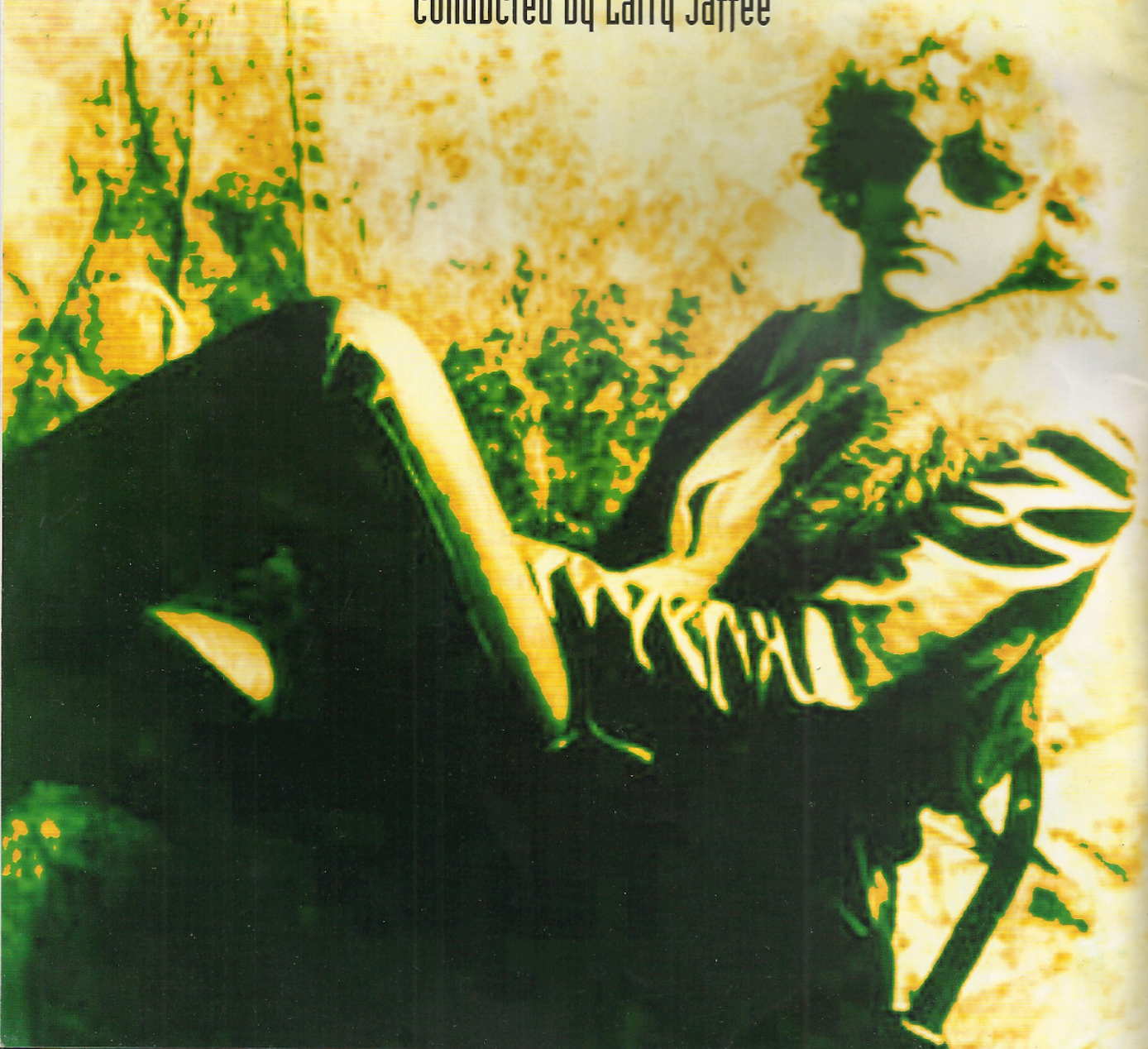


an exclusive On the Tracks interview

IAN HUNTER

conducted by Larry Jaffee



lan Hunter first came to fame as the front man of the British rock band Mott the Hoople, whose first Dylan-influenced album was released in 1969. Mott the Hoople's manic manager/producer Guy Stevens used the mantra in the studio to psyche up the guys "You're Dylan; you're the Stones." The title track from their fifth album All The Young Dudes, produced by David Bowie, firmly placed the band in the annals of rock history. Hunter kept a diary during Mott the Hoople's 1972 tour, and it was published several years later as a book. Mott the Hoople's next two self-produced albums were even more polished. Hunter embarked on a solo career in 1975 with Bowie guitarist Mick Ronson as his musical director.

