

an exclusive On the Tracks interview

LOUDON WAINWRIGHT III

conducted by Larry Jaffee

In July 1971 The New York Times published a concert review that carried the headline "Loudon Wainwright At Gaslight Evokes Dylan Comparison." The clipping is reprinted on the liner notes of *History*, Loudon Wainwright III's 1992 still-in-print album, among 19 releases, including compilations and live albums, since 1970 that demonstrate his unique talent for capturing the full spectrum of human and family relationships with his [ex-] spouses/significant others, parents and children.

History is of particular note to readers of *On The Tracks* for his song "Talking New Bob Dylan," ostensibly written to commemorate Dylan's 50th birthday to the tune of "Song to Woody." In the song, Wainwright chronologically provides a primer in Dylanology—accentuating the point that Dylan is responsible for creating something of a genre—the singer/songwriter. In the early 1970s record companies scrambled to sign such musicians as if it was some kind of gold rush. Wainwright groups himself with John Prine, Bruce Springsteen and Steve Forbert. "We were new Bob Dylans—your dumb-ass kid brothers."

Another Dylan tie is David Mansfield (interviewed in *On The Tracks*, issue #17), who's played with Wainwright often onstage and in the studio for much of the past decade.

Autobiographical and topical, Wainwright throughout his career has been equally adept at exposing his personal idiosyncrasies as well as covering current events for both NPR

and the BBC, such as "Jesse Doesn't Like It" (as in *Senator Helms (R-NC)* to his recent composition about the September 11 terror attacks on the Twin Towers.) His latest album, *Last Man On Earth*, is his first for the folk-based Red House Records, another stellar collection, chronicling his psyche following the 1997 death of his mother. An earlier album dealt with the 1988 death of his father, Loudon Wainwright, Jr., a columnist of renown with *Life* magazine.

Besides regularly touring the club and folk festival circuit and recording, Wainwright has also periodically tried his hand at acting, and was featured in three episodes of *M*A*S*H* in the mid-1970s as the "singing surgeon." Currently, he can be seen in the Fox sitcom *Undeclared*, in which Wainwright plays the tonely divorced father of a son who's just starting college. This interview was done via telephone while Wainwright was in Los Angeles where he's able to work on the show and also play gigs.

We actually did an interview over 20 years ago when I was a student at Hofstra University and you were playing at the Rathskeller. We met before your show. Your father was present, so that event is something I'll never forget. I vividly remember you signing your autograph on a young woman's shoulder!

I used to do a lot of shoulder signing in those days. [He chuckles]

Has being branded a "new Dylan," helped or hampered your career?

Oh, I don't think it hampered my career. It got to be annoying. It probably helped it. I mean it helped me

get a record deal. When you get compared to somebody like that, I suppose the record companies sit up. I don't find what I do to be particular... I mean aside from the fact we play some of the same guitar chords, there's not much about what I do that's like what Bob Dylan does. But, I suppose there are worse people to be compared to.

How did the "Talking New Bob Dylan" come about? Had you thought about writing about him before?

Actually, that was the first song I ever wrote for NPR. They called me up and said, "Bob Dylan's gonna be 50 years old. Would you write a song about it?" And I wound up writing "Talking New Bob Dylan." So it started out as a tribute and then it got to be a bit of a harangue about being a new Bob Dylan. But that was the first thing that I ever wrote that went on NPR.

Did you get any reaction from him or his office about "Talking New Bob Dylan"?

No, I have no idea... I don't even know if he ever heard it.

He obviously had an influence on you, right? I read on your web site that you saw him at the Newport Folk Festival. Although, you started playing guitar a year or two before that right?

Actually, I started playing the guitar around age 13 or 14. But I didn't write my own songs in '68. But yeah, I saw him at Newport (in 1963), acoustically, and then I also saw him do one of those infamous shows with the Paul Butterfield Band, the electric shows at Newport (in 1965). I saw him in both contexts. Let's say I was one of the

people that loved what he did with the Band when he went electric.

