

# TAPE OP

The Creative Music Recording Magazine

## BOB CLEARMOUNTAIN

*Springsteen, Stones, Chic, Roxy Music*

## JOE HENRY

*Solomon Burke, Aimee Mann, Joan Baez*

## SONNY DiPERRI

*NIN, Animal Collective, El Ten Eleven*

## JAMIE LIDELL

*Electro Soul*

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*From The ABKCO Vaults*

## I AM SNOW ANGEL

*Julie Kathryn's Music & Samples*

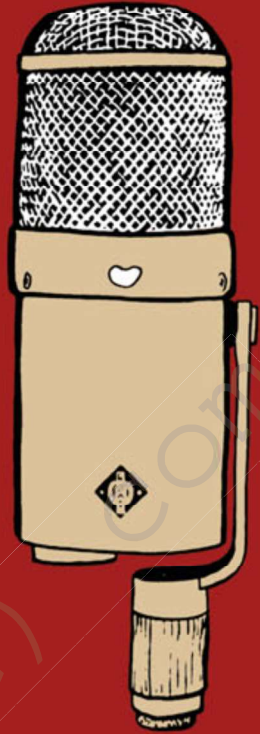
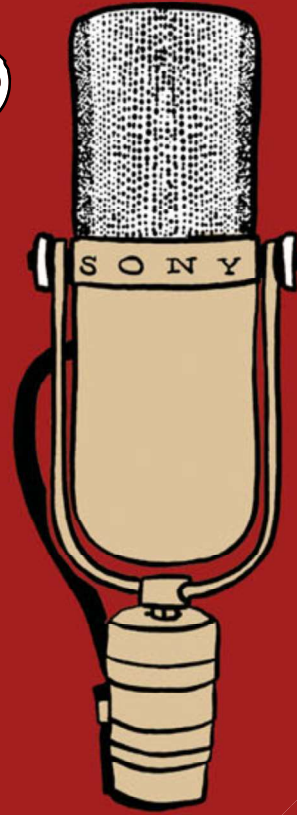
## SOUNDBETTER

*Online Collaboration*

## GEAR REVIEWS

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JOE HENRY MAY BE THE DEEPEST GUY I HAVE EVER DISCUSSED MUSIC WITH. His insights – and, in fact, almost every response to my carefully researched questions – that came out of his mouth highlighted his aphorisms about life, as well as his thoughts about music. It is rare that I start an interview talking about music production and finish the same interview feeling like I have been mentored by a wise man from another era. A genre-defying singer-songwriter with 14 albums to his credit, including 2017's *Thrum*, Joe has also produced many artists across many genres – both at his former South Pasadena, California, home studio, the Garfield House (a mansion built in 1904 for President James Garfield's widow), and at many other studios and remote locations throughout the US and Europe. Having produced three Grammy Award-winning albums, Joe is known for working quickly and efficiently, encouraging his clients to record live in the studio over a period of just three or four days, in many cases. He often makes daring production decisions in real time while recording (rather than later on during the mixing process). Joe has worked with a long list of legacy artists and singer/songwriters, including Solomon Burke, Allen Toussaint, Bonnie Raitt, Loudon Wainwright III, Aimee Mann, Ani DiFranco [*Tape Op* #12], Aaron Neville, Billy Bragg, and Joan Baez – the list goes on. He has even cowritten several songs with Madonna.

Photographed in  
Stinson Beach, CA  
June 2018  
by John Baccigaluppi

Joe Henry

The Process is Not Fragile

by Bren Davies

**Let's begin with the concept of being "authentic" during the writing and recording process. What does that mean to you?**

It means I let the work guide me – not any notion of what might happen to it after its creation. It's so easy to think that music is valued based on the way it is received after the fact. We can all be led astray by any number of things that invite our focus to be about popularity or financial gain. I'm not pretending those aren't important to process, but what it means to me to be creatively authentic is to think about what *the work* means and less about what *I* mean.

