

P E R F O R M E R S



SINCE HER 1971 RECORDING DEBUT, BONNIE RAITT has faithfully demonstrated a catholicity of the heart. Over three decades, she has essayed most every facet of blues – and folk-derived American pop – from Robert Johnson to Motown, from the cockiest blues to the most heartrending contemporary ballads – yet distilled a style uniquely her own. A master blueswoman, a consummate pop singer, a legendary guitarist – all describe her, but none fully define her.

When Raitt's fittingly titled *Nick of Time* swept the Grammys in

BONNIE RAITT

BY PATRICIA ROMANOWSKI

1990, the general consensus was that her time had come. In truth, though, it was *always* her time, because through the years Raitt remained true to her vision and to her fans. For those of us with a few decades behind us, Raitt is among a handful of artists whose attitudes, music and life continue to make some kind of sense. She has outlived, outsung and outplayed every walking rocker-babe, blues-mama cliché. And now, with typically unself-conscious style, she coolly sashays through her fifties, as much a model for her peers as for their children. In her more introspective songs, such as "Nick of Time," she reveals a hard-won, clear-eyed emotional depth. But in her understatedly sexy duet with John Lee Hooker, "I'm in the Mood," or the playfully leering "Thing Called Love," Raitt reminds us that she's also got something else cookin' in her kitchen. And surely always will.

Bonnie Raitt was the second child and only daughter born to Marjorie Haydock, a pianist, and John Raitt, the dashing and gifted





Broadway musical star best known for his roles in *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel* and *The Pajama Game*. Born in Burbank, California, in 1949, Raitt spent most of her childhood in Los Angeles, where her family moved in 1957. As Quakers, the Raitts lived in Hollywood but were never of it. Raitt grew up something of a willing, even proud, socially conscious outsider to the beach-party lifestyle.

She got her first guitar at eight, and with her guitarist grandfather's encouragement, she taught herself to play Hawaiian slide. At fifteen, she made her debut with a girlfriend on amateur night at the legendary West Hollywood folk club, the Troubadour. A longtime fan of R&B and early rock & roll, Raitt then encountered what she later described as "a whole new world" in the recordings of acoustic and electric bluesmen – and a woman, Sippie Wallace, the 1920s blues singer under whose sway Raitt fell in 1968 and whom Raitt considered her "sassy grandmother."

From California, the route of Raitt's inspiration ran

WITH BLUESMAN
FRED McDOWELL,
1970; DEBUT
RECORDING
ARTIST, 1971

east and north to Motown, then over to Chicago, where Muddy Waters waxed his immortal "I Can't Be Satisfied" the year before she was born; then down the Mississippi to a Delta crossroads at midnight

in a year outside of time itself. It seems an unlikely legacy for a middle-class white girl to adopt. The potent, predominantly male brew of hard luck and menace, celebration and boast finds no stronger musical voice than the electric blues of Raitt's idols, who indisputably inhabited a man's man's world. But Raitt was undaunted: Barely out of her teens, she confessed her ambition to become "the female Muddy Waters." Initially, Junior Wells, Buddy Guy, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Howlin' Wolf, Son House and Muddy Waters considered Raitt's interest in them and their music odd,

perhaps even suspect. But it quickly became clear that Raitt was no dilettante. She had heart and soul and chops, and her idols soon came to regard her as a serious student, then a peer. Years later, John Lee Hooker said of her: "She's so deep into the blues, she'll never get out alive."

At age twenty-one, Raitt signed to Warner Bros. Setting the





pattern, *Bonnie Raitt* featured blues and a touch of Motown, as well as two of Raitt's own compositions. Even then, Raitt demonstrated not only a gift for interpretation but also an unerring eye for other writers' undiscovered gems. Raitt's version of Eric Kaz and Libby Titus's "Love Has No Pride" is a rich wild violet, a thing of beauty still. She relied on, but never flaunted, the polished technique behind the cracks in her voice or the seemingly casual, almost conversational phrasing, both stylistic trademarks that could leave listeners almost wincing in empathetic sorrow with each chorus.

While Raitt continued making her mark with her tough-strutting slide guitar, self-deprecating, racy humor, sometimes funky, sometimes caressing vocals and her esoteric taste, her closest brush with a hit in those days was an unlikely 1977 cover of Del Shannon's "Runaway." But hits never defined Raitt's public image, and the lack of them never bothered fans. Steady touring and peerless devotion to social causes

(most notably the antinuclear organization MUSE [Musicians United for Safe Energy], which she cofounded) made her a household name among baby boomers. Still, in 1983, as she finished mastering *Nine Lives*, Warner Bros. suddenly dropped her.

Though disappointed, Raitt didn't quit. In 1989, after six years of touring first with a small band and then solo, she set to work on the first of the albums that would mark one of the most triumphant "comebacks" in rock history. *Nick of Time*, *Luck of the Draw* and *Longing in Their Hearts* – all multiplatinum Grammy winners – proved not that Raitt had made it back, but that she had never gone away.

Tonight we honor a journeywoman-musician embarking on the second half of her life at the height of her powers. Raitt is destined to add a unique volume to the rock canon. Though the first chapters were set down long ago by the traditions she embraces, the end of her story waits to be written by the musicians destined to take up the legacy of artistry, respect and inspiration she will leave behind. Through her life and her work, Raitt shows us how to preserve the past without embalming it and how to honor the art by not letting it get too respectable. Whether returning to the spotlight the artists who inspired her, working with the Rhythm and Blues Foundation or planting musical seeds by funding free guitar lessons for children with her profits from the Fender Bonnie Raitt Signature Series Stratocaster, she keeps giving it back. Now it's our turn: Welcome, Bonnie, to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

WITH PROUD
PAPA, JOHN
RAITT, 1971;
WITH B.B. KING
IN L.A., 1989

