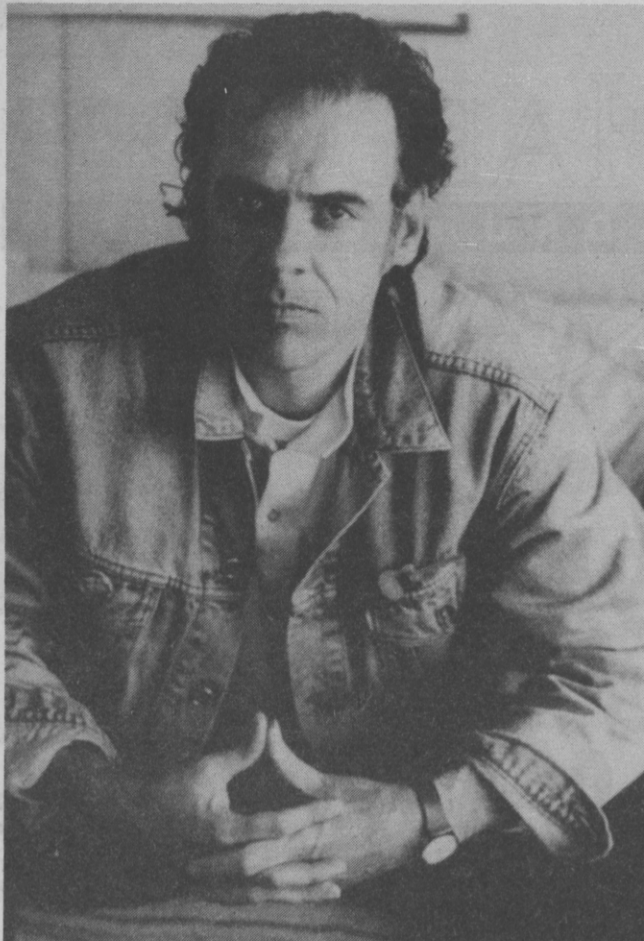


THE FUGITIVE

SLOW TALKING WITH JOHN HIATT

PHOTO BY KERRY BROWN



John Hiatt can't seem to relax. He's in his Auckland hotel room — at the Hyatt, naturally — getting his photo taken. His worn, buttoned-up jean jacket has more character than anything else in the bland, pastel shaded room. Even Hiatt's not giving anything away: he sits poker-faced until the camera clicks, then releases a little smile.

He's weary from yesterday's flight across the Pacific, and more than a little wary. His eyes lock in on the interviewer's as he sizes up each question. Until he warms up, the answers are short. Think of a sober, cautious Jim from *Taxi* and you've got the picture.

Hiatt is out here in an (incongruous) double bill with sweatless bluesman Robert Cray. He's with his new band, the Fugitive Popes: they've been holed up in LA since before Christmas while Hiatt has been working on new material. The band were put together *Fabulous Baker Boys* style: through auditions.

"We put the word out and organised all these people to fly into Nashville. I could have put together two or three good bands, there were so many good players. I was looking for something that had some magic to it: a combination of knuckleheads."

Their names aren't well known — do any of them have a pedigree? "No — they're mongrels."

Hiatt found his previous band the same way: the (fabulous) Goners. Why *did* they become goners? "I like to change it up. That's why I'm a solo guy." Wasn't that risky though, when it had all finally clicked for him? "No guts, no glory," he shrugs.

How do the band members feel when you say, time for a change? "Well, we always part on good terms. There's never any insinuation beyond, 'I'd love to work with you (but) it's time to move on.'"

Nashville seems to be always full of great young players. How do they get on battling the country conservatives there? "I guess they go somewhere else. It's a set-formula town, it always has been. But there's always been the fringe existence, that I feel I've been a part of. There certainly was when I came to Nashville in the early 70s."

Is there antipathy between the Kenny Rogers/Barbara Mandrell side of Music City and the, ah, outlaws?

"Nah, it's a live-and-let-live kinda deal, but it's a clique-ish sort of town, not only in the music community but in the business and political communities as well."

But you stay there. "Well, I like living there, I like the people. If I had my way — most people are fortunate that I don't — but in my wildest dreams I might have it a little different in terms of the kinds of records they have down there."

The problem seems to be getting the good songs to the good singers: even the greats seem content putting out such mediocre material.

"We shop around our stuff all the

time, but... I don't know, someone's gotta write all those bad songs."

