



Perfect Harmony

Bonnie Raitt's

Smokin' Slide and Savvy Songcraft Stand Tall on *Dig In Deep*

BY ART THOMPSON

"I ALWAYS KNOW A GOOD SONG WHEN I HEAR IT," SAYS BONNIE Raitt, whose storied career has been based to a large degree on her knack for finding great songs to record with little regard to the flavor-of-the-moment constraints that artists in different genres of pop music have to worry about. Raitt's huge-selling albums like *Nick of Time*, *Luck of the Draw*, and *Longing In Their Hearts* are testament to the choices of material she has made, and despite all the success that Raitt has enjoyed over the years, she still doesn't take the task lightly. "I could not do this for a living if I didn't find great songs, and the absolute daunting and labor-intensive part of what I do is going through hundreds of songs and CDs, and researching where to find new material. It's a process that takes months and months, and the more albums you record the more you have to do it. It's like a treasure hunt—a lot of slogging through stuff that doesn't work—but if I don't find great songs or write some decent ones myself, we don't get another record and I put a lot of people out of work. I like this gig, so that's a pretty good incentive to keep at it."



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Raitt's latest release, *Dig In Deep* [Redwing], shares many of the attributes of 2012's *Slipstream*, as both serve up a selection of beautifully crafted tunes that run the gamut from funky grooves and fired-up rockers to the introspective ballads that have always been a signature element of her records. One notable difference, however, is that *Slipstream* had one tune co-written by Raitt, while *Dig In Deep* has five that she either wrote or co-wrote. "I really didn't have the opportunity to do any writing for *Slipstream*," she explains. "I took a hiatus in 2010 after a nine-year period of both my parents' illness and loss, and my brother fighting an eight-year battle with brain cancer that ultimately led to his passing. From 2000 to 2010, I made two albums, did a national tour with Taj Mahal, all in the middle of my folks' and my brother's illnesses, and I didn't have any free time for anything other than just dealing with those things. The grief was pretty insurmountable, and the last thing I wanted

to think about after coming off the road was what my next project was going to be. So I took a hiatus, which turned out to be a year. I went to see music for fun, stretched out a bit artistically, and stayed at home. It was really restorative."

Raitt needed to get back on track, however, and she kickstarted the process by getting together with guitarist/songwriter/producer Joe Henry to work up some songs "experimentally," even though four of them would appear on *Slipstream*. "I called my band and told them how much fun it was for me to get back to the music, so we went in the studio and made *Slipstream*, which really got a great response," says Raitt. "When I came off of that two-year tour, I had already co-written a song with my guitar player George Marinelli for the next album. He kind of jump started me by sending me a track that I loved so much, and all I needed to do was write some lyrics to make it say what I wanted it to say. I also wrote a song for the new album with

my old keyboard player Jon Cleary—who's a fantastic artist in his own right, having just won his first Grammy for his album *Go Go Juice*—and then George sent me the music to another one called 'If You Need Somebody.' So I put words to some of these ideas and put some music around them as well."

As a songwriter, are you constantly working on ideas, or do you mainly get busy writing when you're preparing for a new record?

I normally have a couple of songs in the works and sometimes they make the cut and sometimes they don't, but I write specifically for my records and I don't write all the time. When I'm on the road for a couple of years, it's not really conducive for me to get into the kind of space I need to write. I might get some ideas when we're jamming at sound checks, and whenever I get some lyrical ideas I'll jot them down. But basically when the two-years-of-touring part of the four-year cycle is over, that's when I really

