

John Stewart:

Living (and Writing) in the Heart of a Dream

by Rich Wiseman

John Stewart, who once sang of not giving a dang about a greenback dollar as a member of the Kingston Trio in the early 60s, didn't have many greenbacks left to give a dang about by early 1977. After running through three record companies, the cult folk-rocker was label-less and "as cold as a mackerel."

It was time to live another song: the Doobies' 'Takin' It To The Streets. On-stage at the Palamino Club in North Hollywood, a desperate Stewart announced to the crowd: "Look, I want to do another LP. I want to go with this new label, RSO. I want you to write to Al Coury (company president) and tell him why he should sign me."

Some several hundred letters later, Coury, a friend of Stewart's dating back to their Capitol Records days together, did. "That he did," says John, "was due

to a large extent to my fans, who for the last decade had represented the glimmer of hope I needed to carry on."

That glimmer has turned to the sparkle of Gold, Stewart's Top 5 single. Actually the song, which features guitar work by Fleetwood Mac's Lindsey Buckingham, the LP's "producer-at-large," and guest vocals by FM's Stevie Nicks, is wishful thinking, "a hit song about trying to write a hit song" – the illusive hit song that Stewart had been trying to write for 12 years. (Stewart has a million seller to his record: Daydream Believer, a worldwide hit by the Monkees in 1967.)

The title – "Bombs Away Dream Babies" – of the Top 20 LP that houses Gold, hints at the do-or-die nature of the project. Stewart's first RSO album, 1977's "Fire In The Wind" sold a disap-

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pointing 50,000 copies, and just in case "Bombs Away" bombed, Stewart had braced himself for hustling a record company A & R job.

With the pressure on, Stewart rethought his sound. A mutual friend introduced him to FM's Buckingham, whose "beautiful soaring guitar lines" Stewart had admired. As it turned out, Lindsey had been a Kingston Trio fanatic in the 60s. Marveled Stewart: "I found out he could play every song I'd ever written for the trio. He also admitted that a lot of Fleetwood Mac is based on the Kingston Trio sound."

Stewart said that Buckingham "made me think back to the Kingston Trio and my old recording tricks, my rhythms, the stacking of guitar tracks. And then it hit me like a flash of light: it's got to be hypnotic, repetitious, simple. I called Lindsey and told him, 'Now I know what you mean by the similarities between Fleetwood and the Kingston Trio.'

"So what 'Bombs Away' is a Kingston Trio album with drums. It's also a Fleetwood Mac album."

It's also destined to be just as gold as

the single, a feat that Stewart says has caused "a great relief to sweep over my body. I find it hard to deal with the fact that what I've been working for so hard for 11 years has finally happened."

Those years would have driven less resilient singer/songwriters running for cover, and they might have Stewart had he not tasted seven years of success with the Kingston Trio. San Diego-born son of a horse trainer and a would-be recording star since his high school days in Pomona ("I heard Elvis' Don't Be Cruel and it changed my life forever."), Stewart began performing around town with his rock band, the Furies.

When the late 50s folk boom hit, though, Stewart became enamored with the music ("The lyrics were adventurous, you could play the songs with a guitar, and they were easy to sing"), and began "making a nuisance of myself around the Kingston Trio," folk's hottest act of the day. Eventually the Trio recorded two songs of Stewart's (Molly Dee and Green Grasses) and their manager helped his group get a recording deal with Roulette Records. The Cumber-

land Trio went on ^{to} the record three albums, but today Stewart dismisses the group as a "direct ripoff" of the Kingston trio.