Then I saw him (again when) I went to college in Pittsburgh in the later '60s, and I saw him with the Band. On the *Blonde on Blonde* tour. And then throughout the years I've seen him several times. The last time I think I saw him perform was in a show in New York at the theater, which used to be the Felt Forum, with Van Morrison. That was the last show of his that I've seen.

Speaking of Newport, Al Kooper told me that he thought the people weren't booing because Dylan went electric, that it was more that they were waiting for him forever, to come on stage. And that they were just getting tired of that. Being an audience member, what did you think?

Well sitting in the audience at the Newport Folk Festival, there was a portion of the audience that felt that he had kind of "sold out," you know, from folk music, from that we shall overcome work-shirt persona that he had previously been doing at places like Newport. That was just my impression at the time.

Did you ever get to meet Dylan?

Yeah, I've met him a couple of times, very briefly. I met him right at the beginning of my career, must have been '68 or something. I used to play at a club called The Gaslight on MacDougal Street. Sam Hood ran that room in its heyday. I think his father originally owned the club, or ran the club, but he introduced me to Dylan next door in The Kettle Of Fish. We just shook hands. And then I met him a few years later, he came to see me play at another New York club, Max's Kansas City with Doug Sahm actually. I remember. We had a brief conversation back stage.

Do you remember what you talked about?

Well, he commented on the fact, I had just written "Dead Skunk" and was performing it in the show. It wasn't out yet. So this would have been probably in '71 or '72, just a few years after the first time I met him. And he said that he liked that song, "Dead Skunk." So he had a good commercial ear, I guess.

Who knows? Maybe he'll start opening his set with it!

Oh, that would be great.

I was also curious if you've heard "Love And Theft"?

I've heard part of it.

What did you think so far?

I like some of it.

Red House Records seems to be a really good label for you in terms of they have a real folk cache and

roster. How did the deal come about?

Well, Bob Feldman, the president of Red House, I suppose you could say he's a fan of my stuff, and he just pursued me, as it were, and offered the best deal that we could get. He was very enthusiastic, and so it all worked out.

I thought it was too bad that you weren't on the label a year earlier...when Red House put out the Dylan tribute (2001), A Nod To Bob. But you did do the Blecker Street compilation CD a few years ago.

Yeah, I did a Richard Farina song, "Pack Up Your Sorrows."

Actually it was a great duet with Iris Dement. How did that song come to be the one that you covered?

Well, that was the first time that I worked with Stewart Lerman, who wound up producing (my latest album) the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

