

A Conversation with Joe Jackson by Barry Gutman (Puremusic.com 5/2003)

The original Joe Jackson band—lead vocalist/songwriter/keyboard player Jackson, bassist Graham Maby, guitarist Gary Sanford, and drummer Dave Houghton—rode the musical New Wave out of England to international success in 1979 on a pair of classic albums on A&M Records, *Look Sharp!* and *I'm the Man*, and tireless touring. The world fell hard for the band's spare-yet-full sound, featuring Sanford's stuttering, insistent rhythm guitar chords, Houghton's swift, precise and solid drumming, and, especially, Maby's amazingly intricate bass—the band's true lead instrument. And then, of course, there were Jackson's infrequent piano and melodic solos that, along with his rich musical vocabulary which, at that time, emphasized not only powerful rock but also bouncy ska, melodic pop, and lyrics that were alternately scathing and vulnerable.

The Joe Jackson Band worked relentlessly throughout 1980, coming off the road just long enough to record their most experimental and least warmly received album, *Beat Crazy*. By the end of that year, they'd called it a day.

Over the next 20 years, Jackson recorded several more albums that were cast in various shades of rock, pop, jazz, blues, and even classical music, as the muse and mood struck him. The results of his eclectic efforts ranged from 1982's *Night and Day*, Jackson's pop commercial peak, featuring adult contemporary standbys "Stepping Out" and "Breaking Us in Two," to, for Sony Classical, 1997's *Heaven and Hell*, a somewhat challenging interpretation of the seven deadly sins that's best described, on Jackson's own Web site, as "not quite classical, not quite jazz, and not quite rock." Some of Jackson's other albums featured big band covers (1981's extremely enjoyable *Jumpin' Jive*), instrumental orchestral music (1987's *Willpower*), and various film soundtracks, including 1983's *Mike Murder*, which contained several fine songs and a score wasted on an indifferently edited and marketed movie.

Meanwhile bassist *extraordinaire* Graham Maby, while remaining a frequent collaborator of Jackson's, often also found his services in demand by other artists, including Marshall Crenshaw, Natalie Merchant, and They Might Be Giants. Guitarist Gary Sanford toured and recorded with Joan Armatrading, Aztec Camera, and Kirsty MacColl, among others, while drummer Dave Houghton stayed out of the spotlight, doing mostly local gigs in the south of England, teaching drums, etc.

Finally, in 2002, the original Joe Jackson band reunited for a new album, *Volume 4* (Restless/Rykodisc), released this past March, and a world tour. The band warmed up for the recording sessions with a few gigs, highlights from which make up the new package's special bonus CD and demonstrate that its live sound is still as compact, powerful, graceful and incendiary as ever. And the new studio material on *Volume 4* can stand proudly next to such old favorites as "One More Time," "On Your Radio," "Got the Time," "It's Different for Girls," "I'm the Man," and the band's signature hit, "Is She Really Going Out with Him?"

Recently, Jackson called in from the road to talk about the reunion, *Volume 4*, expanded/re-mastered editions of some of his older albums, and more. From past encounters, I knew that he can be as cheeky and edgy as he is charming. Happily, I caught him in a very friendly mood.

Puremusic: I'm really loving *Volume 4*. I've been following you since the very beginning, and I love a lot of the musical changes that you've gone through over the years. And I'm really impressed with, after all those changes and all the time that's passed, how effortlessly it seems that your original band meshed together again.

Joe Jackson: Yeah, it's amazing!

PM: When you first decided that you might like to do this reunion, were you confident that it would work, or was it kind of a gamble going in?

JJ: No, I was pretty confident, but it's turned out better than I expected, to be honest. I was pretty confident because I knew that everyone was still alive and still playing great. Nobody was horribly, embarrassingly fat or messed up on drugs.

PM: I know that you and Graham had continued to work together off and on over the years since the original band called it a day, but had you kept in touch, at least, with Gary and Dave during that time?

JJ: Yeah.