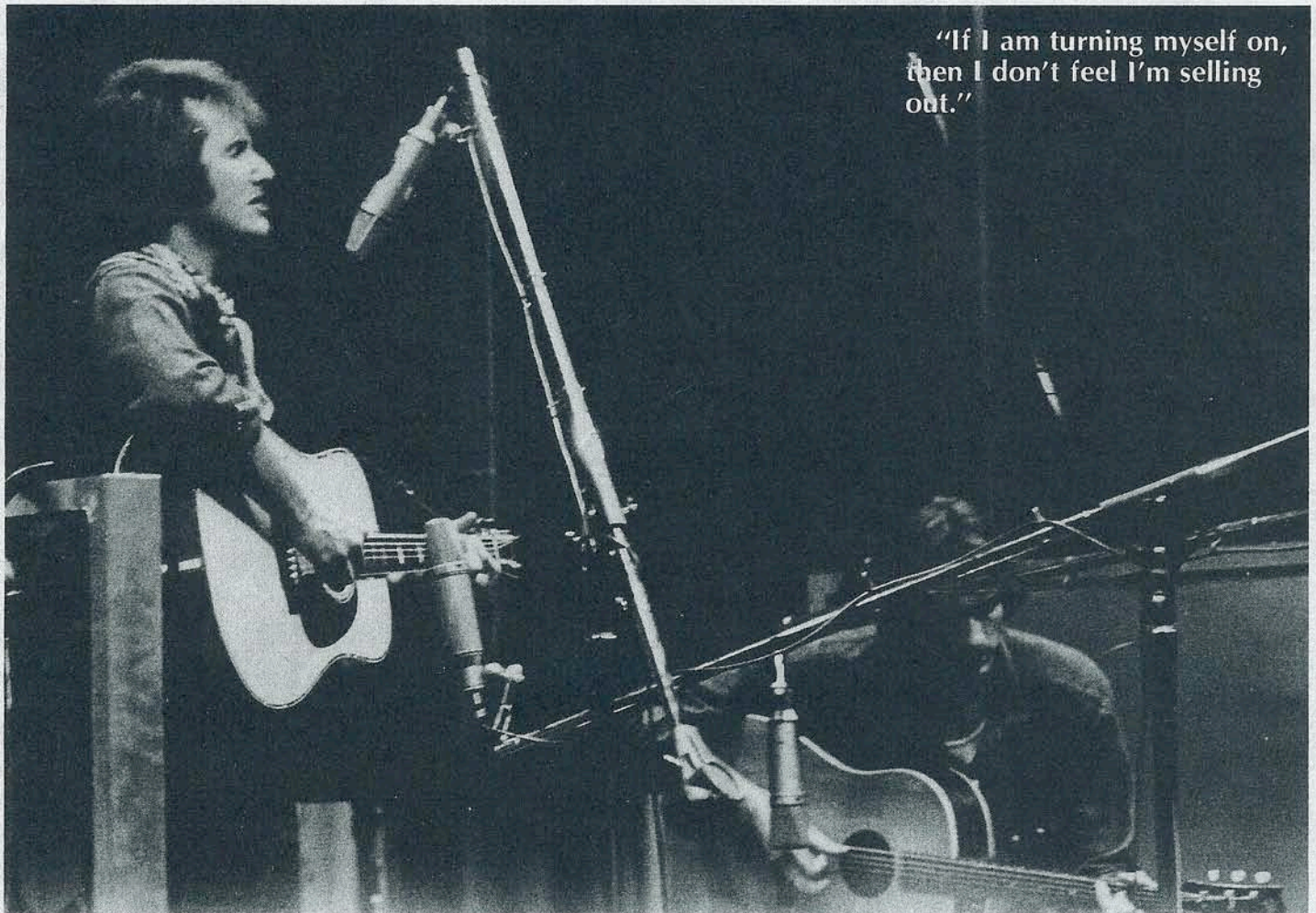
Ripoff or not, Stewart made points with the trio. When Dave Guard left the group in 1961, Stewart was invited to audition for the group. He got the job, and went on to sing on such KT hits as Greenback Dollar, Where Have All The Flowers Gone and Rev. Mr. Black.

Haunted, though, by the notion that "all I could do was perpetuate," John left the trio in 1967, precipitating the group's demise. From then until 1977 he proceeded to "pay my dues."