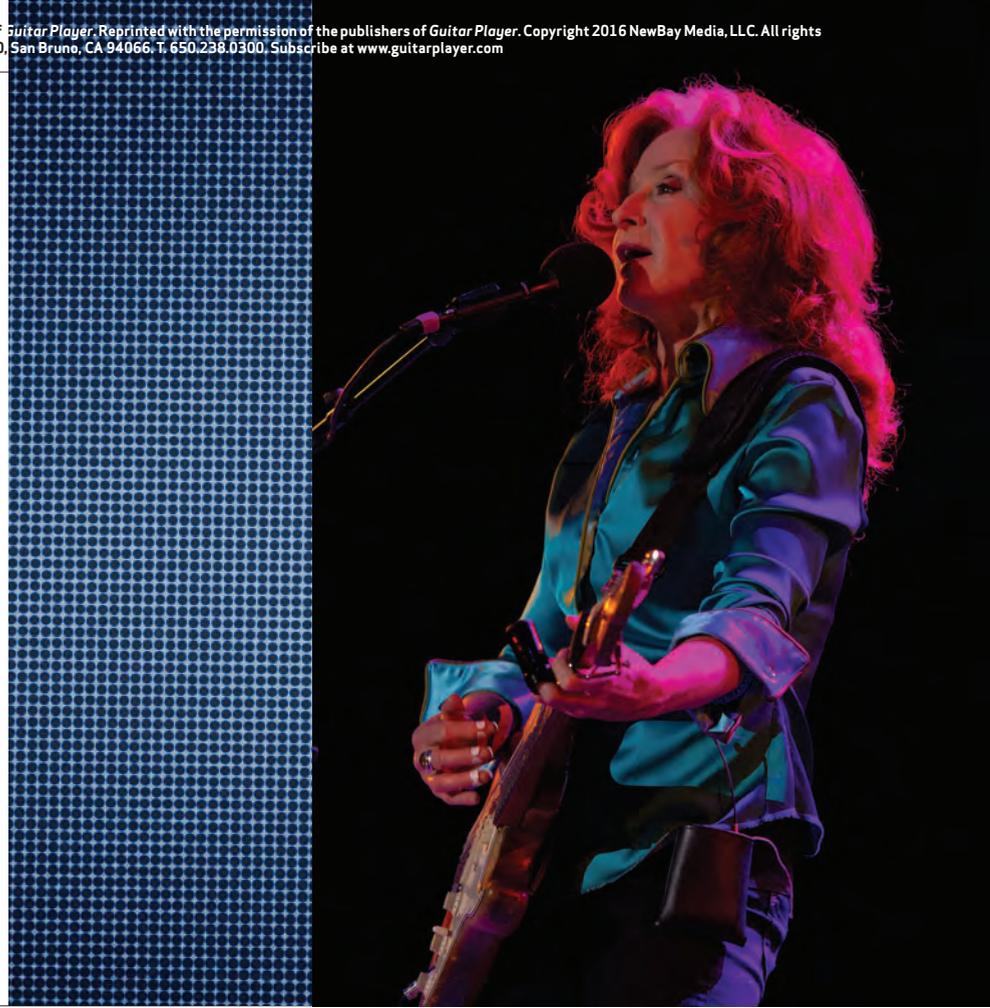
start thinking about songs for the next record.

Do you also have to consider how your own songs will fit with the tunes you've already picked from other writers?

Yes, and I often cater to what I want to say musically and lyrically around songs that I already have on deck to record. I think about it in terms of the whole album. Like whether there's enough ballads, what they're saying, and what the different feels are for the rest of the record. Because a lot of my tunes have already been recorded by other people, my little twists for them have more to do with the arrangements, and I work that out with the band in rehearsal.

You always cover other people's songs so well, while keeping your own style and sound front and center. Can you give some insights on how you do that?

Most of the time I'm doing songs written by other people that come to me so compelling and well done that it's actually intimidating for me to try to cover them. On INXS'



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“Need You Tonight,” I just slowed it down a bit and changed the chorus to fit the way I wanted to sing it. I’ve always wanted to cover Los Lobos’ “Shakin’ Shakin’ Shakes,” so we just worked it out in rehearsal until we got the feel we wanted. We have a week or so to get together, and that’s when I play the songs for the band that I’m thinking about doing. Everybody has their own style, of course, and we just use the original version as a stepping stone. Sometimes we’ll take it one direction and later I may want to change it. That’s happened on several occasions where we make a left turn in the studio. But if a song’s really not working, I either abandon it for the day or just put it way down on the list and go to another song. I don’t like to flog it. It’s the same thing with solos. If I’m not having a great day for overdubbing guitar solos, I will go on to singing or percussion or mixing something.

“Shakin’ Shakin’ Shakes” ends with this great guitar rave-up between you and

George. Was that a spontaneous jam or did you work out beforehand what each of you would play?

We worked it up in rehearsal and just left it alone until we got in the studio. We did one take and we left it all in. I don’t like to rehearse too much when I’m getting ready to make a record, because the one week when everybody is able to fly out here and be together is sometimes a month away from when we’re actually in the studio. So it’s just a question of whether everyone can remember what we came up with. Luckily I’m recording the rehearsals, so I can remind people about keys and all that. Sometimes they have to remind me too.

I understand that you had started to write some music with Prince.