PM: So, was everybody very responsive right away to the idea when you approached them about it?

JJ: Yeah. I mean, Dave had to sort of sleep on it. He was the one that I thought might say no. But he said yes, and that's really why it happened. If one of the guys had said no, this would never have happened.

PM: Dave's the member who has kept the lowest profile over the years.

JJ: Yeah.

PM: But, obviously, he's kept up his drumming.

JJ: Oh, he's playing great!

PM: Would you talk a little about each of the guys and their strengths? For example, Graham is, I think, as amazing a bass player as there has been in the last 25 years.

JJ: Yeah, oh, totally, yeah!

PM: He's so nimble, and when you're not taking a keyboard solo, his bass is more or less the lead instrument in the band.

JJ: Yeah.

PM: Was that always what you wanted?

JJ: Yeah, it was. That was partly because I liked the idea of featuring the bass more, and partly because I had such a great bass player—so, it was both. But also, it's because of the fact that I'm not a guitarist, and I don't approach things from that point of view. I think that's one of the reasons this band is not a guitar band, actually, in an odd sort of way, even though it has a guitar in it, you know what I mean?

PM: Yeah.

JJ: I think that's one of the reasons that it sounds unique.

PM: But, you know, moving on to Gary, I've got to give him so much credit...

JJ: Oh, yeah!

PM: ...because you had said in one interview that he was almost over-qualified to be in the band in some respects. But it's not really easy to be a great rhythm guitar player, and he adds so much texture to such an austere band...

JJ: Right.

PM: ...I think he's invaluable.

JJ: Oh, yeah!

PM: And he does get to cut loose and solo a little bit on this record. "Bright Grey" is one track...

JJ: Right.

PM: So, he's obviously very, very talented. Has he always accepted the nature of his role in the band, Joe?

JJ: Yeah. One of the reasons that he's the right guy for the band is that he doesn't have this kind of typical, huge, lead guitarist's ego. And he was quite happy to play the role that I wanted [the guitarist in the band to play]. You know, it's very much like casting. People ask me, "How does this band work?" And it's very much like I'm a playwright who writes the play, and then I have to cast the characters. And if you get the right actors, then it all just works so much more easily. So, I think this is just the right cast.

PM: Absolutely! One of the things that I love about your band is that it is both so powerful *and* so nimble. I mean, you guys gracefully execute a lot of hairpin turns and abrupt rhythm changes on various tracks. And Dave is so solid and yet so graceful at the same time—he’s very original.

JJ: Yeah, yeah!

PM: It’s great that he’s kept up his skills. I know that during the band’s hiatus he’s played with a lot of local bands in the area where he lives, but did he do any sessions with other musicians I may have heard of, as Graham and Gary did?

JJ: No.

PM: The band did a brief tour of the UK last fall immediately before you recorded *Volume 4*. Was that so you would be able to take that live energy into the studio to tap into while it was still fresh?

JJ: Yeah, exactly. If we’d just rehearsed the songs and then gone straight into the studio, it would have been too safe. So, I wanted to add the element of danger that you only get from playing live. It takes it to another level, and I think you hear that on the album.

PM: Does taking new songs on the road before recording them, and hearing them mixed and mingled with old songs, also help you get a bead on how the new ones stand up and what they might need, what works or what doesn’t work about them?

JJ: Yeah, although I have to say, they really didn’t change much, musically and arrangement-wise. It’s just that there is a level of intensity [on the record] that was higher than it otherwise would have been, I think.

PM: Joe, what are some of your favorite tracks on the new record?

JJ: Oh, all of them! [*laughs*] You can’t ask me that, it’s not fair! [*more laughter*]

PM: Okay, well, I’ll tell you that one that I really dug right away is “Still Alive.” I know you love the Beatles, but I don’t think I’ve ever heard you do such an obvious Beatles homage before, and I just think it’s beautiful. I assume that’s what you were going for. The backbeat gives the song a real “Ticket to Ride” vibe.