Around this time, Hunter and Ronson (who died of cancer in May 1993) happened to be sitting in the same Greenwich Village bar where Dylan stumbled in to perform impromptu fresh from the living room of Jacques Levy their brand new compositions for the forthcoming album, Desire. Although Hunter finally got to meet his idol and would make an intriguing addition to the Rolling Thunder Revue, which had its origins that night, it was oddly enough Ronson (who could have cared less about Dylan), who ended up on the tour. Meanwhile, Hunter plodded on with a respectable solo career.

Hunter's 1979 hit "Cleveland Rocks" was resurrected in the mid-1990s as the theme song for The Drew Carey Show, the royalties from which allowed him to take it easy for most of the past decade. And Hunter has resisted repeated offers to reform Mott the Hoople with the original lineup. "All the Old Dudes? No, that's not good at all," he quips.

In 2001 Hunter made a comeback with an excellent indie-released album called Rant, and he toured the U.K. in May 2002. This interview occurred by telephone just before he was leaving for England. On the Tracks found Hunter eager to talk about how Dylan influenced his career, and clear up some folklore, such as how "Like A Rolling Stone" was not his audition song for Mott the Hoople.

Hunter's enthusiasm for Dylan has not declined any through the years, and in fact, Time Out of Mind and "Love and Theft" only reinforced his appreciation and respect, as summed up by this interview passage: "Where does he go to get information, you know? Which piece of the universe did he tune into? 'Cause I mean, it all comes from somewhere, you know? Maybe it's genetics. I don't know what it is, but he definitely is privy on information that most people aren't."

In your book Reflections Of A Rock Star it mentions your life-long ambition to meet Dylan was "set back again." You said you'd probably "freeze" if you did meet him anyway. You didn't really expand on that. Were you supposed to meet him?

I met him at New York City's Whitney Museum.

That was years later right?
Yeah.

But in the book, back I suppose in '72, when you were on tour...was there a time that the two of you might have gotten together or was anything set up?

No. No, I mean it was geography. We just happened to be in the same neck of the woods, you know?

I can remember, I saw him down at the village one night. He did the whole of *Desire* in a bar before that record came out. He walked into the Bitter End, sat down with Bobby Neuwirth and played the whole of *Desire*. And it was funny. He was really funny! It wasn't like the record at all. It was really better... He did it amusingly rather than seriously. Ronson, myself and the girls were the only four other people in there. By the end of that (rehearsal period), people were flying in from all over the place to play and that was the beginning of the Rolling Thunder Revue. I just happened to be in there that first night. It was just a fluke.

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How did Ronson become part of that tour? It seemed like you were the real Dylan fan.

Yeah, well, he just stayed there, down at the Bitter End, as it just sort of formed.

In the Campbell Divine book it mentions that Ronson was drunk that night and got thrown out of the bar a couple times.

They threw him out three times. And the third time, it was Paul Colby (the club owner himself) that threw him out! After the third time, Mick said, "Man, if you fuckin' throw me out once more, I'm comin' back through the window!" Because the window connected the Bitter End to the restaurant part of the club next door. I told that story to Dylan's son Jakob, of the Wallflowers, just last year. (he laughs heartily)

Anyway Mick just hung out. Eventually people, like Joni Mitchell, flew in and Ramblin' Jack ambled in. All these people sort of (began turning up), and that became the Rolling Thunder and Mick just sort of stayed there. Dylan would look at him suspiciously now and again like, "Who the fuck is that?" But slowly it just developed into the Rolling Thunder.

Did Dylan realize Mick was David Bowie's guitar player?

I think so. But Mick didn't even know the difference between one (Dylan) song and another. It was like, "Hey Bob what's that song? 'Blowin' In The Whatever?'"



Ian Hunter & Bob Dylan. Photographer unknown.

About that time Phil Ochs came up to me one night (at a party Dylan had asked me to). I remember windin' up at someplace downtown, with everybody posin'. Dylan was makin' a movie. Running around with cameras. I can't remember what that was about. All I can remember, I think it was Phil Ochs just came up and whispered in my ear (that they were making a film). 'cause they didn't want anybody else to know. They just wanted me to know, and I had other people with me.

Do you have any regrets? You mentioned that Mick had said, "Why don't you just come on down?" And you were a little hesitant because you didn't have an official invitation.