Yeah, we worked together on some songs for a couple of days, but I needed to write some lyrics and unfortunately Prince’s schedule just didn’t jibe with mine after that. What a terrible loss. He was big a fan and he knew

I loved his music as well.

You’ve always embraced different grooves, whether Latin or African or even reggae, such as on your classic tune “Have a Heart.” Were there any particular musical styles that inspired you this time around?

Yeah, I wanted to get to some music that I hadn’t done in a while just to keep it fresh, and there were two or three different grooves that I wanted to add to my live show. I was motivated to write a gospel shuffle on the piano because—even though I don’t play a lot of piano—I love to play that particular style. So I wrote “What You’re Doin’ to Me.” Then I wanted a new funk tune, so I used Jon Cleary’s “Unintended Consequences,” which is one of my favorite tracks on the record. “Coming Round and Going Through” was something where I wanted to write kind of a four-on-the-floor rocker about how pissed off I was about money hijacking democracy in this country. I rarely write political songs—I wrote one called “Hell to Pay” years ago—but

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I wanted this song to express exactly how pissed off I was. And every night when we play it there's a guitar duel between me and George at the end. One of the great joys of my gig is when the slide guitar and the other lead guitarist are trading licks back and forth. It makes it really exciting for me and I hope for the audience as well.

Your slide tone is very aggressive on that cut. How do you think about your guitar tone from song to song?

I think of it as different colors and levels of ferocity. "Coming Round and Going Through" is going to have a different kind of slide tone than "If You Need Somebody" or "Right Down the Line," that Gerry Rafferty

song from *Slipstream*. It depends on what the other guys are playing, and it depends on the type of song and emotional impact I want to have. You need a tough, ballsy sound when you're doing an Elmore James song, and I use pedals on the solos sometimes to get a real overdriven sound with lots of harmonics. I think the booster pedal makes the biggest difference, but the rest of the time it's pretty much just user driven—it has to do with how I hit it. But for the ballads it's a whole different way of playing, and even if the phrasing is similar, the tone is always something that I pick very carefully. I don't have to really think about it on the gig, though, because it's basically just the Stratocaster's



pickups through those pedals and my compressor that gets me those tones.

What amplifiers are you using now?

I mainly use an amp that James Heidrich custom made for me that has 12" Celestion speakers. Sometimes I'll borrow vintage amps that are lying around in the studio, but I think most of the songs on this album were played on James' amp. He sure makes great amps, and I love the way they light up on stage. *[Heidrich, who founded Bad Cat Amplifiers, tells us that Raitt was one of the first major artists to work with him, and is a cornerstone artist for his new venture, Black Wing Amplifiers.]*

Lowell George turned you on to the MXR compressor, and that's what you're

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still using right?

Yeah. I asked him, “How do you get that tone?” and he showed me how he did it and gave me a Dyna-Comp, which I still have. It’s the only real secret to my sound. I’d have to say that Ry Cooder and Lowell George influenced me so much. I love the Delta blues players too, but I don’t play that style very much. There are so many great slide players, and John Mooney, Roy Rogers, David Lindley just knock me out. I think John Mooney is very underrated as a blues artist. I know he’s got his fans but I just want to tout him in this article because I think he’s fantastic.

Does your guitar lineup remain the same mix of Stratocasters?

Yes, I switch between an old ’63 sunburst Strat that I got from my friend Fred Waldecki at Westwood Music years ago—it was previously owned by Robin Trower, which I thought was so cool—and a brown ’65 Strat that I bought in 1969. I’ve had it all these years because I love how it feels and sounds.

I also play my signature guitar that’s from the Fender guitar program we set up in 1995 to fund a free guitar-lesson program that I started. It’s up and running now in over 200 clubs around the country and in Canada with just the profits from that guitar. Live, I switch between those three guitars because I’m usually in open *A*, *Ab*, or *G* tuning, and it just saves me from having to retune. On this record, though, I mostly used the brown and sunburst guitars.

I’ve seen you occasionally play a Gibson archtop onstage too.

That’s a 1956 Gibson ES-175. It was my main guitar when I went from playing just acoustic to going to a guitar with a cutaway. For a lot of the songs, I have to put a capo on the third or the fifth fret, and having the cutaway gives me more neck to play on. I got a great deal on that guitar in the mid ’70s, and I think I got out of the store with it because the guy didn’t know I was famous. I love that kind of stuff. It’s the other side

of being a woman guitarist—you get a good deal because they just don’t think you’re a serious player.