There were three albums for Capitol, including 1969's much-praised "California Bloodlines," and two LPs for Warner Bros. None sold. "When I left Warner Bros., Joe Smith (then president of WB), told me, 'I wish I could tell you that people who leave Warner Bros. go on to do something - but no one ever has.' It made me fight even harder."

But after three RCA albums, none of which sold more than 50,000 copies, his fighting spirit was clouded by "a big

Recording with friend James Taylor in 1970



"If I am turning myself on, then I don't feel I'm selling out."



Examining color slides with wife Buffy

blue haze. I was low. But as long as the dream was there I felt I had to go on. In the meantime, I was working every gig I could to make the nut."

It was then that he remembered a political strategy that Robert Kennedy had told him (Stewart had campaigned for Kennedy during the latter's run for mayor of New York and the Presidency): "You go with your strength, your constituency. Since a great deal of my clout was in the people who supported me in the engagements I did, I decided to go to them to help me get one more record deal."

Most of the rest is history, the part that isn't is his career, which is happily flourishing in the present once again.

Len Latimer and I visited John Stewart at his Malibu home in early July. We found a candid, good-humored and interested man eager to share his thoughts on song craft and makin' it in, as one of his songs goes, "the heart of a dream."

You've talked about having an "ingrained sense of rhythm." Would you elaborate?

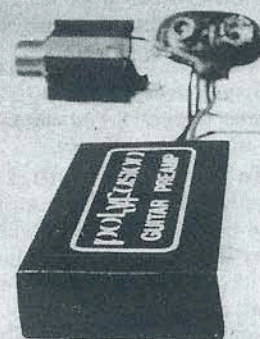
My father being a horse trainer, I grew up on the weekends and every summer on the racetrack, cleaning out horse stalls. As he'd work the horses, I'd go out to the infield and lie down with my ear on the ground next to the rail. I'd hear those horses coming around the clubhouse turn and then down the backstretch. The sound would get louder and louder. The rhythm was like this . . . (Stewart slaps his thighs to simulate beating of hooves). That sound is all over the album.
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"After every album, I have that paranoia: 'That's it — I will not write again.' "

I can hear it on Gold.

And *The Spinning Of The World* and *Runaway Fool of Love*. That rhythm was just hypnotic to me, plus being part of my childhood.

Have you done a similar "Roots"-like study of your imagery? You consistently refer to the wind, sun and rain.

To tell you the truth, I don't delve deeply into the reasons why of things. The reason they feel good to me is that they are forever. The wind calls the sailor, it waves the flag, it brings the dust, it clears the storms, it is the messenger of the universe. There are cosmic winds, the North winds, and Monsoons and the Southern winds.

Sounds like a song coming on here.

I just felt that I need to write about things that are solid rather than transient.

Being one who does not do a lot of self analysis, you probably don't realize that of the 20 songs you have put on record for RSO, 10 of them have a reference to the wind, in either the title or the lyrics. There are almost just as many references to the sun and to the rain.

I'm running out of elements. I'm in big trouble!

Wind was the big concern on the "Fire In The Wind" album. There were even more wind titles that didn't make it. *Hand Your Heart To The Wind* was going to be on that album. I said, "Al, we are going to do an album about the wind." He said, "No we're not."

Al, of course, is the president of RSO Records. I take it, then, the subject has been brought up before?

32 Oh, many times. The only ones who were really on to it as a positive thing were the guys in England who were going to release an EP with *Fire In The Wind*, *On You Like The Wind*, and *Promise The Wind*. I thought it was a great idea.

Maybe it's not within your power to not write about the wind. You've gone on record as saying, "I don't believe you write songs. They're given to you."

Right, I'm a radio receiver. I do not know where the songs are coming from. But they are all out there, and they just come in.

The wind blows them in!

The song of the wind. *Midnight Wind* I wrote on the back of a *Rolling Stone* waiting at the airport in about seven minutes. The lyrics were coming faster than I could write them down. So how could I possibly say I wrote that song?

When I sit down to write, I just practically go into a . . . I don't want to say a trance because it sounds too 60s . . . but that's almost what it is. I'm not one of those kind of methodical writers who says the C Major 7th should follow the E Minor 9th because of its good figuration.

