

Jonathan Richman sounds about the way you'd expect him to.

He's friendly, obliging and says things like "or sumpin'" and "'n stuff" at the end of sentences. His voice is mature but there's a little of the youth in the way he uses words.

Richman is 32-years-old and began singing and playing after he saw the Velvet Underground in New York at age 15. His first band, the original Modern Lovers, were strongly influenced by the Velvets and Iggy.

The Modern Lovers were "discovered" by Kim Fowley in 1974 in Boston. Fowley shifted in with the band's drummer (other members were Jerry Harrison, later of Talking Heads, and Dave Robinson, later of the Cars) for several months and tapes were made but it all came to nothing. Most of the songs were re-recorded a couple of years later for the first official Modern Lovers album. Bomp Records of California later pressed the original tapes on an album which is worth trying to get hold of.

Since then his approach has changed somewhat and he's been variously regarded as eccentric, a genius of humanity, unlistenable, lovable, or just plain nuts.

He's been in Australia supporting John Cale and is on his way home to the USA. He's in the in-transit lounge at Auckland airport and he can't get out without filling in all kinds of forms so both parties sit under the same roof but can only speak over the telephone.

So, how'd Australia go?

"It was great. Perth was terrific, especially. The cruddy little clubs were better than the big theatres. In the cruddy places they seemed to get the idea more."

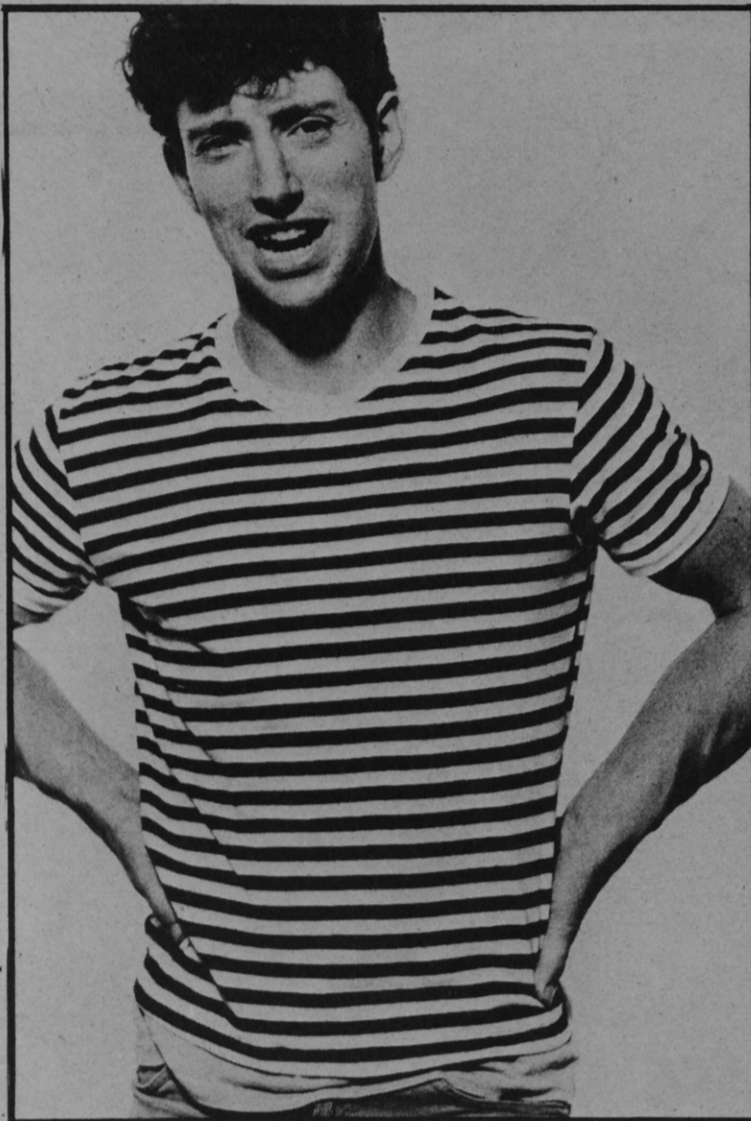
Richman's act was an unusual one indeed for Australia. Alone on stage, he played guitar through a 40-watt guitar amp, which wasn't miked to the PA. Sometimes ("when I wanna sing quiet") he used a vocal mike.