There’s a cool-sounding lick on the intro to “If You Need Somebody” How did you come up with it?

That’s George’s music, and the intro to that song was just Hutch [James Hutchinson, bassist] warming up before we turned the tape on. I liked the lick so much that I doubled it on my guitar and we ended up starting the record with it. There’s a lot of playing with the production on that cut. After the band came and went, George and I did some double-tracking and played some horn parts on our guitars. We had a lot of fun stretching out on that one a little more than we usually do.

On “You’ve Changed My Mind” there’s some beautiful guitar harmony in the opening section. Is that also you and George playing those parts?

I didn’t play guitar on that one. That’s a

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Joe Henry song from the sessions in 2010, and his musicians included Bill Frisell and Greg Leisz on guitars. Joe had written a song from a conversation we'd had about what I'd just gone through with losing all those people in my life, and he sent back this incredibly beautiful tune and set of lyrics that put so much beautiful poetry to something I had said. I decided to put it on this record because I just appreciated the sentiment about how you can come out of a dark period of pain. I have so much gratitude for what Joe and those sessions did—they really opened my heart again. That ensemble of players also included David Piltch (bass) and Jay Belterose (drums), and the main guitar is Joe Henry playing that beautiful line. Joe had just started playing in open tuning and he wrote such an exquisite song.

What kind of resonator guitar do you use?

I have one that Larry Pogreba made for me that's a cutaway type made out of recycled

aircraft aluminum with a salvaged wood neck and a '51 Rambler hubcap as the resonator cover. He painted it purple because he knew I liked that color, and it has a combination of an acoustic pickup and an electric pickup. The coolest thing is to mix the two, and I usually just run it through my amp. I don't actually have a standard National guitar anymore. I had one in the '70s, but I do have a beautiful Dobro that I played on *Nick of Time* for a song called "Cry On My Shoulder" that I really love. I don't take that guitar out on the road much because the cutaway hybrid one just works so great. I know Keb' Mo' has one of Larry's guitars too.

Is that the same Dobro that's heard on "Fearless Love," from the album *Fundamental*?

Oh, that's a beautiful tune, and I think I used the Dobro on that one. You would remember these songs better than I do. I think I make six albums in seven years in the '70s, and when people ask me about them I

usually have to go look it up.

You've always had great guitar players in your band, including Johnny Lee Schell and Will McFarlane, so how do you pick guitarists and what do you expect from them?

Usually I've just heard them with someone else and I find out that they're available when I'm looking for somebody new. I don't audition per se—I just listen to them with other bands and on records. It's essential for me to have someone that plays the other style of lead guitar that I don't. And if they play another Stratocaster, there's an important balance that they've got to have tonality-wise that will complement what I'm doing on guitar. Having someone that can play R&B and great soul guitar, and understands what makes Chuck Berry and the Rolling Stones so incredible—I would say we have to start with those aspects. But between the guitar chair and the piano chair there has to be a wide range of musical ability and vocabulary,

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and chops that knock me out. You have to be able to listen to somebody play a beautiful solo on a ballad and have it knock your socks off, which was George Marinelli playing with Bruce Hornsby. He just tore me up, and I was just so thrilled when he agreed to play with my band. George has it all. He's got R&B and rock and roll, he can play

everything from Hendrix and the Beatles, and he's a great soloist.

You once said in *GP* how bringing in Steve Donnelly for the album *Fundamental* was akin to "risky behavior."

Yes, Mitchell Froom knew Steve, but I was not familiar with his work so that's a big commitment to bring somebody in that

you've never heard. That's when you really have to trust your co-producer!

Have different guitarists influenced your music in any particular way?

When I switched bands from Will McFarlane and Freebo to the Bump band with Ricky Fataar on drums and Johnny Lee Schell on guitar for the *Green Light* album, that was a really fun decade of rock and roll. Nobody plays like Johnny Lee—he's really got a cool thing going. The two of us together on the *Green Light* record really sent me off to appreciate being able to play more rockin' music.

Before you started producing your own albums, you used a number of different producers. Were you looking for certain sound or was it more a matter of changing things up to keep the music fresh?