If I could clearly write what I hear in my head without any interruptions . . . If I could live in the right lobe — the right lobe being your imagination, and the left lobe being your linear thinking. The right lobe is where artists work from. Ideally, in a situation like this, you have a manager who takes care of everything for you so you could live in the right lobe.

A lot of people think that Stevie Nicks is really nuts. She isn't, she has just found or created a lifestyle for herself so she can function in the right lobe. And she writes all the time. She's one of the most underrated songwriters in America.

How do you get into the right lobe yourself?

Lot of times I have no choice. I was always a dreamer in school. Got fired from most of my jobs because I was just "out there." To this day friends come over and there's a point in the conversation where I may just go away.

You can't try for it. The more you try for it the further it goes away from you. It's a very Zen kind of thing.

I take it, then, you're not the type to set aside certain times to write.

I'll sit down with a guitar and say, "OK, I'm going to turn on the radio, and I'm going to start turning the dial and if anything comes out . . ." When nothing comes, though, it can be really frustrating. After every album, in fact, I have that paranoia: "That's it — I will not write again."

That seems to be a common fear.

It is. But sometimes it doesn't come back. I've known people — who will remain nameless — for whom it hasn't come back.

The way you've been talking, I figured that writer's block was not going to be a problem with you because you're not the kind to force yourself. Do you get to a point where you are forcing yourself?

Writing is something that I want to do. It's the most fun when you really want to do it. So you try to create the situation to do it again; but, many times, it's like trying to recreate a great

party or a great lover. You can't recreate it, it has to be something else.

Let's talk about the creating of "Bombs Away Dream Babies." The album makes an overall statement — you described it as "living in Hollywood and chasing the dream; what you win and what you lose." Did having this statement in mind help your writing?

When it started to emerge, it was a great help. When I began the album it was like wading through molasses. I couldn't get anything going, nothing was fitting together. That's when Lindsey and I first started getting together. When he was first going to produce this album, he wanted to do a lot of the songs I had done with the trio that I had written with the trio. That I didn't particularly want to do. Plus, there was a great deal of pressure from RSO to get a hit record. In fact, I was ordered to get a hit record or be off the label — Thou shalt make thy hit.

Did that inhibit you?

Oh, yeah. Greatly.

But did it work?

No, it didn't work. The only way it worked, was that I wrote a song about trying to write a hit song, that turned out to be a hit song — *Gold*.

How did that song come to you? Right lobe?

It started out right lobe — The chorus was just pure right lobe.

