

Q&A w/Jim Dickinson 3/29/05

PJ: In general terms, what was it like working on this album with John?

JD: Well, because we've known each other for so long and, as the wrestler's say, "been up and down the road together," some of it was easier, some of it was harder. But John and I have talked about doing a record together several times. In fact, the record that turned into *Bring The Family*, we discussed doing that in Memphis with the Hi rhythm section. We would've made a real good record but he's lucky he didn't do that! Also, he's known of my sons since they were real young, playing punk rock, and was interested in working with them years ago. But back then it wouldn't have really worked, ya know. And of course his management, they had a publishing contract on my boys from way back, so it wasn't like we were an unknown factor. But Hiatt, for me personally ... I mean I just did some of the best work of my so-called career with him. It was a privilege to get to do it. I thanked him profusely for the opportunity 'cos he's a real *artist*. I've seen him do serious work before and I knew we could achieve a certain depth. I gotta say, we went further than I thought we would. I'm real proud of the record, it's one of the best I ever made.

PJ: Was there anything unique to this project compared to other artists you've worked with in the past?

JD: They're all different in a way but then, it's all the same too. A lot of times, as a producer, they just want you to sweep up the tracks. But this was more a collaboration than I thought it would be. John let me do *a lot*. He trusted me. But it was intimidating. It's the man's 21st album and he's worked with the true greats. He made one of his early records with Chips Moman, who gave me my first job in the record business and for whom I have enormous respect. He did two records with Glyn Johns. And Shelly Yakus for God's sake, John had Shelly Yakus behind the board who has the best ears in rock 'n' roll! The exciting thing about it was this digital process that he brought in, this Sonoma thing (The Sonoma-24 Direct Stream Digital Recording and Editing System). I mean, I've been working pro-tools like everybody else and after you work pro-tools all day long, you feel like you have your head in a bucket and somebody's hitting it with a hammer. This Sonoma System, it's not like sound reproduction, it's like being in the room with first generation audio. It is *the* best sound I ever heard. Not only for digital media, it makes analog sound silly.

PJ: It really sounds like an old-fashioned recording, you'd never know it was done so recently.

JD: It 's a process developed by Sony. It's not a new thing. It's what they used on all the super CDs - the Dylan reissues and The Stones, all that stuff. John has the system at home so he knows what it's supposed to sound like. I got to add a lot of vintage gear upfront. You're not just hearing the warmth of the tubes like you do in typical recording; you're hearing the damn spark jump through the vacuum. I've never heard such detail in my life. The fewer microphones I used the better it sounded, it was remarkable! I was working with my favorite engineer (John Hampton) and we'd be sitting there after a ten-

hour day and we'd still want to hear more. It was quite an experience. Hiatt likes to go fast and I like to go fast. You know it's my theory that misery sticks to tape, or digital media in this case, and the shorter time you can do it in, the less misery is gonna be there for the listener. So we worked fast and I think that helped to homogenize the concept. We started out with 30 songs and got down to what we ended up with, which is very geographically specific. This album is about times and places and people. He's such a fine songwriter that if you get him wound up and let him tell the story, you're gonna want to listen.

PJ: Who's idea was it to work with Luther and Cody (from the North Mississippi All Stars, also Jim's sons)?

JD: That's just how it came to me. I think they wanted to work with them more than they wanted to work with me! I was just part of the deal. I wanted to make a bigger record than John has been making. I wanted to go a little deeper and make a rhythm section record 'cos my boys understand that. John stopped me short of background voices, which is okay! (laughs) I just wanted to paint on a bigger canvas. Although it's distinctly about John Hiatt and his voice.

PJ: You didn't use Chris Chew (NMA bassist) you used David Hood (legendary Muscle Shoals session man). Why?

JD: Chris is a gospel player and what he does, he does very well. We just wanted to do it real fast and David is the best.

PJ: The horn players are wonderful, the arrangements are very 'old timey,' sometimes reminiscent of what The Band did on their early albums.

JD: On the last song, of course, they're supposed to sound like a Salvation Army Band but for one of the others I said, "Alright, you're in a warehouse in downtown Memphis in 1930-something and the music is in one room and you're in the other room" and they really *got it*. It's a trombone player from Oxford, Mississippi (**name?**) that I heard on this little radio show that I do down there and the rest of 'em are just my Memphis guys. It was the first time I'd used this tuba player (**name?**), he was quite good. Saxophone and clarinet are played by Jim Spake and the violin player is Tommy Burrows - they are my two favorite soloists in Memphis. They're players I love to use. I put 'em on a lot of records. You can hear Tommy's heart break in every note he plays. And Scott Thompson is the trumpet player. He plays on the new Al Green records.

PJ: The violin on "Love's Not Where We Left It" is especially cool I think.

JD: Yeah, isn't it killer? You see, in that song, no one defines the minor chord. Although it is minor, no one plays the minor 3rd and in the solo Tommy hits the minor 3rd one time and it makes your knees bend, he's the only one that takes it all the way to the minor chord. I'm very, very happy with the record. John is a

perfectionist. His quality control was a real pleasure for me. As long as you're making the record better, I say "Let's try that one again" and a lot of artists don't want to do that. They're willing to accept a take once you're basically happy. But we really went for a perfection that I think we got.

PJ: And the basic tracks were done as a quartet?

JD: Yeah, it was done with just the four of them.

PJ: Did you play anything?

JD: A little piano, a little Wurlitzer and some organ. Just kind of filled in the cracks here and there. As little as possible.

PJ: The cover image is of a wrestler. Do you know how that came about?

JD: I don't know where it came from. I'm a wrestling fanatic. I do talk about it a lot. But it was John's idea and I'm delighted by it. He sees it as a character and I like that aspect too. I work with a lot of artists who work in character. John's borderline. He's not quite in character but I think he sees this record as *being* a character.

PJ: Any other comments you'd care to make about the album?

JD: When I talk about it, I tend to talk about the damn Sonoma system too much but it really was such an audio experience that I can't say too much about it. I'm not one of the people who rejected digital technology because the first time I heard it was 3M digital with Ry Cooder and it sounded *great*. Like when I did The Replacements, I did them digital and no one believes me. I've been working this format a long time. I recognize the depth of quality of analog but what people don't discuss is - the good part of analog *goes away*. Analog tapes deteriorate really, really fast. The sound quality changes. That doesn't happen with digital. What you get is what you keep. If this Sonoma thing catches on, it will revolutionize the recording industry. I told John that bringing that Sonoma in put years on my life professionally.