**You've talked before about the distinction of recordings that are in service of the song, as opposed to those that are in service of the artist.**

Well, both need to be true for me as a producer. I'm very song oriented; it all begins with song for me. Any project I take on as a producer for somebody else begins with this: play me songs that matter to me, and then I can hear myself engaged with it. There are artists who I admire to a degree where I'm interested in what they're trying to accomplish, regardless of any particulars of this moment. But ultimately my work is defined by *the invitation of song*. I try to keep myself there. I think it's my job to encourage any artist on my watch to keep themselves there. There are plenty of times when it's so easy for things to distract you from that course. You start believing that all of these other things are more, or equally, germane to forward motion. But at the end of the day, it's back to the song. Just let the song speak. If we create a living space for it, where we don't have to sit there and babysit this idea anymore – where it moves on and has its own life – that's always the goal. Genre doesn't mean anything to me. Absolutely nothing. A voice and a song – we can talk all day. I don't care what the dialect is of anybody's given vocabulary. If the song speaks to me, and the artist is committed and has a point of view, I'm interested.

**You make records very quickly – in most cases, four to seven days. You don't really believe in pre-production, and you try to capture the earliest, best version of the seed of a song during its first three to four takes, from what I'm gathering – including tracking everything live in the studio as much as possible. You've said that this captures the initial discovery of the song.**

It's all about discovery for me. Recording fast, and primarily live, is not based on any idea of purity. That's how most exciting music happens. If what you like is the engagement of people joining the table of a shared song and putting it up in the air together in real time, it turns out that the best way to accomplish that is to actually do that. It also happens to be a very responsible way to work financially. But the way I really came to it is that all

of the [recording artists] that I loved when I was a really young person [recorded that way]. What excited me was when I understood this idea of people playing music together in real time. That's exciting to me. I don't think about songs as writing, recording, or as wanting to express myself. It's not as much about self-expression to me as it is discovery. To me, self-expression is very egocentric. It's a very limiting way for me to think about what I do. To be open to discovery and wherever that takes you – giving authority to the song and the process – that's endlessly interesting to me and to my ear as a listener.

**Let's talk about producing other artists, as opposed to producing yourself. I know you were concerned that you might not have the time or energy to devote to your own projects.**

I also thought that becoming a parent would limit my ability to write and work before I had children. I came to find out that the more I work, the more I work. The busier I was as a parent, even – I had to learn to work differently. Once I was really challenged, it made me look back at my early working life and wonder what I did with all of my time. I found that producing records for other artists is not a separate engagement from what I do for myself as an artist. I really believed when I began being asked to produce [other artists] that they were two very separate enterprises. But the more I work, the more blurred the line becomes. I don't think about the records I make for myself and the records I produce for other people as being distinct and disparate engagements. It's all about making something meaningful come out of a pair of speakers. It's about conjuring something into the room that wasn't there a minute ago. I was surprised to discover that I didn't feel any diminishment in satisfaction – whether it was my voice in a song, or someone else's. I knew what my role was in helping something come to fruition, and I was very satisfied by that. I also learned a lot working for other people that I found I could [use] when I was working for myself. Things I didn't know how to see on my own behalf. It was wildly educational to observe and participate in the process when my own so called "artistry" was not on the line.

**I suppose you eventually start to see the rules that govern those experiences.**

My son is a really gifted musician, and I work with him a lot. He went to the School of Jazz on scholarship here [at The New School, in NYC]. He learned [musical] language in the classroom and understood the theory in advance before he was trying to write based on ideas of theory. I learned from repetition and emulating people who were doing work that was meaningful to me. When you do that long enough, you start to recognize patterns that repeat. I was an English major in college, but not very devoted to structured education. Most of what I've learned about writing and literature came from my brother David handing me the next book I was "supposed to" read. I started putting pieces together and

recognizing what was interesting to me; what held my interest and challenged it. What did I continue to respond to, what do they have in common? They might not be related genre-wise or articulation-wise, but there's some common thread that is consistent to what moves me and what doesn't. Your circle slowly expands. You get more fluent.

