

Jon Bon Jovi

"We are living in an 'us and them' society. That's just not gonna fly."

BY TERRI WHITE
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

We'd last seen Jon Bon Jovi about 24 hours earlier at the listening party for his new album at London's Ivy Club - one of those joints that have their own name emblazoned on the crockery. Now we're opposite him in the even more opulent Savoy Hotel.

He's wearing sunglasses indoors. We're intimidated by the carpet, never mind the coiffed 19th-century lass gazing apathetically at us from the wall on which her portrait hangs. We're here to discuss the new record, "This House is Not for Sale," the first since guitarist Richie Sambora left the band, in the wake of the drama with their record label.

We are also set to talk about his charitable work; work that saw him presented with the Global Citizen Award by Bill Clinton in September. Ten years ago, he founded The Jon Bon Jovi Soul Foundation, tackling the issues of homelessness and hunger in the United States by providing housing, but also via his JBJ Soul Kitchen, which operates on a simple premise: eat there and either make a donation or volunteer in the kitchen.

The juxtaposition of these two parts of his life and these two parts of our conversation isn't lost on us. But it sure isn't lost on him either.

Terri White: *"Coming home" is a theme of this record - but legacy is too. Is your legacy something you've been mulling over?*

Jon Bon Jovi: I think my legacy... isn't specific to this band. It's like, what do you want your legacy to be, who are you? And making records is what I do, it isn't who I am. I said when I was 50 I was not going to be writing 'bitch' on my belly and painting my fingernails black. I couldn't be the cliché. It's not rock 'n' roll to start a foundation that feeds homeless people. It's not rock 'n' roll to say you work for the president.

T.W.: *Do you think music is enough of a legacy?*

J.B.J.: I'm not defined just by the music, that's a calling card. I'm very proud of the foundation's work. The restaurant that we created just didn't exist. That was the needle in a haystack, that's the one in a million, just: holy fuck, we did something. It's not just standing at a microphone giving some speech about feeding the homeless; I'm down there washing the fucking dishes.

T.W.: *Your earlier records represented blue-collar workers - the world has changed significantly for those people.*

J.B.J.: It's changed dramatically, which makes you understand that a certain part of the demographic - the one part of the demographic that currently Trump leads in - is the older, white, somewhat educated male, who was fearful and saddened because he didn't get that pot of gold, and the factory job left, and the mortgage was still there.

And then the millennial on the other side of the coin that was gonna vote Bernie whose attitude was: "Well, I'm never even gonna own a house and I'm resolved to that. We have to start thinking more about our future and that pertains to an environment."

That's the polar opposite of the first demographic I'm describing. These changes have happened in my lifetime. I haven't given up hope that technology can lead to some better things. It's just when politics gets in the way of it and greed gets in the way of it, it's heartbreaking. Because any logical mind says that money and greed are just an evil combination.

T.W.: *The disillusionment of that disenfranchised group - how do you begin to remedy that or reach those people?*

J.B.J.: Part of the Soul Foundation's work is that we have the EET program - Employment and Empowerment Team. So you have folks who are 50 years old and are trying to re-enter the workplace and they don't know how to work that computer like their teenage kids do and they don't know how to fill out that job application - saying what are my abilities, what services can I provide - and that's a scary place to be because the world has changed so.

I don't know how to do it. It's going to take smarter people than I to figure it out. But until we can at least acknowledge that what separates is what needs to bring us together, this polarization is not going to get any better any time soon. This judging everyone by the cover of the book: color of their skin, religion, sexual orientation, financial backgrounds. There are so many niches; we are living in an "us and them" society. That's just not gonna fly.

T.W.: *The foundation is about restoring pride in yourself and your community. Where did that philosophy come from?*

J.B.J.: It came through experience. I'm looking out a hotel room (in New York) one day and I see this guy sleeping on a grate, it's dead of winter. I think, this isn't what George Washington and Ben Franklin, the guys who were walking these streets, must have been thinking about. It all came into focus: I got it, the homeless issue.

It doesn't matter if you're white, black, young, old, Republican or Democrat, it can affect you at any time. Most people are living two paychecks away from calamity. So I met an expert in the field and she's a nun - so then the cliché is the rock star and the nun - but the rock star and the nun became fast friends.

So when we went to D.C., her expertise and my pretty face got us into a lot of rooms ... then we compounded it to create the restaurants. Again, the audacity was that we could empower people by bringing them together in this environment. There were naysayers, right in the community, saying: "We're not going to support this." Why? Fear. OK, fear of what? I don't wanna sit with a homeless person. Really, that guy just cooked you a meal.

That kind of lack of education, putting a face

on the people who are your neighbors, is what our mission is. Slowly, we're teaching that community that the commonality, which is food, gives you the opportunity to know your neighbor. Then, 55,000 meals later in a 33-seat restaurant, bravo, you know, it's working.

T.W.: *Does all of this feed into your political beliefs and alliances?*

J.B.J.: Not really. I'm a Democrat since my wife educated me some 30 years ago, prior to that I was too young and wasn't paying attention, so when Ron Reagan told us everyone should have a white picket fence and two cars in the driveway (and I was 18 and didn't know any better), I was like, yeah I like that.

It doesn't sway me (now) because I was very objective in this election. I'm open to somebody that has a fiscally conservative agenda but yet a liberal viewpoint. I'm not so Blue that I can't listen to Purple.

T.W.: *But do you think you can be fiscally conservative and believe in a welfare state?*

J.B.J.: I hope so. Under the guise of doing the right thing: it's a hand up, not a handout. That right there, that little bumper sticker, is enough for the beginning of a conversation, to reiterate once again: believe me ladies and gentlemen, nobody woke up and said: "I've got a great career path; I want to be a homeless guy in the street." No, who the fuck wants to do that? Whatever led them to that despair, it wasn't their first choice growing up.

Courtesy of INSP.ngo / The Big Issue UK bigissue.com @BigIssue. Street Roots is a member of the International Network of Street Papers.

PHOTO BY LOUISE HAYWOOD-SCHIEFER

