

Joan Armatrading is an everyday girl

living a life of unusual proportions

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

In a recording career spanning four decades, Joan Armatrading has released 18 studio albums, has been a three-time Grammy Award nominee and has toured the world extensively. She is in the final leg of her last major world tour, touring solo for the first time in her entire career.

She was born in the Caribbean islands, the third of six children of working-class parents, and they moved to London when she was 7. At 14, she began writing her own songs after her mother purchased a piano. At 15, she left school to take a manufacturing job to help support her family. Lucky for us, she lost that job for playing her guitar on tea breaks, and she continued playing and writing songs.

Armatrading is known for her guitar mastery and her remarkable vocal abilities. In the 1970s, Armatrading became the first black British female singer/songwriter to achieve international success. Today, at almost 65 and after 40 years of touring, Armatrading still writes and performs songs she has created from her observations of people around her.

She says her songs are "about what I see other people going through. If the songs were about me, I'd be so embarrassed I don't think I'd be able to walk out the front door."

Armatrading prefers not to discuss her private life, but it was reported that she married her girlfriend, artist Maggie Butler, in a civil union ceremony on Scotland's Shetland Islands in 2011. Armatrading has never spoken publicly about being gay. Many of her lyrics do not specify the gender of their subjects, and she frequently uses the word "you" rather than a gender pronoun.

Armatrading, as a private person, doesn't tout her actions or accomplishments. In 2001, she received an honors degree in history from Open University after five years of studying on a tour bus

and in hotel rooms. At age 58, she ran the New York City Marathon. Recently, she took helicopter flying lessons. Clearly, aging is as much of an adventure as making music for this British pop icon.

I caught up to her on a phone connection that spanned the globe: Hamburg, Germany, to Portland.

Sue Zalokar: *This is your final major world tour. How can you be sure?*

Joan Armatrading: It's not my last tour. It's the last *major world tour*. This tour started in 2014, and it will end at the end of November 2015. December the 9th, I will be 65 – that's like two birthdays. That tells you how long the tour is.

After I'm 65, I don't want to be on the road so long. The tours after this will be very short.

It's not that I won't ever be touring again; it's that I won't be touring in this expensive way that I have been for the last 42 years.

S.Z.: *This tour is also the first time in four decades you've played a solo tour.*

J.A.: I find it hard to believe, myself.

S.Z.: *Touring must take a toll on everyone. Then you had a bit of an illness – a cold and then laryngitis. I hope you are feeling better now.*

J.A.: What happened to me, maybe eight or six months ago, is I developed a nut allergy. Out of the blue at 64, I developed a nut allergy. That happened at the same time as I got a virus. The allergy was frightening when it happened. It was really scary. So now I have to carry an EpiPen.

That kind of knocked me, and I had to reschedule. My voice is great. I've got no vocal cord (issues). I've never, ever had any vocal cord problems before. I'm very lucky; I've got a very strong voice.

S.Z.: *Tell me about Camfed. I came across this organization, while trolling your Twitter feed. (Armatrading is a member of Camfed's advisory board.)*

J.A.: It's absolutely brilliant! The woman who (founded) it, Ann Cotton, she went to Africa, to a little village. She noticed that girls in particular had no proper education. She went back to Cambridge and opened a little cake store. She decided to raise some money to educate some girls. She would go do that, come back, (sell some more cakes), go back.

The other thing that is brilliant about it: This is a holistic thing. So when they train the girls – and they are trained in all kinds of things: doctors, lawyers, nurses, technicians, computers, whatever – they tend to stay with the village. So they don't get that education, that leg up and then leave and go on to the next spot. They tend to spread that knowledge among the village. It's not just one girl getting help; the whole village benefits. And that is brilliant.

If they leave, everyone is not sitting around asking when are they coming back to help us. They can help themselves; the education allows that. It was the whole point of the program. (Since 1993, Camfed's programs in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Ghana, Tanzania and Malawi have directly supported more than 1.4 million students to attend primary and secondary school, and directly benefited more than 3 million, according to Camfed.)