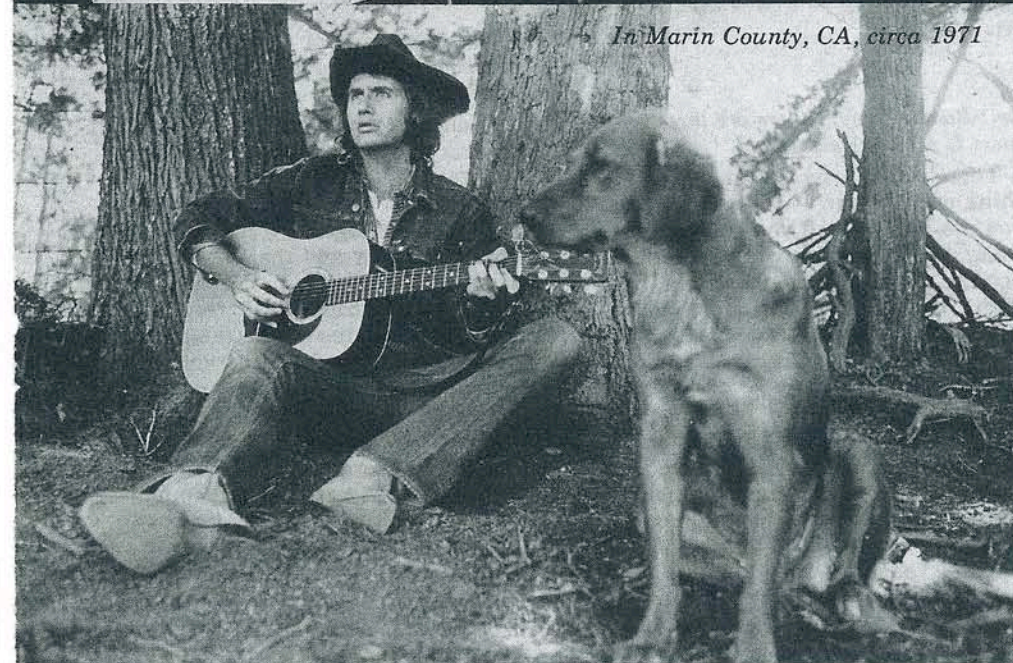
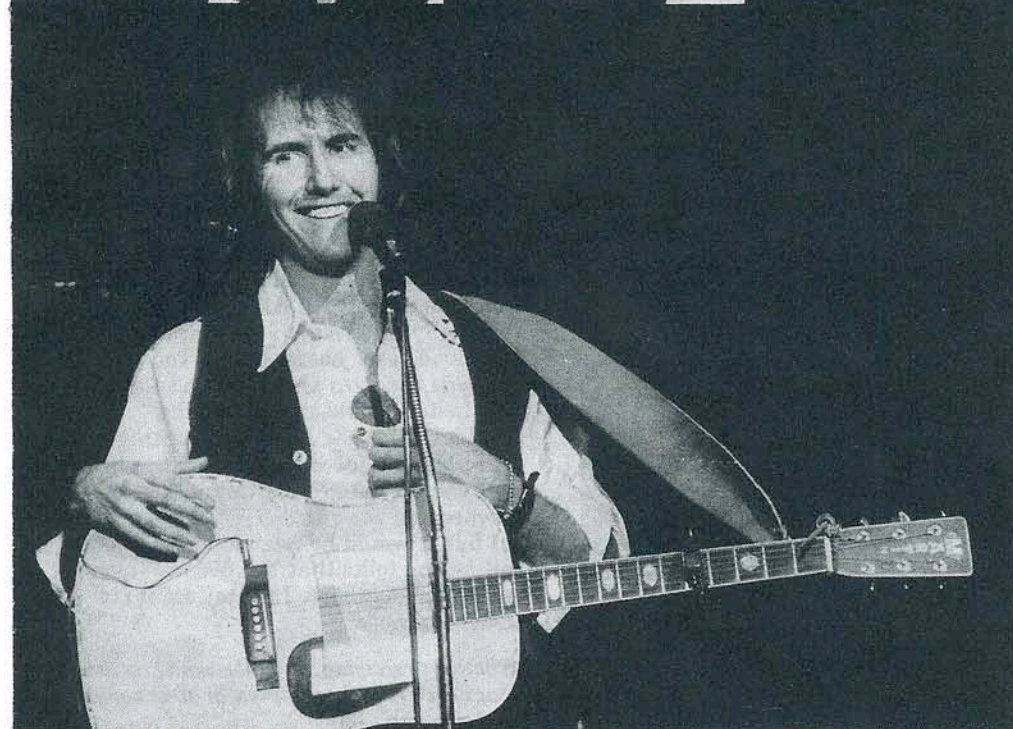
I wanted to do a shuffle. I love shuffles. I was sitting in the dressing room at the Boarding House in San Francisco just playing a shuffle to while the time away between shows. Then from there I said, "OK, now, where do I go from here?" "Driving over Kanan" — Kanan Road is right up the highway here, that's the way I get to the city sometimes. Since I live a long way out of town, I spend the time listening to cassettes, or listening to the radio or just turning off the radio and thinking. So it was just natural "Driving over Kanan, Singing to my soul/There are people out there turning music into gold." There are people who are doing it, you know. It can't be that big a trick.