JJ: Yeah. The drumbeat was just what came into my mind as being the right kind of feel. And someone had to tell me that it was “Ticket to Ride”—I didn’t even realize that.

PM: Also, I don’t know if Gary’s actually playing a 12-string guitar on that song...

JJ: Yeah, it is a 12-string.

PM: It definitely gives the song a Beatles/Byrds jangle. I'd never heard you do something quite like that before.

JJ: Well, you know, we did a lot of things on this album that we never did before, which is what makes it fun, I think. We could have just come back and done some kind of blatant imitation of the first couple of albums, and we didn't do that. And that's what makes this album cool.

PM: Yeah. Another track that I really love is "Dirty Martini." On that one, I think it's cool how you've got that New Orleans-style of piano playing going, but you've also got this kind of Turkish thing going with the organ.

JJ: *[laughs]*

PM: I just love the way you mix that stuff up!

JJ: *[Joe's smile as he responds is audible.]* I certainly didn't think that it was Turkish. I don't know *what* it is, of course.

PM: One track I wanted to ask you particularly about is "Fairy Dust," because, aside from the fact that, musically, it's one of those "hairpin turn" type of tracks that we were talking about before...

JJ: Yeah.

PM: ...I'm not entirely sure of everyone that you may be addressing in this song. At first, I think you're having a go at gay bashers. But then, I listen to it more closely, and I think that maybe you're giving militant gays a collective "bitch-slap." I wonder if you'd care to clarify...or be willing to?

JJ: *[chuckles]* Uh...it's sort of a satirical song, and it's sort of aimed at an aspect of the gay world. But, by the same token, it stands for the way that any minority group that is fighting for its rights, shall we say, at some point becomes just as bad as the majority. That's just because, in order to be a group, you have to include some people and exclude some people. And in order to be effective, you have to have an identity. I see the gay identity has become more and more about being so masculine that you're more straight than the straight guys. And this is something that I find quite funny. I sort of get it, and at the same time, I don't like it that much. It's mixed feelings. And if we're talking about stereotypes, then I guess what I'm saying in the song is that I almost prefer the older stereotype—this sort of Oscar Wilde/Quentin Crisp gay stereotype, I almost prefer that to the more-straight-than-straight stereotype. Of course, you know, when you talk about it and explain it, it all comes out seeming so much heavier than it really is. But it's a sort of satirical song about the gay world.

PM: And speaking of satire, I think "Thugz 'R' Us" is a fun poke in the ribs at suburban kids who, from watching a lot of MTV and movies, try to look and act like real gangstas.

JJ: Yeah!

PM: I also think “Awkward Age” is terrific because it makes me feel a lot more comfortable about things. When we’re growing up, we feel alienated in some ways and don’t fit in. But as we grow older, in different ways, we feel alienated and don’t fit in. All of us are always at an awkward age, in one way or another. It’s comforting to know that others feel that way as well.

JJ: Yeah, absolutely!

PM: A few other songs on the album seem to be about relationships, about how love is really a gamble and that it takes courage to take the risk. We don’t decide to fall in love, it happens to us, as you more or less say in one song.

JJ: Yeah, in “Blue Flame.” That’s the only real love song on the album, actually. Well, “Love at First Light” is a “maybe” love song—maybe it’s happening, maybe it isn’t. And “Bright Grey” is a “what-the-hell-happened-to-love?” song. But “Blue Flame” is about loving someone in spite of the fact that they’re absolutely impossible, because you just can’t help it.

PM: Are you happy with the reaction to the record so far?

JJ: I don’t want to get into this game that a lot of artists play with themselves of what is an acceptable level of success. I mean, I’m happy every time one person buys the album, because I have no expectations at all.

PM: Well then, moving away from *Volume 4*, how do you feel now about your earlier albums with this band? I just listened to *Beat Crazy* recently. I know that was, at the time, your first under-appreciated record, but I’ve grown quite fond of it. How about you?

