics for a new ballad to prove she doesn't need them – but then breaks up laughing when she can't remember the first line. "So much for losing the training wheels!" she says.

After practice, Raitt heads down a hallway deeper into the studio; there's a chore she's been meaning to get around to. Her guitar tech opens a big, musty locker packed with old instruments. "This is over 30 years of people laying guitars on us," she says. She opens a case to reveal an acoustic Jackson Browne gave her, and another containing a guitar that belonged to songwriter Stephen Bruton, a close friend who died in 2009. "I'd been meaning to go through these for years and figure out whether to give them to charity, or what," she says. "But then I moved away and my family got sick."

Raitt is referring to a painful time that began with the deaths of her parents (she lost her mother in 2004, her father a year later); in 2009, her brother died after an eight-year battle with brain cancer. "I was really depleted," she says. "You go back and relive your relationships with those people, and when there's multiple losses and illnesses, it can be almost overwhelming." After her brother's death, Raitt, who tours year-round and plans her career in five-year stretches, told her band she was taking a year off. She started seeing a grief counselor and, for the first time since she hit the road in 1970, watched all four seasons change in her Marin County backyard. "I needed to take some time to sit down and fall apart," she says. That reflective period – and the joy she found when she returned to the road in 2011 – shaped Raitt's new album, *Dig in Deep*, her first LP with newly written songs in more than

a decade. "I have always felt so sorry that I couldn't be a better this or that for my family members," she says. "And I know they were probably just as sorry I couldn't be what they would've liked me to be."

Raitt has lived in Northern California since 1991, but she feels at home in L.A. She grew up on Mulholland Drive, not far from her rehearsal space, the daughter of actor John Raitt, who had lead roles in *Carousel* and *Oklahoma!* during the golden age of Broadway in the 1940s and 1950s. She fondly recalls hour-and-a-half school bus rides through the San Fernando Valley and attending Quaker meetings with her parents, whose love of music and social justice helped draw her to the blues: "It became an anomaly when I was 18 or 19 – people would say, 'Isn't this odd that a little redheaded daughter of a Broadway singer from Los Angeles is playing Robert Johnson songs?'"

Raitt kicks back on a worn-in couch with a piece of double-chocolate cake, which she ordered for her bassist's birthday. "Mmm, tastes like gluten!" she says, eating it straight off a napkin. Someone mentions that the Rolling Stones are rehearsing nearby, and Raitt recalls how she took a semester off from Harvard to tag along on the Stones' 1970 European tour (Raitt was dating the manager of opening act Buddy Guy). She missed class registration on the road, and her parents, angry, stopped supporting her. "That's why I started playing," she says. "I had to make a living. I've got the Stones to thank for it!" At 23, she landed back in Laurel Canyon, becoming a regular on the L.A. club scene with friends like Tom Waits and Little Feat. "We all sang and played on each other's records and hung out, dated each other," she recalls. "We'd start at the Troubadour and then go to somebody's house to keep the party running."

Raitt is approaching her 30th year of sobriety. She started attending AA meetings in the mid-Eighties after losing her

deal with longtime label Warner Bros. and going through a difficult breakup. Her first "sober album," 1989's *Nick of Time*, was a multiplatinum success that won her three Grammys. "I remember the change in her when she stopped drinking," says Browne. "It was like she just flipped a switch and this power happened in her."

Raitt is still a big draw on what she calls "the Americana circuit." She adds, "My end of the music business doesn't rely so much on looks. It allows you to age more gracefully than the mainstream pop stars that are total babes. People are snarkier about them getting older. It's just terrible. So I'm actually relieved that I'm in the character-actress end of the world, where I can just get more seasoned and people go, 'Oh, well, look how mythical she's become!'"

Most days, at home, Raitt spends mornings hiking with friends, and then works from her home office with a staff of four. She has touring down to a science, looking online for hotel deals and doing her laundry at theaters with washers and dryers. Today, she's wearing motorcycle

boots with zippers – she doesn't ride, but they're easier to get off at airport security. Raitt's tour dates often include benefits for progressive causes, like safe energy and campaign-finance reform. She also finds time for the romantic relationship she's been in for more than a decade, her longest since her eight-year marriage to actor Michael O'Keefe ended in 1999. "It's not a joined-at-the-hip relationship," she says. "I like my independence. I have a full life."

In March, she'll begin a two-year tour. She's already planning daytime adventures like seeing music at New Orleans Jazz Fest and exploring old railroad tracks that have been converted to bike paths along the East Coast.

"They're usually under a canopy of trees or along a river, so it's really beautiful," she says, smiling. "You get to see a lot more when you're up in the daytime." **RS**

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**NICK OF TIME**  
Raitt in Santa  
Monica in  
December