So then I got into the aspect of all the people that are trying to make hit records. Everyone is a songwriter. You get in the elevator and the guy says, "Hey, I've got a song for you." The cab driver has a song for you. So then I said, "Where do the songs come from? Well, you just look around at the California girls — each "girl a song in the making." It's like there's a million stories here in the Naked City.

So *Gold* is a perfect example of starting out with something that just comes and working it from there. Keeping it simple. Keeping it simple is the hardest



With the Smothers Bros. on their TV show in 1975



In Marin County, CA, circa 1971

thing to do in songwriting, I think.

And, as you've said, keeping it simple, plus making it "repetitious" and "hypnotic" is what you aimed to do with "Bombs Away Dream Babies."

It doesn't take a genius to figure out why a Fleetwood Mac, a "Bombs Away Dream Babies" or any album that has boom, boom (Stewart taps his heart, simulating a heartbeat) is going to sound very reassuring. You listened to that for nine months in the womb, dummy, before you even knew what you were — when you thought, maybe, you were a dill pickle.

Which takes us into production. Talk about record writing as opposed to songwriting.

For a long while I believed that you just sat down with a guitar and played a song and it felt right. But that has been completely blown away from me now. I went out and played *Gold* as a solo with one guitar and it didn't make it. *Lost In The Sun* really didn't make it. What you can do with the song in the studio can make it, make happen what you want to have happen when someone hears it. It's not like Tin Pan Alley at all.

(At this point Stewart plays a rejected version of Lost In The Sun; it sounds a little manic.) What I did with *Lost In The Sun* is slow the track down. It made the drums sound enormous. It made it possible to put the rhythm into the verses. The rhythm of the verses complements the drums.

It cost a lot of money to do that. I say, "So what?" "Jaws" cost \$12 million, it grossed \$300 million. "Bombs Away Dream Baby" cost \$110 grand . . . so what?

That's cheap, actually, these days. But of course, it is hard to say "so what" if you don't get a hit!

Well, that's the danger.

The change of rhythm made a world of difference to Lost In The Sun.

To me, the rhythm is everything. The rhythm actually is the attitude. It's the attitude of the record, of the singers, of the feeling it's portraying.

Mick Jagger is the master of attitude: "Some Puerto Rican girl is just dying to meetcha." His attitude seems to be on every song, "What you going to do about it"? John Denver in turn, has a terrific attitude on the things he does.

Let's transfer what we are talking about now into advice for the songwriter. Talk to the songwriter who's at home with his little two-track and who may be preparing to hit the demo studio next week.

The only thing that worked for me was doing it, doing it, doing it. Putting

continued on next page

it on a cassette machine and playing it in the car. And seeing if I could honestly say to myself, "This turns me on."

Stevie Nicks had a great comment during the album, a comment that really kept me going through the album. She said, "John, make it so it turns you on. Because if it doesn't turn you on, it won't turn them on. Because they are no different than you are." And that is really true.

Go to the heart of it, go to the rhythm. "Can I make it more simple?" "Can I make it even *more* simple?" That is just speaking of the way I write. I'm sure that Billy Joel would disagree, because Billy Joel has done some very commercial, successful, terrific songs that are very complex. But I can't speak for Billy Joel.

Are you aware of writing with one structure more than others, i.e. verse/chorus/verse/chorus?

My folk roots are ingrained in me. It's usually verse/verse/chorus/verse/chorus/chorus/chorus/out.

You don't bridge too often.

Runaway Fool is about the only bridged song on "Bombs Away." "You can call me, runaway fool of love" is really the chorus and the bridge is "You can move me. . ." That could also be the chorus, so I don't know, maybe there isn't even a bridge in that song.

You mean this may be a case of the twin chorus?

Yeah, chorus two — Do not pass go, go straight to coda.

While we're talking structure, things like inner rhyme makes a song hypnotic and interesting to me. "When the lights go down in the California town, people are in for the evening. Jump into my car, throw in my guitar, heart beating time with my breathing." *Gold* is a children's song. All children's songs have inner rhyme.