S.Z.: *You've said you like to move when you write. What is the connection for you between movement and creating or creativity?*

J.A.: In order to get a variety, you need movement. I don't know about authors or other songwriters, but if you just sit in your house, even

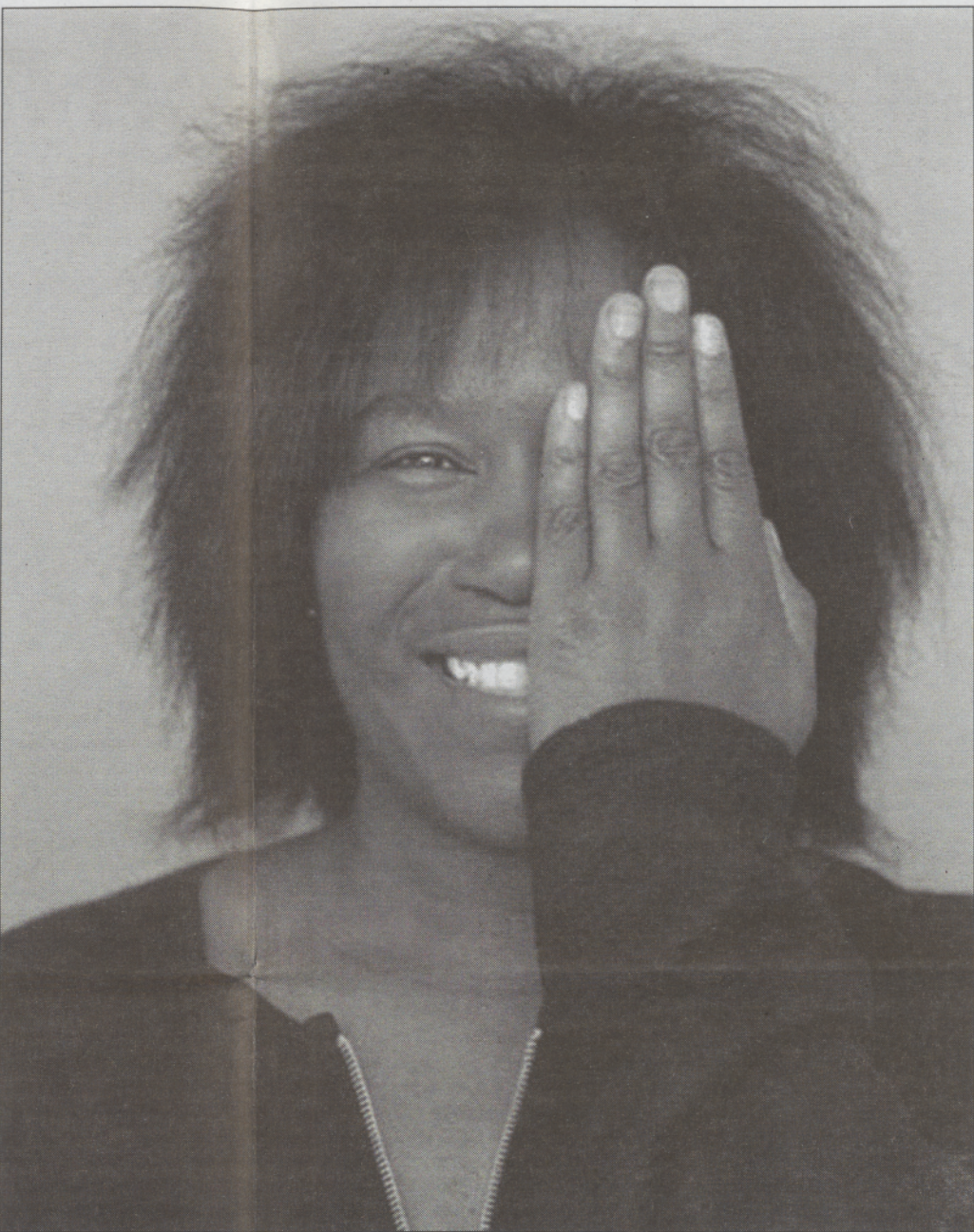


PHOTO BY JOEL ANDERSON

Joan Armatrading, who was the first black British female singer/songwriter to achieve international success, is wrapping up what she calls her last major world tour, which began in 2014.

with the aid of the Internet, and you never go out and experience life and see real people and how they talk to one another and interact and watch the body language, if you never do that, you won't expand. You would just be going over the same riff all the time, you know?