**Do you find that your role is different in each project?**

It's pretty rare anymore that I find myself working with an artist who doesn't have a strong vision [of their own work]. I still might get approached by an A&R person who has a young artist they are signing who needs song help and doesn't have a whole lot of vision about a sonic landscape. At this point in my working life, I'm more inclined to say, "Let me recommend somebody to you." That's not really my thing. If they're not bringing some real compulsion to the table, I'm probably not the guy for them. There are plenty of other people who will take that half-written song, then take half of their publishing, and create the entire sonic world for it! That doesn't happen to be my gift, and it doesn't interest me terribly.

**Do you see yourself as more of an actualizer for other people's visions that are almost there, but still need some tweaking?**

I think a lot more about being a facilitator. I give away the store as a record producer. If musicians show up with commitment and vision, everything else takes care of itself. Sometimes there's a question, but I don't tell anybody what to play – that's for sure. I've been really fortunate in my mentorships. Most notably because I'm a songwriter, first and foremost. Even when I'm a record producer for somebody else, I'm still in that chair as a songwriter acting as a producer. I came to understand that there are very few people out there working who maintain a balance between being a songwriter, a performer, and a producer. A lot of people who are producers, who were musicians themselves early on, have surrendered a lot of that practice to be a producer. "I don't write songs anymore. I just produce now." I've had two really significant mentors in my life who remained songwriters, performers, and producers. Those being T Bone Burnett [*Tape Op* #67] and Allen Toussaint. I gravitated towards them without even knowing that was [something I needed]. They were artists who were doing all this work, but not recognizing a real division of that labor. Allen has passed, as we know, but T Bone is still the same operator – whether producing a film, producing an album, recording an album for himself, or performing songs. He is still coming from this very shamanistic approach to living life in which music happens.

**You have worked with various engineers over the years recently, including S. Husky Höskulds [*Tape Op* #56], Ryan Freeland [#101], Jason Richmond, and many others. What are some of the differences in your workflow with these different engineers?**

S. Husky Höskulds, who's from Iceland but lives in Los Angeles, was the first engineer I had a dedicated relationship with. I met him through the producer Craig Street, when Craig and I were collaboratively producing my album *Scar* in 2000. For a while, Husky was the only person with whom I had that engagement. I made a couple of records of my own with Husky, and some of the very first records I produced with other people – most notably Solomon Burke's record *Don't Give Up on Me*, but also Bettye LaVette's record [*I've Got My Own Hell to Raise*], and Susan Tedeschi's record [*Hope and Desire*] were also of that era. I also worked with him on my collaborative soul project called *I Believe to My Soul*, whereon I met Allen Toussaint, Mavis Staples, Irma Thomas, Ann Peebles, Billy Preston...

### **That's a powerful group of people to meet all at one time.**

It was. Husky is brilliant. As a recording artist, he manipulates sound very significantly. He doesn't mean for his hand to be invisible. He is making very bold choices that are turning the dice on what's being played. He's not just documenting each moment; he's contributing to its creation. For the last 15 years, if not longer, I've been working almost exclusively with Ryan Freeland – my recent work with Jason Richmond notwithstanding, who I enjoy working with a lot. He's a recording engineer who lives in Durham, North Carolina. My association with Ryan began in earnest when I was producing an album for Jim White [*Drill a Hole in That Substrate and Tell Me What You See*], probably around 1998 or 1999.

### **This was at your South Pasadena studio?**

This was at Ryan's home studio in Culver City. I wasn't yet in the Garfield House. I made Jim's record, and then Aimee Mann's record [*The Forgotten Arm*] with Ryan. At some point Husky wasn't available, and it was a very fortuitous moment for me to begin working with Ryan. I realized at that point in my evolution, what Ryan brought to the table was critical for me. Husky and I both share a real love for chaos, sonically speaking. And darkness. When I went down the rabbit hole, Husky went with me. I learned so much from Husky. When I met Ryan, I felt the need to evolve what I was working on a bit. I recognized that Ryan and I shared a very strong sensibility, but I also felt that he was protecting me a bit – in that I could put ideas forward that might be pretty wild and mangy, and he would find a way for that to be musically appropriate. But he would never let the concept engulf the practicality of the moment. I didn't come up with recordings that were exciting to me but unworkable for other people, which would sometimes happen when Husky and I were working together. We'd find something that was incredibly exciting, but sometimes challenging and off-putting to listeners. I don't want to create music that needs to be explained in order to be approached. As my ambition as a producer expanded, Ryan helped me evolve my working mind and the sounds that it encompassed. It's critical to understand that Ryan is a musician first. As a recording engineer, his approach to that job, as well as problem-solving, is inherently musical. It's not