When Hiatt rode into Nashville in his late teens, his songwriting mentors were Guy Clark ('LA Freeway') and Bobby Braddock. "He wrote things like 'DIVORCE' for Tammy, 'Her Name Is' for George Jones. He was very encouraging to me, because he was a completely *wacko* guy. And he was writing cool songs and getting them cut. I think you learn craftsmanship by osmosis, by having the good fortune of being around guys like him, hoping something rubs off."

Tracy Nelson was the first person to cut a song of Hiatt's, one he wrote when he was 17. He laughs at the memory, at the time it felt it was all going to happen overnight. "That's

when I learned you can get songs recorded and never see a dime."

A song for Three Dog Night followed, then a "long, long, break." Some songwriters, like Tracy Chapman, have had immediate success — was his long apprenticeship beneficial? "Absolutely. I would hate to be in that position. I'm kinda glad that I'm a knucklehead: a slow learner."

Success, success. What does it do, that great songwriters like Willie Nelson and Charlie Rich find it and then never write another song? "I think because success on that scale — I'm only imagining this — completely *devours* all your fuckin' time: you can't write anymore. You just get eaten up by the machinery of maintaining that level of success. But people respond differently. Paul Simon has been successful for many years, and just when you're ready to write him off after two, three really mediocre records, here he comes out with a *Graceland*, one of his best records ever."

And Dylan could blow us away tomorrow. "Exactly. In fact he's probably been pulling our leg for the past few albums, he's been playing with us and he's gonna come and go PWEWH!"

How were the Grammys? Hiatt laughs at the memory. "It was pretty funny. 'Masters of War' and *no one would know*. It woulda been neater, though, if he'd come out and just sung with guitar. That woulda been cool."

Around the time of *Bring The Family*, Hiatt talked of "taking control of the songwriting obsession in his life". Did he succeed? "Naaah. I've lost control again. It's got me!"

When? "Anytime!" He shivers, grabs for my pen. "Any chance I get! ... Actually it's been good lately, I've been writing a lot with different people. I've been doing this thing with Ry Cooder, Jim Keltner and Nick Lowe. That's been a lot of fun. We've been writing all kinda sick songs. Hulas. We know a dance craze when we hear one."

For years, before *Bring The Family* and even since then, Hiatt changed the musical style of each record, as if he was always looking for the right one. "I was, for sure. Still am." And the next style? He stands up, points to his trousers. "I think... a slight flare, and no cuffs. I dunno! That's

part of the fun of it for me, to keep trying different things. I look at it from a songwriter's point of view, it's almost as if I'm covering my own songs. I get the same kick out of trying things as I do when I hear so-and-so is going to record a song. You think, 'oh, great' — and then start to imagine what it's gonna sound like."

It's very flattering to have your songs covered, says Hiatt. Two of his favourite versions were the Neville Brothers doing his 'Washable Ink' way back in the 70s, and more recently, Bonnie Raitt doing 'Thing Called Love'. Do people ever miss the point when they cover a song? "On the contrary, I find these things have many points. They tend to find their own. More often it's like Oh! They surprise you with a different take on it."

Is songwriting a competitive thing? Hiatt leans forward.

"I'll be honest with you. I hate seeing someone write a good song. I guess I'm *jealous* of other writers when they hook a good one. One that isn't mine. But I don't begrudge 'em getting hold of a good song — it just pisses me off cos I gotta work harder."

Who's nipping at your heels now? "All sorts of hound doggies." Who's *really* pissing you off? "Actually, Cleveland. That girl in your magazine. (He points to the ad for his former band member on page one of last month's *Rip It Up*). She went out and made a great record."

"But... women mostly. Shawn Colvin — she's terrific. But for my money, Prince keeps delivering, album after album."

There's a "certain camaraderie" among the Nashville songwriters, says Hiatt, but "you're only as good as your next song." The hula number he's just written with "Cooder and the boys" is called 'Do You Want My Job'. "It's about a guy who lives on an island in the South Pacific, a fictitious island, and the Japanese bring their nuclear waste and pay these people on the island to let them dump their nuclear waste."

Is it easier to write a personal song or a narrated story?

"Don't know if one's easier — a fictitious tale is more fun, cos you don't know where they're going half the time. But then even the more personal stuff I don't know where that's goin' either. You never know what you're gonna feel comfortable divulging."

Ever given too much away in a song? "Naaah — not enough," he laughs. Or something you regretted? "I don't think so — I've written bad songs but I don't regret that. It's good for you."