JJ: I think it’s okay, I like half of it. It doesn’t quite work for me. Of the first three albums that we did as a band, I think *I’m the Man* is probably my favorite, actually.

PM: Are you happy about how some of your older albums have been re-mastered recently with bonus tracks [long unavailable B-sides and previously unreleased tracks] added to them? Your first two albums, *Look Sharp!* and *I’m the Man*, were reissued like that several months ago, and a two-disc *Night and Day (Deluxe Edition)* is imminent. Have you been involved with these reissues, and is that, in turn, bringing closer to reality the reissue of some of the others that some fans have been waiting for, like *Beat Crazy*, [1989’s] *Blaze of Glory*...?

JJ: And several others. [The reissues of Jackson’s three most commercially successful albums don’t] really have any bearing on that situation—those others are still out of print. I don’t think there are any plans to re-release them. And I have not been able get anywhere at all with Universal [Music Enterprises, which controls Jackson’s A&M catalog].

The re-releases of the first two albums, I had nothing to do with whatsoever, and I’d have really preferred them not to put those extra tracks on them. You know why? Because [*chuckles*] I

didn't think they were good enough to go on the albums in the first place! Record companies always want [to add] extra tracks [when they reissue old albums]. And in my case, I put all the good stuff on the album, and that's what it's supposed to be. And if there are extra tracks, they're more or less rejects—things that I probably shouldn't have let them have at all. So there's that.

The *Night and Day* package that's coming, I was somewhat involved in, because they were proposing to put all kinds of awful crap on there, like live stuff that wasn't even mixed! And I was able to propose some other things to them that they could use. So, actually, it's gonna be quite a good package, because it has things like my demos that I did for the album, with me playing everything. And it has live stuff from the live album [*Live 1980-86*] that's out of print, and it has the songs from *Mike's Murder*, which is also out of print.

PM: I'm particularly happy about that because, as you've talked about before, the way the *Mike's Murder* movie turned out, it kind of threw your songs away. It would be nice if, in a new context, people had another chance to discover them, because some of them are really nice.

JJ: Yeah. I don't know when [the *Night and Day (Deluxe Edition)*] is coming out. It was supposed to come out last year in August or something, and they totally screwed it up! And now it's coming out more or less on top of my new album, which, again, thanks a lot, Universal! [Author's note: it's now tentatively scheduled for release in June.]

PM: Are there any artists that have emerged in the last few years whose work you particularly like? I know that Ben Folds, for example, is a big fan of yours...

JJ: Yeah!

PM: You work in so many realms in music, I wonder if today's "modern rock" is of any interest to you at all?

JJ: Not really. I mean, I like good songwriters. And most of the people around that I really like are people that have been around for a while, like Neil Finn [formerly of Crowded House and Split Enz, now a solo artist] or Andy Partridge [of XTC]. Although, there are some younger ones—I like Ron Sexsmith and Rufus Wainwright. I also like a lot of electronic music, a lot of British drum 'n' bass stuff, things like that, which is not about songwriting at all.

PM: By the way, are you contemplating writing another book at some point? You're first memoir, *A Cure for Gravity*, took readers up to the formation the original band and early days of your career as a recording artist. But so much has happened since then that's interesting artistically, and, I imagine, in terms of your personal ups and downs.

JJ: Yeah, but that's nowhere near as compelling to write about! If I write another book, it would have to be from some completely different angle that I haven't thought of yet. It might not even be about music.

PM: Is there going to be another North American leg of this current reunion tour?

JJ: Yeah, we're coming back this summer to play some more shows.

PM: Is your mind open at all to the idea of at least occasionally reuniting this band again in the years ahead, thanks to the good experience you're currently having?

JJ: [*slightly exasperated laugh*] I don't know. This is intended to be a one-off. So, that's really all I can say. It's dangerous to say anything too—I mean, I've said stupid things before, like, in 1994, I said I would never tour again. [*laughs*] So, I have to be careful what I say! All I *can* say is, it's meant to be a one-off. Probably *is* a one-off.