I picked producers in the early days that I thought were doing great work with artists that I loved. Paul Rothchild had worked with Paul Butterfield, Janis Joplin, and the Doors, and it was Butterfield's record that I wanted to emulate. I wanted to get something kind of funky like that, so I did two records with Rothchild because I liked his engineer and I liked the way those records sounded. But my taste has morphed over the years in terms of the teams of producers and engineers that I wanted to work with. Like with Don Was and Ed Cherney, we made four great records together, and then it was a good idea to take a break just to freshen it up. I moved on to Tchad Blake and Mitchell Froom, who I loved for their work with Elvis Costello, Richard Thompson, and, of course, Los Lobos—*Kiko* is one of my favorite records of all time. I wanted to make a little bit of a left turn and I loved the aural atmosphere that Tchad and Mitchell were getting. So we worked on a couple of records together, and then I decided to record with Ryan Freeland because we just hit it off when I worked with him and Joe Henry. I asked Ryan if it would be possible to integrate the very different sonics of the Joe Henry sessions with what I was going to do with my band when we recorded at Ocean Way, and he did an incredible job. I didn't know which songs from the Joe Henry sessions were going to be able to be integrated into my last album, *Slipstream*, but I think it ended up sonically and thematically working out really well. It was such an enjoyable situation working with Ryan that I decided to do it again this time with

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my same band. A huge part of the way these records sound is my connection with my long-term band.

Why did you decide to start your own record label?

Well, that's been growing for a while. The record companies have kind of collapsed in many ways. I think I went through six or seven different presidents during my time with Warner and Capitol, and I looked around and saw my friends who were starting their own independent labels, like Jackson Browne and Beth Nielsen Chapman. So the three women in my office and I studied up for a bunch of years on distribution and manufacturing and seeing how these other people were doing it and learning from their mistakes. Luckily I had an incredible home office team that was extremely capable at all the accounting and other details involved with helping me get the vision that I wanted, and so we planned it for three or four years and then it was kind of seamless. We were overseeing the record company on all the aspects anyway—like making sure the records are in the stores and approving all the promotion—so we wanted to at least be able to switch players in the middle if it wasn't working, or change distribution or PR people. I also find that people call you back a lot faster when it's your own label. So we cut out the middleman because financially the record business collapsed and people aren't buying CDs as much, and if you're going to make less money selling CDs, you might as well make more per unit. If you have a team like I do that's able to do the work, and they're willing and savvy and have their ducks lined up, then I think it's a really great option for a legacy artist like myself who is already established.

Would you ever consider producing other artists?

I wish I had time to do it, but I just don't have enough hours in the day between running my own label and management, being a political activist, and the touring and all that. It's pretty much a seven-day-a-week job.

Early in your career you became friends with guys like Son House, Skip James, and Mississippi Fred McDowell. Can you tell us what you learned from them?

Oh, that's a great question. From Fred McDowell I learned what it was like for him being in that part of America at that time period. I grew up in the '60s as a Quaker

with all the civil rights marches, so it was amazing to actually meet somebody who was raised in Mississippi, and be able to ask him all these questions and see the dignity and humor and perspective that he had. Fred showed me what the blues was like from his point of view. He told me how he learned about music, about driving a tractor on a cotton plantation, and what it was like to be black during the depression. It was an incredible education musically too, because I was able to watch how he played guitar up close. I taught myself to play off his records before I met him, but I didn't know certain chords he was using, and I could not figure out how to make that sound. It was in '69 when I finally got to see him play and learn things first hand about his rhythm style and how to play that Delta slide. Fred was an amazing mentor to me and a great friend—like having a terrific uncle across cultures. I didn't get to know Son House very well—he was quite elderly by the time I met him—and I didn't open any shows for him like I did with Fred McDowell and Arthur Crudup. Skip James was one of my absolute favorite artists but he was very ill the year that I met him, and he died that same year. But I got to hang out with him in Philadelphia, go have dinner with his family, and play guitar for him when he couldn't play.

What are your recollections of B.B. King?

I met B.B. when I was 19 and we ran into each other off and on at blues events, W.C. Handy awards, Grammys, and festivals ever since. We toured together a little bit and he was always so complimentary, including mentioning is his book that I was his favorite slide player. You can't imagine what that would mean to me! I admired B.B. for his singing style as much as I did his guitar playing, and as a person he was so humble and generous and loving. But for me to have been close to him, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, and Fred McDowell—and seeing them all having the time of their lives and being so joyful instead of bitter and twisted-up was such a great lesson. They were like spiritual teachers for me. One of the greatest gifts I've been given—aside from being the daughter of my parents, who were such great musicians—was to be backstage when B.B. or John Lee Hooker or Charles Brown were sharing stories. I felt like the luckiest person on earth. ■