A song from *Riding With the King*, 'You May Already Be a Winner', typifies Hiatt's early style: taking a scenario rather than an emotion and somehow building a song out of it. A married couple are down on their luck, but the husband says, don't despair — I got a letter today. It says 'You may already be a winner'. He then proceeds to read out a *Reader's Digest*-style hustle: it's the couple's only hope. "That was a fun song to write. The idea came from that stuff in the mail that we all get. I thought the song had a kind of tenderness to it. A lot of people thought it was more smart-ass than it really was — or my intentions were."

Is it easier to write when you're happy? "Absolutely. Misery is hard work, for Chrissake. I'm sure if you met any of these tortured artist people, it takes up 99 per cent of their time, just torturing themselves. I don't know how they get any work done."

For a guy who writes passionate,

often dark-edged songs, there's a lot of humour from you on stage.

"Thanks. I think I'm a pretty funny guy too. I'm glad you think so. That's one of the reasons I married my wife: she gets my jokes. I think some of my material is hilarious." He laughs. "Don't you? Some of the songs? A dark humour?"

Have you done any other writing? Any prose? "No, I'd like to try. Short story writing appeals to me, but I haven't screwed up the courage yet to give it a go. But this co-writing with Ry, Jim and Nick; that's been different for me. We generally start with the music, a lot of it comes out of these jam sessions. We've been co-writing the lyrics back and forth on fax machine. It's been real good to have these guys scrutinising your stuff. It's a good barometer — you can't bullshit these guys. It's also been a good thing in terms of not taking yourself seriously. It's freed me up a lot for my next project. Maybe this has taken some of the pressure off in my musical life, and I'll be able to do something really whacked out and not feel like I have to worry about the consequences. Ha ha!"

The next record may not be with the Popes, or the Cooder ensemble, though. What he'd like to do is go down to Muscle Shoals to record: the funky but laidback home for Southern soul. He recently recorded with the Popes there, for a film called *The Midnight Rider*. He'd also like to go to Memphis and record with Chips Moman and the Hodges brothers (Al Green). "Mainly I want to roam around the south and work with a bunch of... southern wackos and see if anything happens."

Hiatt is a songwriter in the old tradition — with his mixture of melody and wit he's as much out of the Cole Porter tradition as Bob Dylan. What songs alerted him to the craft of songwriting? "Pictures of Lily" by the Who. I always thought that was clever. 'Woolly Bully'."

What song do you wish you had written? "Gee, that would take days. I'm happy to toil along with the little stories that God has allotted me. My little corner."

On stage that night John Hiatt was a transformed person: he'd turned from jet-lagged to jet-propelled. He didn't waste a moment of his hour-long set before Robert Cray, from the gentle 'Ten Little Indians' opener to the celebratory rock of 'Child of the Wild Blue Yonder' towards the end. There wasn't a dud in the songlist, all but 'Riding With the King' taken from the last three albums. Hiatt is an old-style showman, throwing himself into the songs and acting them out. He has the energy and spirit of the earliest Springsteen (complete with monologues and swift gear changes) and the endearing humour of Charlie Chaplin. The Fugitive Popes played perfect foil, anticipating his moves and instantly altering their dynamics according to Hiatt's spontaneous moods and gestures. The real surprise was Hiatt's singing: he is in complete command of his voice, using it like a virtuoso instrumentalist, something that doesn't come across on record. Hiatt is full of humour, though it is never hokey, and also full of passion, particularly when he took the piano over for a moving 'Have a Little Faith in Me'. He left the audience stunned, not wanting to come down from their high. Poor, sedate Robert Cray had an impossible act to follow, and John Hiatt an instant invitation — no, demand — to come back soon. CHRIS BOURKE

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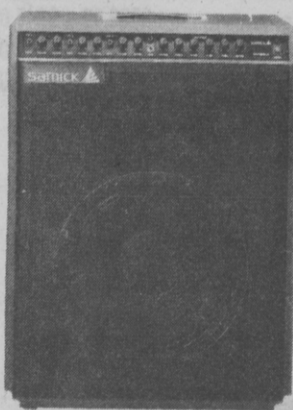
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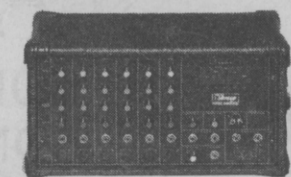
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