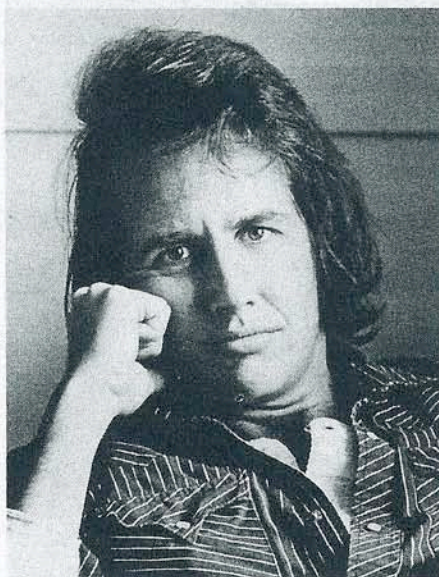
It has a rhythm of its own.

I could have left a note on the door for you. "Dear fellows: Rhythm, attitude. Thanks for coming by!" Dylan would have done that. That's how legends are made.

Well, rhythm and attitude deservedly have an exalted place in our talk. But let's also talk a bit about subject matter. It's obvious that for "Bombs Away" you just dove into your life — your frustrations and your dreams — for song fodder. There is a message in that for songwriters: Don't sit out there and listen to the Top 40 and say "Oh, gee, I have to write X or Y type of song because that is what is being played." Write, instead, what you feel — while trying to strike that "universal chord." Am I putting words in your mouth?!

No, I couldn't agree more. It is wide open, subject matter wise — unless you are writing disco. It's the adage, "You have to write what you know."

But wishful thinking does play a part. The *Midnight Wind* character is a character I wish I would have been. In high school, I was an absolute nerd — I grew four inches in one year, dropped 20 pounds, and my coordination went. I mean I couldn't get a chick with a hundred dollar bill in a Mexican whorehouse. So the whole thing of driving around in a car and being one of the boys and getting laid, it just didn't happen to me. That's when I started playing music. I found in music you can create your own world.



"I'm a radio receiver. I don't know where the songs are coming from. But they are all out there, and they just come in."

On "Bombs Away," there are three references to the "promised land."

There's a book by a yogi — I can't think of his name — who writes that you are happy until you want something. But when you want something, you are not happy anymore until you get it. Because that will make you happy. All you are doing is returning to where you were before you wanted something.

Songwriting is a way of perpetual want. Songwriters are the blessed, cursed people. Because if you are truly a songwriter, meaning that you hear the voices, you will never have a moment's peace in your life. You will always be wanting that next song.

You are also a messenger, and I think there really is a reason that those songs are being sent out. It's the universal language. It's the one way we have of talking to each other that can be heard by everyone. I don't want to get heavy about it. It's just that the "promised land" is a chance to get what you want and wanting something means you are going to be unhappy until you get it and then you are going to want something else. So the promised land is always "things are going to get better." And I think songwriters can make it better.

Talk about the writings of Coming Out of Nowhere, which is actually an apt description of your "resurgence."

The song actually was written in tribute to a song Lindsey has on the upcoming Fleetwood Mac album — it's working title right now is *On Down The Road*. It's the only time I've written a song about another song.

Lindsey accomplished in songwriting and in record making what I didn't think anyone was going to be able to do again. He came up with a new form. He came up with a combination of ingredients that made something entirely new. The closest I can approximate it is that it is a Scottish, African, new wave rockabilly song. That's how bizarre it is. It's like a laser beam. It hits you right between the eyes and it doesn't let you go: "Listen to the guitar-playing fire/Listen for the horseman on the drums/Listen for the sound that will nail you on the ground/Comin' out of nowhere on the run."

I felt it would be neat to write a song telling the folks that the 80s are upon us. It has happened. Lindsey did it right under my nose!

What you're saying, in other words, is that songs are everywhere — even in other songs!

Everywhere.

While we're dropping songwriters' names, are there others you'd like to single out for praise?

Well, in terms of finding inspiration in every day things, Hoyt (Axton) amazes me. He can find a song in a toenail.