the

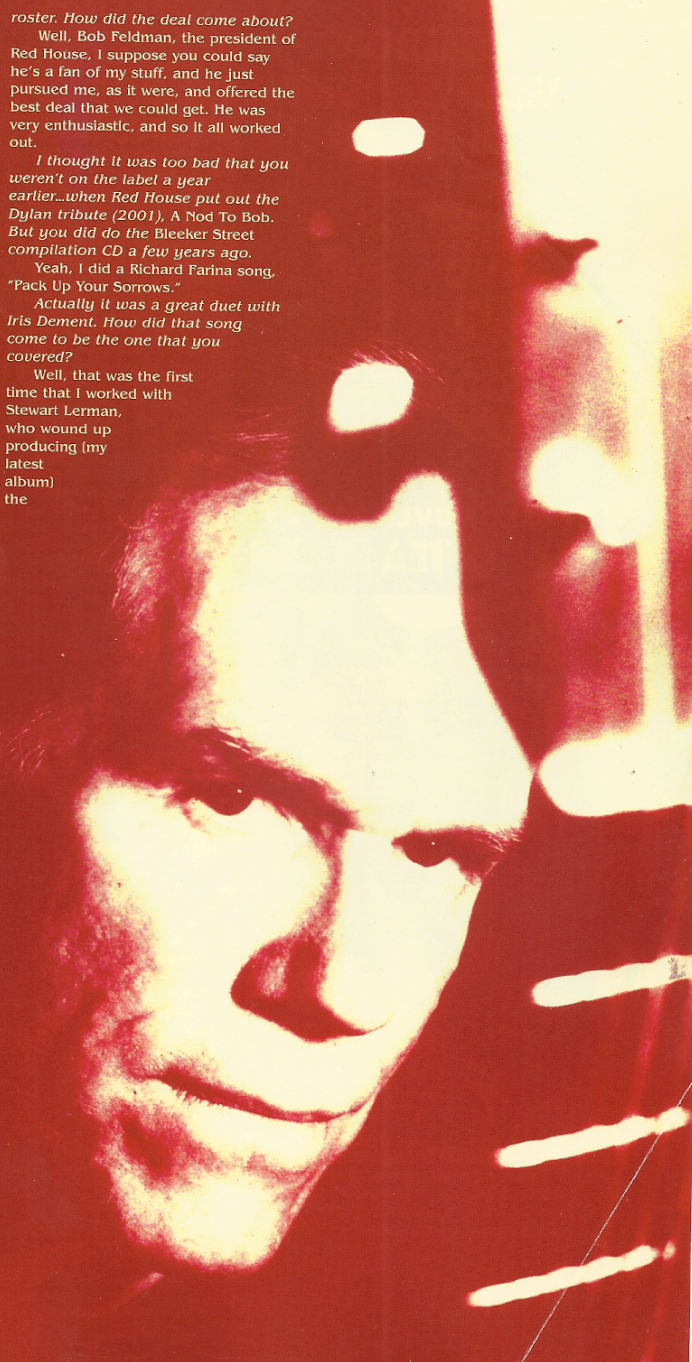
the

the

the

the

the





Last Man On Earth. He was making (Bleeker Street). I've known him socially for a long time but he asked me if I'd sing on something. We talked about which songwriters of that era, the '60s, that I liked and Richard Farina certainly was one of them. I also saw (Farina) at the Newport Folk Festival. I always liked that song "Pack Up Your Sorrows." So we cut it.

Are you surprised that two of your kids, I guess you have three, got involved in the music business?

I have four, actually.

I know about Rufus and Martha's careers, but the others, are they also involved?

Well, I have a daughter named Lucy Roche who goes to college at Oberlin in Ohio. She can sing and play, but is pursuing her academic career. Then I have an 8 year old, who's basically a third grader. But she seems to be talented in many ways.

When Rufus and Martha decided to get into the business did you give them any advice?

Yeah, they probably ignored it.

What, did you tell them not to do it?

No, no, I didn't tell them not to do it. I think this is a fine profession to be in. There are certainly pitfalls and drawbacks but I didn't discourage them.

And they've done exceedingly well.

Were you surprised Rufus covered your song "One Man Guy"?

I suppose I was. I was delighted, you know? I mean, I knew that he had been singing it in his show. But I was really happy to hear that they included it on the record. And then when I heard it I was very knocked out. I thought it was a great version with Martha and Teddy Thompson there.

Did Rufus and Teddy meet when his dad Richard produced your albums I'm Alright and More Love Songs?

No, I don't think so. I knew Teddy when he was a little kid. It's possible that they did meet as kids because Rufus and Martha used to come and visit with me in London when I lived there. But I don't remember who met whom and when and how, but we all know each other now.

Did Rufus ever give you a reaction to your song "Rufus Is A Tin Man"?

You'll have to ask him what his reaction was to it.

How about Kate (McGarrigle, Loudon's ex-wife), did she have any reaction to it?

Oh, I think it's a lovely little tribute to Kate so I hope she liked it and likes it.

Do you prefer performing over recording in the studio?

No. Not really. Apples and oranges.

I was curious what you thought of Rhino Handmade (available only through its website) issuing the first two albums on one CD but only as a limited edition with a cap at 5,000 copies. Does that bother you?

I think they are sold out. I don't know, that's what they chose to do. I don't know why any record company does what it does.

"The Man Who Couldn't Cry" is my favorite song of yours. What did you think when you found out

that Johnny Cash was going to cover it?

Well, I was knocked out of course. You know, when another artist records your song, that's a kind of validation, and when somebody of that stature records your song, that's major validation. So I felt good that year.

Had you met him at all?