technical, even though he is a technical master. There's nobody I've ever worked with who edits and comps takes with the finesse and artistry with which Ryan Freeland operates. It's unbelievable what he can offer you to hear, in a moment – if you're debating a take or between a couple of takes, and you wonder what an edit between the two of them might sound like. He would go, "You mean like this?" He listens to every conversation that's happening in the room. I don't have to have a conversation with Allen Toussaint and then turn to Ryan and say, "Here's what Allen and I would like to try." He knows if he hears that being offered up, in a moment I'll turn to him and want to have it ready to be heard. We save incredible amounts of time and energy by being able to hear, in real time, the possibilities. It's not all about speed, but about fluidity and fluency. Never letting the process get bogged down because of some technical aspect.

### **By working with talented engineers such as Ryan, does it free you to be creative in a way that is not necessarily married to any one piece of gear or technology?**

Sound has meaning, other than the way it props up lyrics, or the way that a musician might use the sound of an instrument to speak. Before a note is chosen, that sound has its own authority. It can guide you, and it will be a guide. It's an element that has to be confronted. A lot of people are unaware. They haven't been invited to think about the tonality of an instrument or a voice as having its own musical authority before stringing melodic thoughts together. I'm always listening for the way that sound itself is being conjured into the room, and what it suggests about what we might want to do.

### **Various philosophers have written extensively that if we go into a situation with a preconceived notion of our desired outcome, we limit the possibility of discovering something truly new.**

That's how I view my role as a writer, as well. Almost never in my life have I shown up to write something with an idea for a song. What I try to do is show up believing that if I greet this opportunity with engagement, attention, and energy, I will be met and will find out by writing what it is that I'm writing about. It is about discovery.

### **It has been argued that the imperfections in music recordings are what make them special. You've recorded at Garfield House with the windows open...**

I was making a record of my own at that moment, called *Reverie*. It occurred to me that the songs didn't arrive in a vacuum. The songs happened to me in and around the workings of my day. People walking in and out of my room. The mail arriving. Trucks driving by. People going in and out. Dogs barking. The idea that for the songs now to be articulated, I needed to retreat into some hermetically treated, silent void was a preciousness to the process that I had no use for. I wanted to hear life happening around the songs. I

also believed that if I mic'd the ambient noise coming from outside my basement and sequenced the record so that there was no silence in between songs, it would sound like a score; like strings. If you listen to the record in real time, it suggests that it happened in real time. I found it fascinating. It wasn't just a gag. When we were working, everybody had their headphones, and a stereo mix of the outdoor ambience came up on a fader. If I pulled that fader down to silence, everything felt immediately diminished and one-dimensional. I missed it, even in the moments of chasing the song.

### **It's almost like the world outside was applauding you and was directly involved in your songs.**

It's certainly true that I set it up so that the world outside was *not uninvolved* in what I was doing. Not every artist I work with wants that. Bonnie Raitt and Joan Baez didn't want dogs barking on their records. It's not for everybody. There's no part of the process that is either good or bad. They're all just colors. The idea of having to retreat into a bunker of protected silence has its place, but it's *a choice*. It's not always the right choice, for a number of reasons. What I'm trying to do has to grow out of an engagement with life in real time. Once you accept that, you're completely liberated from the fear of a take being ruined. When I had the Garfield House, [the studio] was downstairs in the basement, and somebody would walk downstairs into the middle of a take. They'd be horrified. I'd say, "It's really not a problem. We'll play it again." If it's there in range, it's not all of a sudden going to leave us. By not being superstitious about it, you liberate yourself from a whole lot of fear and anxiety about the process. I'm back to my primary job as a producer for [other artists]. Helping artists to feel fearless. Different artists need different things to feel fearless. *We're not going to hurt the song*. The opportunity is not going to escape us. We can address any issue. Even though we record primarily live with people in the room together and bleed everywhere because we love the sound of that, I've never, in 15-plus years of working with Ryan Freeland, had a single moment of wanting to fix something that he told me we couldn't address because of bleed. The process is not fragile. Your song is not fragile. Don't be afraid of it.