Mick was living down there, on Hudson, so it was easy for him just to go around, you know what I mean? I was livin' in upstate New York. I'd gone home after that first night. I never heard anything more about it until about three days later Mick calls to say, "Come down." I said "Well, I can't really. You just don't sorta come down." I'm English (you just don't do that sort of thing)! So as the Rolling Thunder Revue just sort of developed, Mick was doin' "C,F&G" stuff. That's what he called it, "C,F&G" [referring to the simple chord structure Dylan used to write songs].

Didn't Ronson also call Dylan "Yogi Bear"?

Yeah. I always had this runnin' argument with Bowie, 'cause my people (fan base, or following) are like with the Stones and Dylan, you know? And Mick didn't really understand Dylan at that time at all. Dylan'd come out of the shadows. Bobby was like playing to their mothers—as far as the Stones were

concerned. Then about a year later Dylan's sound sounds suspiciously like a Stone's song...and Mick was playing with Bob. And I'm sitting at home doin' nothin'.

Did that bother you?

Well, the killer, the end of it all (he laughs) was *Rolling Stone* magazine did a review of the Rolling Thunder Revue and said I was "great" on it!

And you weren't even there...

That was the final insult, you know? (he pauses) I kind of like the idea of the camaraderie of the Rolling Thunder Revue. Although Mick told me there wasn't quite as much camaraderie as you would imagine.

I know that Sam Shepard was hired to write a screenplay and he ditched it because the whole affair was so unorganized.

Yeah, I mean it was a bit of a (mess), but I still would have liked to have been there. 'Cause at the time (you're going back a lot of years, you know) things were different then. I think I would have (enjoyed it). I've always liked odd things. And that seemed really odd...out of left field.

I liked the Ringo thing, (which I did recently for example,) because I got to play with people I would have never normally played with. And that is interesting to me. People like Roger from Supertramp...all different styles of music. I find it (refreshing). You like doing your own thing but (always doing your own stuff) your life can get a little tedious. It's really nice to go out and do different things.

When was the first time you heard Dylan's music?

I had a plastic singles player in the '60s, not an album player. You could get these things at Woolworth's that were green and cream plastic, that would only play 45-rpm records. I bought a couple of Dylan singles. Probably "Lay, Lady, Lay," or more likely "Like A Rolling Stone" because this would have been around *Blonde on Blonde*. I didn't know what Dylan was talking about, it just sounded *absolutely right*. It just sounded absolutely spot on *RIGHT*, you know what I mean?

You were playing music at that point. Did his music encourage you to sing?

Yeah. I think he and Sonny Bono...both of them. At that time, in England, music was (dominated or defined by) the likes of Stevie Winwood and The Guy At Three. Paul Rogers, Jess Roden, all these great singers, naturally great singers. I was on Island Records. So those "muso"people would kind of look down at ya. The Muso thing was still strong. When Bono put out, "I Got You, Babe" and Dylan was doing what he was doing, I thought, "Well, wait a minute, maybe I can do this..."

Your instrument was bass at that point?

Yeah.

I guess Dylan's music also inspired Jimi Hendrix to start singing.

Yeah, Hendrix to me was a great lyricist. I can remember one time writin' every lyric he ever wrote, writing it down for myself in a book.

Didn't you decide to sing "Like A Rolling Stone" as your audition song for Mott The Hoople?

I doubt if I did do that. I think I did "Laugh At Me." It's a Sonny Bono song. Probably because it was "C,F&G." You know, pretty simple. I wasn't really a pianist. I still am not. I just write. I can write on these things, but I'm not like a musician. With Dylan it was amazing words, incredible words, the color of the words, the vividness of them. Half the time, like I say, I hadn't the faintest idea what he was talking about but it just sounded absolutely correct—for me—as Jerry Lee Lewis had done the decade before.

I heard a tape of a Mott The Hoople concert where you mention seeing Dylan at Madison Square Garden. You told your audience that you wrote "Rest And Peace" because someone in Dylan's audience was screaming that phrase and you thought it might make a good song title.

Yeah. Yeah. I remember him! (laughing heartily) It was like another time when I was in the Village, and I had just seen the Stones. They had just gone through a bad patch. I was speaking with Dylan and he asked me, "What did you think of the Stones at the Garden?"

I said, "Ahhh, not a lot."

And he said, "Yeah, more like *apathy* for the devil." And I used that phrase—"apathy for the devil"—as a song title on my album, *Alien Boy*.

I've heard another concert tape where you played a transformation of "Mr. Tambourine Man" renamed "Mr. Bugle Player."

I know, I know. God knows what possessed me to do that! It's too far back to remember why. I did it for a reason, the lyric



Ian Hunter. Photograph by Phil Holbrook.

meant something. I've heard that tape, but it's a very rough cassette. So not being able to make out what the words are means I still really don't know now why I was doing it. There surely was a reason at the time.

