

Bonnie Raitt LP doesn't capture live energy

By Rick Heyman
Emerald Contributor

Bonnie Raitt — Nick of Time
Thank God Bonnie Raitt is back, and *Nick of Time* gives plenty of reasons for giving thanks. But before I praise *Nick*, I have a few reservations which must be exorcised first.

Only those who have seen Bonnie live know what a ferocious performer she is. Though her albums have always been good, no producer has managed to capture her live energy on vinyl.

Record Review

Nick does little to change that longstanding weakness. The songs that kick the hardest, John Hiatt's "Thing Called Love" and Jerry Williams' "Real Man" are fiery, but I have a suspicion that they'd become flamethrowers in concert. With the production throttled a bit, they could have been transcendent rock 'n' roll, but instead we have to settle for the merely excellent.

The same can be said for much of *Nick*. It's not clear why Bonnie sounds so tentative. It could be because in 1982 she delivered to Warner what was probably her best record in a decade, *Green Light*, on which she was backed up by a dangerous band — only to be dropped by the label the next year. They picked her up to release her last record, *Nine Lives*, but rejected the original tapes and forced her into making a patchwork LP.

She's finally on a label that recognizes and respects her (and lets her play some slide guitar for the first time in much too long). *Nick*, in some ways, sounds like the kind of album Bonnie made back in the early '70s, before Warner tried to turn her into another Linda Ronstadt. She's playing blues-based rock again, picking excellent songs (mostly by unknowns), and working with a

core of sympathetic musicians. Maybe the desire to get her career back on track resulted in the conservatism of the playing.

Enough quibbling — I'm making it sound as if I don't like this album. I love it. The clarity of Bonnie's voice is absolutely breathtaking, as always.

The songs she's picked are absolutely perfect, and she makes them her own (as any cover singer must). You cover John Hiatt at your own risk, but Bonnie and longtime co-conspirator Johnnie Lee Schell make that sucker growl. At other times, though, the vulnerability in her voice gives you shivers.

Finally, even though Don Was' (of Was (not Was)) production didn't kick up the intensity as high as I would have liked, it is still exceedingly pleasant: Bonnie is never upstaged, and the soulful backups used throughout are perfect complements.

So hey, what do you do? You deliver a superb album and reviewers nitpick about how it could have been better. Bonnie must know that it comes with being an artist of her caliber, and must also know that all the superlatives in the world couldn't describe how great it is to have her back.

Madonna — Like A Prayer

I can no longer stand to live a lie. I'm ready to admit something of which many of my best friends have not the slightest clue. I am an unrepentant Madonna fan.

I've always admired her knack for controversy, for her screw - you - I'll - do - what - I - want attitude, but most of all, for her grooves.

At first, I thought I might be able to kick the habit with *Like A Prayer*. Madonna singles usually are like crack — they grab you so mercilessly that you become their lifelong

slave. The hit song "Like A Prayer" is a bit more complex, and took a while to work its insidious magic, as did much of the record.

Like A Prayer is much more adult than your average Madonna record.

The danceability of the songs is still emphasized, but the lyrics are a notch above the usual "open - your - heart - and - shake - your - booty" fare. "Express Yourself" is a call for men to open up, while "Promise to Try" and "Oh Father" canonizes and castigates her mother and father, respectively. The album's tour-de-force, however, is "Till Death Do Us Part," an account of her love/hate marriage with Sean Penn. The lyrics are poignant — "Our luck is running out of time/You're not in love with me anymore/I wish that it would change, but it won't if you don't" — but the music is still infectiously danceable.

The biggest surprise of this album is her duet with Prince. Prince's bluesy funk totally overpowers Madonna — his fingerprints are all over the song; you'd be hard pressed to identify that it's Madonna who's singing with him. It's strange that one of the most strong-willed performers of the '80s would include a song on

her own album where she is so clearly overshadowed.

Like A Prayer still has a good beat, you can still dance to it, but Madonna has allowed herself to grow up a bit. That alone may make other closet Madonna fans openly admit their addiction.

House of Freaks — Tantilla

House of Freaks, who open tonight for the Bangles at the Hult Center, are the best root-

rock band I've heard since the BoDeans. The songs are hook laden and the production is absolutely razor sharp. The band consists only of a guitarist and a drummer — but do they ever use that to their advantage. The guitars (acoustic and electric) are thickly layered and the drums are strong but not obnoxious. Buy this record — you will not be disappointed!

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