### **When the moment's right, you'll capture it.**

When people understand that, they'll open a vein for you. They'll give you everything they've got. That's something I learned from T Bone 20 years ago. He said, "Joe, we don't tell people what to play. You invite people into the room and encourage them. Make them feel protected and safe. They'll give you everything they have. You can't *stop* them from doing it."

### **What was it like transitioning from your home studio, where so much amazing music was recorded over a period of years, to United Recording Studio B? Are you still working with those same people now that you're producing at other studios?**

Oh, sure. And keep in mind that I worked at a lot of other studios before I ever had Garfield House. That was a really unique engagement, for a lot of reasons. Even though I did probably 80 percent of my work there in that 10-year span, I didn't do *all* of my work there. There were a number of projects that my basement could not accommodate. Frequently there was a film crew involved. I didn't really allow that in the basement, except for a very few exceptions. It was more people than I could comfortably accommodate or wanted to impose on my family. I love working at United. I like pulling up where there's a parking spot with my name on it and a runner asking if I need another coffee, and there's somebody else washing 30 coffee cups at the end of the day. I learned a lot at Garfield House. It was an epiphanal time in so many ways that I can't even identify.

**I heard that during the tracking and mixing of 2002's *Don't Give Up on Me* by Solomon Burke, when he finally heard how raw and exposed his vocals were, he almost didn't approve the album for release?**

Well, *initially* he would not approve the album for release. But as I remember the story, the head of Anti-, Andy Kaulkin, made a very shrewd play. A music conference happened in Seattle that I think was for music journalists. The keynote event was Jon Pareles, from the *New York Times*, who interviewed Solomon on stage that night. Everyone in attendance had been given an advance copy of *Don't Give Up on Me*. There was a portion of the evening when journalists could get up on a microphone in the aisle and ask questions. I wasn't there, but as I understand it almost everyone who stood up to ask a question framed it by saying to Solomon, "Are you aware of the significance of the record you've just made?" By the end of the night, Solomon apparently thought, "Hmm – maybe I *do* like this record!" He allowed it to go forward. But he never listened to it until it was mixed, sequenced, and mastered.

**Is that something that was specific to his way of working, or to where he was in his life at that moment in time?**

I don't have any way of knowing if he'd always been that way. It's the only way I ever knew him. He never even listened to a single demo before he showed up to the sessions. His excuse for it was, "I want every day to be like Christmas. I'm opening a new present every morning."

**That's a great way to go through life.**

But it'd be great if he had sung this through a time or two on the way over in the car! We might have had a leg up. But, nonetheless, we made a record in four days, and we both won a Grammy for it. For both of us it was a life-changing experience. It was not an easy one, but it was a wonderful one. I got on with Solomon tremendously well. He was a hustler and a shaman, in equal measure. I hadn't produced many records other than my own when that invitation happened. I was the low man on the totem pole compared to other producers who were interested. I'm not completely sure how I got the gig, other

than Andy Kaulkin at Anti- really wanted to do something with Solomon that Solomon had never done before. I met Solomon, and he liked me well enough to throw in.

**In the chorus of the song "Diamond in Your Mind" on that album it sounds like Solomon Burke is singing along with a very old recording of a gospel choir, as if he's almost reaching back through time.**

It was a way of creating a sound dimension, to heavily treat certain elements against others that weren't as heavily-treated. It created a bit of depth of field.