So when you finally realized your "lifelong ambition" and got to talk to Dylan was it at length at the Whitney Museum party (November 1985, New York City)?

No, not really, 'cause he was a bit scared. It was an official Columbia "do." Everybody and their mother was there. I mean, I respected *everybody* in that room. They were all great people there. Just great musicians...I remember the Band was there. I've got photos of it. I can't remember what Dylan and I were talking about, but we had a chat.

You aren't on Columbia anymore, did you get invited to that because of Mott The Hoople and your solo stuff?

I was officially invited. I didn't know what it was. All I know is it was to honor Dylan. And I thought, "Yeah, I'm going to that, I've got to be there." I had no idea of the size it was going to be. It was a real "do." I remember Columbia bought Dylan these paintings (or maybe prints) that he'd wanted, and he was quite blown away because I don't think he expected that. I remember he stood on the stage... Well, actually, he headed straight to the bar, that was the *first* thing he did (he laughs) 'cause he was virtually on his own. All these people were there and he's supposed to, you know how it is, you're supposed to become the life and soul of the party. And it's very difficult. I remember he went straight to the bar. Then he got up on stage and said, as he's picking up the prints, "Gee, thanks (talking to Columbia), maybe I'll have to do one of these for you sometime."



Ian Hunter and Sheila E. Photograph by Marc Eisenoff.

Did Dylan play that day?

No. He was just (the Guest of Honor) as I recall.

Have you seen him play live very often?

I've seen him on and off. The last time I saw him I think was at Western Connecticut State University which would have been a few years back, maybe four or five years ago. I'm not like a Dylanophile, to me, like to millions of people, he was just right. But I don't go running around following him play. Now if you were gonna ask me, who was the greatest lyricist of the whole of rock-n-roll, he's got it by spades, he's way ahead of the field. I don't even consider him to be a rock-n-roll artist. I consider him to be more doctoral (leagues ahead of us all).

He's really influenced your career in terms of songwriting as well as performing.

I don't think I would have ever started if I hadn't heard his voice and realized I could try too. He is a great singer. It's just people didn't realize at the time. And he wasn't as good then, obviously, as he is now. He has so many voices now. I still can't believe how he can deliver every single word with so much within each word. Some people, still to this day, don't rate him as a singer and it's beyond me. He's an amazing blues singer, an amazing country singer...

Especially the last two albums.

Yeah, there's just this Truth in it. There's just this... I mean I suffered for many years like a lot of people in the industry, especially in the studio, with nerves. And it really does get in the way of vocals. Because...I don't know what you're doing, but you're not really letting go. And he seems to know how to do that right from the off. Everything sounds so natural with him. I mean *Oh Mercy* sounds like he's walking up the street in New Orleans and just walked in and did it, and walked out.

How did you feel when people started comparing your songwriting to his? I remember a review of the first Mott The Hoople album and the reviewer thought "Road To Birmingham" was Bob Dylan's work.

Oh, you know... Obviously I was pretty near to Bob at the time. I like to think I was delivering my own opinions. But like just trying to get in vocally at that time I was just starting to get accepted. I think we were kind of running along the same ideas but I would come and go because I was a rocker too, you know what I mean? I would veer off and I always have done. But that part—"I wish I was your mother"—that part of me is directly coming from him.

Do you have a particularly favorite song or album of his?

I think "Every Grain Of Sand." 'Cause to me when I read that, it's like you want to give up. (he pauses) That's so far ahead of anybody in the industry...

Was it the religious imagery in it?

It was...(his voice softens) amazing. How the hell does he... Where does he go to get information, you know? Which piece of the universe did he tune into? 'Cause I mean, it all comes from somewhere, you know? Maybe it's genetics. I don't know what it is, but he definitely is privy to information that most people aren't.

And I think he pays for it. I think to Dylan probably everything that moves in this world is to be observed. When you write, to a degree you become an observer. You don't participate. You don't actually live your life. You watch it. And in that way, maybe that's why he likes touring so much 'cause you get out and about.

I've never been a roader. My last couple years I've been out and about but I've never done it to the extent that he does. I mean he goes out a hundred and sixty days or so per year. But it's easy the way they do it. They travel lightly. I still very much carry the rock thing.

The record business—the politics of the record companies and the way they take advantage of musicians—has it been that tough do you think?

Oh yeah, if you've got a brain in you, it's very difficult. It all depends on what you're doing.

Is that one of the reasons you laid low for awhile?