I like Bob Seger. I think he is one of the most gutty and real songwriters. His imagery is very picturesque to me.

If you can write a lyric that immediately creates a picture, then you've got it: "Come on down Miranda, the window's open wide. Come on down Miranda, no need to fix your hair. We will shake the town with the windows down and fly in the midnight air." (John) Prine is great at this, and (Tom) Waits is a master. Waits writes movies; he's one of the great songwriters. His *Tom* continued on page 36

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Traubert's Blues is one of the most gut-wrenching songs I have ever heard; I wept after hearing it.

You don't do much collaborating. Why not?

Because I can't stand hurting someone's feelings. To say "I'm sorry but that bridge absolutely sucks" is not in my makeup. I would have to find someone who is really channeled the same way I am.

Stevie and I talked about writing songs together one time. I really think we could because there are really a lot of similarities in our imagery and rhythms. And I would like to try writing something with Lindsey, because he is not into lyrics at all, and I am. And he is really into rhythm and melody.

Art vs. commerciality has long been a hot discussion topic among songwriters. As we head down the "homestretch" of our talk, we'd like to have your thoughts on the compatibility or incompatibility of the two.

All the songs I put on "Bombs Away" were songs that I liked, so I was in the lucky position of having songs that I like becoming commercial. If I am turning myself on, then I don't feel I'm selling out.

Let me tell you, there were some songs Al threw at me — that he thought

"A rhythm machine is the most indispensable songwriter tool I can think of."

were a hit — that curled my hair. I just could not sing those songs.

And as far as writing a commercial tune, I can't do it. It is physically impossible for me. So I really don't have that problem.

I really believed "Bombs Away" was my last album. I told myself, "If it falls on its ass, at least I know that my last album is what I wanted. If I had tried to do something else and it fell on its ass, I would have wondered the rest of my life what would have happened if I had done the album my way.

You were in danger of having the door slammed in your face for good. What about all the hustling young songwriters who are having doors shut on them left and right now as they try to "make it."

Everybody goes through rejection. Take it seriously but don't take it personally. And just keep doing it. Because no one really knows their ass from a hole in the grass about hit songs.

I took *Gold* to Al Coury. It was the

Want To Catch Up On Back Issues of Songwriter?



first song I took to him after he said you have got to get me a hit. He told me, "It might be a second hit, but that's not the first hit." I took *Daydream Believer* to four groups before the Monkeys recorded it and sold five million copies on it.

So if someone doesn't hear it, it doesn't mean that it is not there. Songwriters have got to remember that.

Would you recommend that songwriting hopefuls get their producing chops together?

Yes, I would. This is what I would suggest. Find a small mixing board, four track to eight track, enabling you

"To me, the rhythm is everything . . . It's also the attitude of the record."

to record from one cassette machine to another. Get a rhythm machine. Sit down and put the rhythm machine on it and start writing your songs to it. A rhythm machine is the most indispensable songwriter tool that I can think of.

When you sit with just your guitar in your living room, you are going to start writing one kind of song — and it is not very inspiring. You are going to start relying on lyrics and you are going to start overplaying the guitar. Overplay and it sounds real folky. And if you've got a rock band and you are a songwriter, you are going to have the input of every person in that rock band saying how your song should go. But if you can sit there with a rhythm machine and your guitars and overdub it without pressure from outside forces, you can play with it. Then you can take it to your band and say, "This is the way I want it to sound."

You're talking about writing a record as opposed to writing a song.

Yes, I don't think there are really very many real songs being written. Song-songs, I mean, like *Feelings*. *Hot Stuff* and that *Chuck E's In Love* are very hard to pull off with one guitar. I'm sure that songs like those just came out of a lot of working on the rhythm. So work with a tape. What you hear with your ear sitting in the living room with your guitar, or with your friends and their drums, that's not what it is going to sound like on tape. You have to put the colors on the canvas.

Any final words?

All I can say is, don't give up. Many times, I wanted to. —

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