**It created a depth of time too.**

That whole record is a bit time-defying, in my estimation. As I recall, that was Husky's impulse. We had two great singers – Niki Haris and Jean McClain, two wonderful women I've worked with a lot over the years. Niki was a backing vocalist for Madonna for a quarter century I think – family to me. We had them on a single mic and we ran them through an old Fender Tweed Deluxe amp that we re-mic'd. Simple as that. It's their two voices pushing against the paper cone of that little Tweed amp. The next time you hear it, that's what you'll picture, because that's exactly what it sounds like.

**With *Look Again to the Wind: Johnny Cash's Bitter Tears Revisited*, what made you choose that often-overlooked Johnny Cash album and revisit it with new musicians and modern production techniques? The original album is very sparse, production-wise.**

I didn't come up with the concept for that record. I was approached by my friend, Chuck Mitchell, who was Senior VP of Sony Masterworks at the time. He had been befriended by writer and filmmaker Antonino D'Ambrosio, who had written a book about the *Bitter Tears* project [*A Heartbeat and A Guitar: Johnny Cash and the Making of Bitter Tears*], and the fact that Johnny had just come to Columbia Records from Sun [Records]. He had a massive, extraordinary hit record with "Ring of Fire," and Columbia was thinking he was going to go on and create more and more hit records for them. Johnny was thinking that the reason he came to Columbia from Sun was because he wanted the time, space, and resources to create some concept records; to become a more fully-formed artist. He was very aware of the notion that the rights and treatment of Native Americans in this country was not a separate civil rights issue [compared to] the African American situation that was being so fully voiced in our culture at that moment. It was a very galvanizing time in 1964. Civil rights legislation and conversation were really becoming a part of mainstream conversation. Johnny didn't understand how we couldn't see that the treatment of Native Americans was a tangential aspect to that notion. He made this raw, dark record called *Bitter Tears*, which at first Columbia didn't want to release at all. When they finally did, they wouldn't promote it. Johnny Cash went into a very

public battle with them. He took out a page in *Billboard* and wrote an amphetamine-fueled rant against the record industry, calling cowardice on them. Cut to the chase: 50 years go by, and Chuck Mitchell recognizes, with the help of this filmmaker, how important this record was and how dismissed it had been. The notion was to create a contemporary [reimagining] of that repertoire at the same time that they re-released Johnny's original album. Chuck approached me about helming that project for Sony Masterworks. I'm deeply devoted to Johnny Cash. Along with Ray Charles, he was the first artist on my radar as a child. The first thing I did was look to my very dear, close friend Rosanne Cash, and ask her if I was *allowed* to do this. "If you don't sanction it, I'm not getting near this." She shared with me that to the end of his life, her father was disappointed with the lack of response of that particular [album]. She felt it would be important to him, were he still around, that that project would have [new] life put back into it.

**What was it like recording with Billy Bragg in room 414 of the Gunter Hotel in San Antonio, Texas - the exact room where Robert Johnson recorded nine tracks from his discography in 1936?**

It was as spooky as you'd think it was. Keep in mind that Robert Johnson is not an incidental figure for me. I put him in the category shared only by Charlie Parker and Louis Armstrong. He is somebody that I'm hearing, literally hearing, at some point nearly every day. I don't make a single playlist that doesn't include Robert Johnson, Charlie Parker, and Louis Armstrong. It's a fact of my existence. To step into that space, close the door behind us, and stand in that particular atmosphere, powerful and heady and mystical – whether created in my mind, or otherwise – it was *real*, and it was *heavy*.

**Am I getting the story right that Billy arrived late to the hotel and when he checked in, they gave him that room?**

They did. People pay extra money to be in that room. We showed up at two in the morning, having just gotten off a train. I think the desk clerk was as tired as we were. He recognized we were musicians carrying guitars. I think he slid it across to see if we'd notice. I don't think any desk clerk hands that key over without knowing that it's the most significant event that ever happened in that hotel.