I met him afterwards. I went with my mom to see him do a show at Carnegie Hall, a few years back. I went backstage and introduced myself and he was extremely nice and gracious. I know his daughter Roseanne, but I'd never met him.

You contributed to Roseanne's book. Your section, was it about your song "School Days"?

Well, the idea was to take a song and write something related to that. I wrote a letter, I made up a letter that I wrote to an old school teacher of mine, that was my contribution.

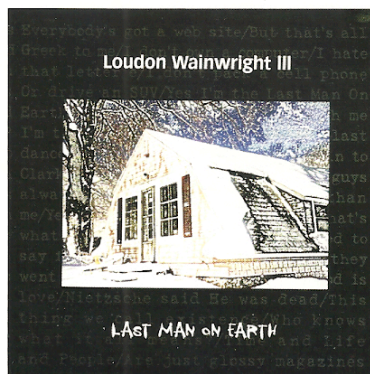
You've spent a lot of time living in England. Are the Brits more appreciative of what you do?

Well, I love living in London, and yeah, my career is good in England, so I appreciate their enthusiasm.

I also wanted to talk about Undeclared. This acting gig is a little different from the other things you've done in terms of a sitcom.

Well, I was in M.A.S.H. many years ago for a few episodes. This was just a great thing. Judd Apatow, the creator of *Undeclared* and *Freaks and Geeks*, is a fan of my music. So he just asked me if I'd be interested in auditioning, which I said I would. I got the job and did a bunch of episodes. In fact, I'm on TV tonight. The parents weekend episode...

But it's been great. It's been a lot of fun this year. We're waiting now to find



out if we're gonna get picked up but I really, really had a great time doing this.

That means you have to be in California.

When you're doing them, yeah. We did a couple more a few weeks ago, and I'm just kinda out here now doing gigs, being around.

That's great you can do both. You've lived in Brooklyn Heights, New York right?

Uh-huh.

You were on John Platt's WFUV radio show in New York a few weeks after September 11th. I have to say that your spoken-word performance about you riding the train under the World Trade Center had to be one of the most profound things I've ever heard. What is that called?

Well, it's a song now that's called, "No Sure Way." As I recall, when I did it on John's program, I had just written the lyrics. I didn't even have a tune for it. But it became a song.

Will it appear on your next album?

I think it's gonna be on a benefit Village Voice album that's coming out. That'll be the first time that it'll be on something. But I've been singing it in my shows ever since I wrote it.

What kind of reaction do you get from the audience on that?

Strong, I'd say. Yeah.

You're probably the best song-writer in terms of writing about families and family situations. It just hit me Saturday night when I had to be at a Bas Mitzvah. I saw relatives I hadn't seen in 25 years...I was about 18 years old the last time I saw them. They had kids who had kids. It was such a revelation, like what did I miss? I guess you could fill up albums forever with that type of material.

I've always found it to be an interesting topic. Your family...the most intense relationships are the people in your family. They're much more interesting to write about. For me, the generic romantic relationships are difficult. You know, make believe relationships... (Family relationships) they're very deep and twisted; very interesting, powerful.

On the new album, my favorite song is "Surviving Twin." I look in the mirror and see more and more of my father in my face. It's a little scary actually. My three-year-old son Jake learned "to be careful, there was a baby in the house" when his sister was born,

and still remembers the song pretty well. "The Swimming Song" helped him learn how to swim, so thank you for both of those. I'm almost living my life out through your music!

Yeah, you owe me some money! (he laughs)

(We then spent the next few minutes talking about the proper kind of gift to give to a Bas Mitzvah girl since he had one to go to as well. I said he couldn't go wrong with money; he wanted to know how much money.)

Actually, both of my first cousins have daughters weeks apart in age, so we went to one in December as well. I gave \$150 to both.

This is not somebody that's in my family. It's the daughter of a friend of mine that I like a lot. So would that be more or less than \$150? (both laughing)

I don't think you would give more. I think \$100 would be good.

One hundred dollars would cover it?

That's what I think. They can buy something nice.

Or put it in the bank account. All right, that's very helpful.

Let me know how that goes! ♦

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.