Well, yeah. Initially it was fine. You wanted mainstream. But when I got kind of disenchanted with that whole deal then it became difficult. Because you're dealing with a limited

audience when you just get to do what you want. There's less of a following. I mean even Bob Dylan doesn't sell that many records, which is incredible to me when you see what does. But the industry'd kind of fine-tuned itself to the point of near self-extinction. It seemed to happen in a lot of areas, not only music. They got to the point where they market so much, it costs so much, that you can only go with a deadeye or somebody new and young who you can give a contract to that's three miles thick and screw. I mean we have business affairs in record companies that are just dedicated to screwing the artists. I mean they have to. It's not their fault.

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BOB DYLAN

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any in there I can't identify with on some level."

"I write fast," he continues. "The inspiration doesn't last. Writing a song, it can drive you crazy. My head is so crammed full of things I tend to lose a lot of what I think are my best songs, and I don't carry around a tape recorder."

"Music," Dylan says, "is an outgrowth of family—and my family comes first." He moved them to the beach at Malibu from Woodstock several years ago, and has been intermittently rumored to be splitting from Sara. He concedes, "I haven't been able to spend as much time with my wife as I would like to," but pinning Dylan down on personal matters is like collecting quicksilver. A sample colloquy:

Are you living with your wife?

When I have to, when I need to. I'm living with my wife in the same world.

Do you...

Do I know where she is most of the time? She doesn't have to answer to me.

So you don't live...

She has to answer to herself.

Do you live under one roof?

Right now things are changing in all our lives. We will always be together.

Where are you living now?

I live in more than one place.

Can you be more specific?

I don't want to give out my address. Region?

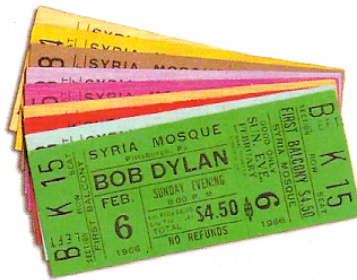
I live where I have to live, where my priorities are.

Right now, is that in New York City?

Right now it is, and off and on since last spring.

"Traveling is in my blood," said Dylan, as he rehearsed for his latest tour. "There is a lot of gypsy in me. What I'm trying to do is set my standards, get that organized now. There is a voice inside us all that talks only to us. We have to be able to hear that voice. I'm through listening to other people tell me how to live my life." Did Bob Dylan, of all Americans, feel himself mortgaged to others? "I'm just doing now what I feel is right for me," he concludes. "For my own self." ♦

This interview, conducted by Jim Jerome, was originally published in People Weekly magazine, in the November 10, 1975 (Vol 4, No 19) issue



IAN HUNTER

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They get fired if they don't. It's run by accounts...

Guy Stevens used to urge you guys to play Dylan's songs in rehearsals, "Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window" and "Tom Thumb's Blues."

That's right. Guy was a huge, huge Dylan fan. Huge. It was probably Guy that told me about Dylan in the first place. 'Cause back in '68 or '69, when I first met Guy, Guy's taste was unerring. Whatever he told you to do, you did. He was one of the first to import records. I was talking to Ringo about this because he says, "The Beatles got a head start because of all the Navy guys, the Liverpool ducks, would come back from voyages to the States and they would bring back records." So the guys in Liverpool were getting them ahead of time. But then I've heard from numerous people that Guy was doing the same thing. He was the only disc jockey in London that was importing. He was a DJ at a club called The Scene. Mick Jagger and Eric Burden would be in there every night finding out what Guy had. Guy told me that Jagger knew the numbers of every record. Jagger would come in and say, "Have you got XK41?" That's how I found out how much of a fan he was.

(Speaking of being a fan of someone else's music) Dylan plays

some of the cuts on "Love And Theft" like he's doing Willie Nelson. He really sounds like Willie Nelson on a couple things. It really does. I've never heard him sound like anybody else. That's the first time I've heard him sound, geez, that close, you know?

I hosted a four-hour Bob Dylan special on Bridgeport, Connecticut's WPKN radio station recently. We ended up playing "Summer Days" from "Love And Theft" about four times in a row—because we just liked the groove of it.

Yeah, he's probably his most relaxed. He has a lot of good stuff on there. But I'll listen, if it's in the car, something like that. But I've not been sitting here all these years just listening to Bob. I don't really listen to music much to be honest with you. The radio kind of puts me off. Once you've been in the ice cream factory as long as I have, you tend to just do what you do. ♦

Larry Jaffee's writing has appeared in Rolling Stone, New York Times, High Fidelity, High Times, Spin, Vibe, and Tower Records' Pulse. He is also editor of Medialine, which covers the preparation and manufacturing of CDs.