**You've done several projects with Billy Bragg. How did 2016's *Shine a Light* come about?**

It was Bill's concept. I think that concept had to come from a foreigner – someone looking into our culture with real love and understanding. Understanding how much the railroad has played into our national mythology. We still put more freight on the rails than any industrialized nation. How many songs about the railroad have informed our sense of national identity? He wanted to step into it and reclaim that engagement. He had this idea that we'd get on a train in Chicago, ride for three and a half days south

to San Antonio, turn right, and head on into Los Angeles, and that we would travel together and record songs along the way as we found the moment – on platforms, in waiting rooms, in train cars themselves. We showed up in Los Angeles 64 hours later and we had an album in the can.

**Your 2017 solo release, *Thrum*, was influenced by your love of poetry. You've spoken about the liberating effect over the years of your exposure to certain forms of art, poetry, and music.**

I've been writing poetry since before I wrote songs. When I began as a young teen writing poetry, I knew that what I was trying to do was to learn to write songs. Ideas would show up as fragments; sort of in imitation of William Carlos Williams.

**He was a big influence?**

Yes. I understood that what I was trying to do was to listen for the musicality in anything that I was writing – believing that if I kept writing, at some point I'd hear music in this, or I'll create a character who will then begin to sing. Then I'll write his song. My engagement

with poetry consciously did not begin with *Thrum*. I decided that I wouldn't be shy about talking about it. I went for years and years thinking that I wasn't allowed to talk about regarding myself as both a poet and a songwriter. I know how that sounds to people from a culture that doesn't read poetry any longer. It sounds like you're giving yourself a field promotion. No – poetry and song share a lot. I want to recognize the power in which the poetic voice is important to me, and when it really takes over the authority of song, that's when I'm happiest – and that's when I feel like the songs are truest to what I mean to do. I stopped being shy to talk about the fact that [Rainer Maria] Rilke, James Wright, Walt Whitman, Galway Kinnell, William Blake, and Seamus Heaney are as important to me as Bob Dylan and Randy Newman.

**What was it like producing Joan Baez on her 2018 album, *Whistle Down the Wind*?**

She recorded a song of mine on that album called "Civil War," which was an incredibly intense and affirming moment for me – about joining a folk tradition, [about] being a part of what it means to extend a tradition. I revere Joan, as an artist and as a citizen. It was one of the most significant moments of my recording life, to sit at the control board of United and listen to her give voice to something I had written. I almost couldn't speak as it was happening. Ryan Freeland as my witness – he was in the room with me. I couldn't even speak.

**What are some of your favorite experiences that stand out as a producer?**

Allen Toussaint's *The Bright Mississippi* was an incredibly powerful experience for me. Partly because he invited me to create this whole concept for him, and I picked

all of the music, which was so-called "jazz music." A lot of it originated from New Orleans in the '20s and the '30s – Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, King Oliver, and Sidney Bechet – plus music by Duke Ellington and Thelonious Monk. Allen let me bring this concept to him, and give him all this music as an assignment for him to learn. The invitation to set that table for Allen, and the freedom to invite that caliber of musician into the room – Jay Bellerose, David Piltch, Don Byron, Joshua Redman, Brad Mehldau, Nick Payton, and Marc Ribot. We recorded that record over three or four days at Avatar Studio here in Manhattan – the Power Station. The engineer for that record was my dear friend, Kevin Killen [*Tape Op* #67], who I'd been friends with for a long time but had never really worked with. He was an indispensable part of that project. I finished that record on a Saturday. The next day I was in New York City; it was Easter Sunday, and my one day off. The day after that, myself and drummer Jay Bellerose and bassist David Piltch flew to Paris and began making a record with the great singer from Mali, Salif Keita. It was an incredibly powerful thing to meet with Salif –

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our cultures being so extraordinarily different – and to see how generously he was willing to meet me and invite me into his world. Even though only two songs were released formally, the totality of what we recorded stands as some of the most powerful music I've ever been near. My wife Melanie [Ciccone] would still say that it's the most significant music I've ever had a hand in – even though most of it has gone unheard to this day.