A different aspect or viewpoint gives you something different. I tend to change guitars as well. Even if the song ends up being recorded on the guitar I started writing the song on, during the course of writing the song, I might switch guitars to see if something different comes up. Just holding a different guitar gives off something different. To me, this is quite important because it frees up your mind and switches things up.

There was a disc jockey that I knew and we were talking one day about producers, and this disc jockey said he didn't know why he had a producer for his radio program. He said because I pick all of the songs that I'm going to play. I do the script. I do the format of the show. I'm the one who knows what I'm going to say to the listeners. He said, "Why do I need a producer?" As he was thinking that, the producer came into the studio and he said, "Do you want a cup of tea?" (laughter). He said at that moment, he knew why he needed a producer. The producer mixes things up. That interaction puts you in a different space. The simple question, "Do you want a cup of tea?" jolted him out of this spiral. It's the same thing with movement. It will jolt you out of "this is how I always do it," and you're going to get something different.

S.Z.: *What about gun violence in America? Do you have an opinion about that?*

J.A.: I have an opinion. It's a weird thing because I didn't grow up with that. So it seems odd. I'm from a family of six children. I always thought everybody came from a large family. It wasn't until I was older that I could see that other families had two children or three. It's what you're used to.

You guys are used to having guns. You seem to want to have guns. It's your culture – you seem to still want to be in the Wild West. Quick draw – that's what you're used to. We aren't used to that. In England, the police aren't armed. We don't get loads and loads of people shooting each other in the street and in schools. You might get the odd instance, but you guys seem to get it every day.

S.Z.: *Every day. I can't even look at the news sometimes.*

J.A.: I understand wanting to have your freedom of choice. But freedom of choice goes out the window when one guy chooses to kill a hundred. What is their choice?

If I was able to have any kind of influence, I would say shoot guns in a proper, controlled way. I wouldn't say restrict guns, don't let anybody have a gun. In England, if somebody wants a gun, they get a permit and they have to say exactly what they are going to do with it and they have to use it in the proper way.

It's possible. It's really America that has this culture. There are loads of other places in the world that don't have the level of violence in terms of violence that you guys have. It's obviously able to work – to have guns (and not so much violence).

S.Z.: *To borrow from some of your lyrics: "You are an everyday girl doing everyday things." What do you do when you are making or playing music?*

J.A.: Music takes up a lot of my time, but I do like to do other things. Just normal things like everybody else. I love to watch the television. I love comedy. In fact, just last night, I downloaded a "Family Guy" episode. I love "Family Guy."

I do radio shows in the U.K. from time to time. I support Camfed – I'm on the advisory board. I try to support them as much as I can.

S.Z.: *You have many accomplishments that seem to be just for you. In 2001, you achieved a university degree, and in 2009, at 58 years old, you ran the New York City Marathon – but you have a pattern of not talking about your accomplishments. Aside from the humble nature of this act, it also speaks to the value of intrinsic reward, a job well done.*

J.A.: Yes. Once I've finished a goal, I can talk about it. But I don't particularly want to spread the word until I've done it. I like to do things just because it is nice to do.

S.Z.: *You've said, "Your first port of call should be yourself." It's good advice. What do you mean by that?*

J.A.: I mean almost in everything. It sounds selfish, but it's not. If you want to help people, you need to be fit and strong yourself and to know what it is you want – what it is you're trying to do.

Once you've settled in your own direction, then you are in a good place to help other people.

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TUES	9/15	SALVADOR MOLLY'S
WED	9/16	COUNTY CORK PUBLIC HOUSE
THURS	9/17	THE OBSERVATORY
FRI	9/18	HARLOW
SAT	9/19	ADDY'S SANDWICH BAR
MON	9/21	THE FLORIDA ROOM
TUES	9/22	TIM SHED
WED	9/23	FRACK BURGER**
THURS	9/24	PRASAD
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