So what sort of venues do you like playing? "Old-time dance halls, like when you had the big bands. People like Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, they would play ballrooms. I like it when people dance but rock clubs are very different from old-time rhythm and blues clubs. It's like another kind of era that I don't like. It's very technical. All these big PAs that don't sound like music to me."

The reason is that the sound of these new places is for technical kind of equipment and I use a natural kind of sound. I belong outdoors with my band or in little rooms, dancehalls. The

But I  
still  
love  
the  
old  
world

JONATHAN  
RICHMAN



new clubs are built for people who play so loud it sounds like jet planes, so they're all carpeted and insulated everywhere, so if you've got real instruments it kills the sound."

Richman tours with a seven-piece band in the USA, the lineup including two female backing vocalists. He says the sound is definitely acoustic, like that of his just-completed album, *Jonathan Sings*.

So can you see popular music moving that way, reacting against volume?

"Well, I don't know whether it will, but I have. It can do what it wants. I already have moved back and I'm going further that way every year. Like, I'm just figuring out new ways

to get that way 'cause that's what I wanna do. Some music has never left that way, the music of the Congo, the music of the American Indians. I care about ... I wanna play ... watchamacallit."

Folk?

"No, I wouldn't say that, any more than rock'n'roll ever was folk music, which I think it is. I just wanna play dance stuff."

You've been quoted as saying you'd like to have your records filed alongside those of people like Charles Aznavour and Maurice Chevalier ...

"I said that, I mean it. I see myself as a family entertainer, with my music and my band."

Did you get a chance to reach any family audiences in Australia?

"Well, the time I had a chance to do family audiences was on a show called *Good Morning Australia*, which is one of those shows for everyone."

Do you think you'll reach that audience with the new album?

"Well, I think I reached family audiences with all my previous albums. I would have parents bring their little kids to my shows whenever I could. I don't know."

What sort of material did you play there? All recent stuff or some old favourites?

"Well, you see, I never write out a set list, I never know what I'm going to do. I throw in a few ancient songs 'n' stuff, I make up some. All different kinds but a lotta new ones."

Was there any problem with people calling for the old Velvets-type numbers?

"Not as much as I thought. I thought I was going to get a lot more of that."

Have you found that a problem at all since you've had the acoustic-type sound?

"No. I've been asked that question countless times. I never find it much of a problem. When you go to one of my shows, people will shout out for old stuff, some people will shout out rudely for it. If anyone shouts out for stuff in a way I don't like, they don't get it."

Is there any possibility we'll see Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers in New Zealand?

"Yeah, I'd like to come to New Zealand. I'd like to play anywhere. What I'd like to do next time is not come by plane but have my band play on a boat cruise and pay our way by doing some shows. I'd like to travel by land and boat."

So, is there any way you could sum up what you and your band do?

"Yeah, it's real simple. It's music for feelin' and not thinkin' about. It's the same thing I've always been doing. It's not about musical notes or sumpin'. The idea is that I feel something and the audience is supposed to feel it too. It doesn't have to do with technique, it doesn't have to do with anything very clever, really."

Tour promoter Ken West said people came away from John Cale contented and moody and from Jonathan Richman contented and smiling. Is that about right?

"I don't know. Some of the people who walked away from me seemed contented and confused!"

I know a closing quote when I hear one. But don't get it wrong - Jonathan Richman isn't confused. He knows exactly what he wants to do. And I can't see him doing things he doesn't want to, ever.

Russell Brown

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