**Is it so significant that perhaps the American idea of "popular music" might exclude some people from understanding it?**

Maybe. Some of the best songs are 14 or 15 minutes long. It's like trance music, [but] not in English. I'm a word guy, and yet I stood in front of that console and wept routinely at what was happening with not one single notion of what the lyrics were conveying. What was happening through the vehicle of Salif's voice – I'll say that he has a voice that lives somewhere between Lead Belly [Huddie Ledbetter] and Édith Piaf – I was completely devastated and entranced by him. It was unbelievably powerful music. I was talking about this record to somebody the other day and reminding myself that it's time to go back and ask Salif if he'd consider letting me mix that and find a home for it. I believe that it needs to be heard. It was not held back for any reason related to recording quality. He came to think that his songwriting was not up to the quality of the recordings. He thought the label pushed him. He will spend five years writing a song. He felt that, as pieces of writing, they were not as involved as the music ultimately became.

**You've had a varied and vast career.**

I was having breakfast, before I met you, with my friend, Gloria Steinem. She's 84, and a woman of supreme importance. I was talking to her about my work with Harry Belafonte. I produced what I believe is going to be his last recording. It was a collaboration between him and another great singer from Mali: Baaba Maal. Harry was unhappy with the state of his voice. After a single song, he decided it had its purpose, but we weren't going to continue. I bring that up because, as it turns out, I've produced the final recordings for a number of so-called "legacy artists:" Solomon Burke, Jimmy Scott, Mose Allison...

**They call you "The Undertaker," or something like that...**

That was in *The New Yorker*, because my mother asked me if I was concerned with my reputation. To the point where they said in that same article, when Joan Baez showed up to the studio, bassist David Piltch leaned over to me in a stage whisper, and asked, "Does she know?" But producing Joan was the first of any of those [projects] where I understood – up front – that this was going to be her final statement. This is how she decided that she was going to button things up. What it means to be in service to people who have meant so much to all of us – like Mose, Harry, Jimmy Scott, Solomon, Allen...

**What are some of your favorite memories as a performer, an artist, and a songwriter? You've released 14 albums.**

My opportunity to record with Ornette Coleman still stands out as something that was incredibly affirming to me, because he'd never been a sideman to anybody. The fact that he acquiesced to come join me on a song was intensely affirming.

**He did that because he listened to one of your songs and said...**

"I understand why you want to do this." I translate that as, "I hear why you need me. It's not gratuitous that you want to stick my name on the record."

**Your music fundamentally communicated that?**

I'd written a song called "Richard Pryor Addresses a Tearful Nation." It's sung in the first person, as Richard. I needed somebody to represent the intensity and volatility of Richard's person in our culture. I needed somebody of significance as an instrumentalist to stand for Richard. That's how I was thinking of it. I was writing the song with the idea of that and saying, "I need an 'Ornette Coleman.'" It never occurred to me for a minute that I could actually get Ornette Coleman! But like a lot of things in my life, I start walking forward and find out that there's more possibility than I could have imagined. Then I wrote a book about Richard [with David Henry, *Furious Cool: Richard Pryor and the World That Made Him*] because of the song. I befriended him and was invited by him to write a screenplay based on his life, which became a book that was not just about Richard's life but was also about the world that allowed his life to happen – and the way that he influenced the world around him in real time. That moment with Ornette, and how that led me to be in the path of Richard Pryor, is no small thing. Making my most recent record, *Thrum*, was as

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much fun as I've ever had making a single record. We recorded it not only live in the studio, but it was mixed live as well. Ryan was making very bold treatment choices. He could do anything he heard, as long as it happened in real time.

### In service of the song.

Yeah. As we played songs through, he was making really quick and bold choices about running this element through an amplifier, running my vocals through a tape delay or amp to emphasize a line, a phrase, a word – and then printing it to tape. When we came into playback. We listened back off the 1/2-inch tape, and it was either a record or not a record. If it was not a record, then we played it again.

### In the case of that album, there were no post-production decisions?

Zero – except for mastering.

### That's extraordinary! There are very few people who could do that.

There are all kinds of people who *could* do it, but nobody wants to do it because you're surrendering so much control to the moment. I'm a person who likes nothing better than to allow the moment take over and let me know what it means. I don't want to be in control. I want to be seduced. ☺

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