

Q&A

Ani talks about the making of *Canon* and *Verses*.

Q: Both of these projects have been on the back burner for a long time. Both fans and the folks who work for your record company have been asking for a retrospective album for years. Why did you resist releasing one earlier? And why succumb *now*?

A: I guess it never happened until now for the same reason that so many things don't happen: time! No time to look back, always moving forward. *[laughing]* But of course my life has taken a sudden left turn with the baby, which involves a lot more time at home, and it was sort of an obvious juncture to actually try and manifest some of these theoretical projects that have been looming around. The poetry book and the compilation record were projects that lent themselves to homebound contemplation.

Q: *Canon* and *Verses* are both titles that involve a similar kind of pun; there's this military or at least oppositional reference in them...

A: Yeah. Well, I don't know what to say about that, other than I was just kind of into the double entendre—at least double, maybe triple... *poly* entendre! We were joking around about the *Canon* title; in addition to the obvious [meaning of] "a body of work," and the play on words with the weaponry out in the dawn's early light *[laughing]* on the cover, it also has that religious connotation; you know, "canon" is often [used to describe] religious works, which fits right in with "Righteous Babe Records" and "the Church" *[laughing]* and whatever other random religious connotations are floating around my completely atheistic life. But anyway, I'm a sucker for wordplay.

Q: In a sense, you're assembling a retrospective almost every night you perform, when you put together the set list. Was the process of selecting songs for *Canon* anything like that?

A: Definitely! I was using the same sort of intuitive powers to put this setlist together for the record. There was just so much to choose from; it could have taken many, many different forms, but I set myself a few parameters to start with. I wanted to be somewhat chronological, and that became the big hurdle then, because in any evening of music, whether it's live onstage or at home in your own CD player, you want [the night] to have a flow all its own. Then it became a challenge of, "well, I would naturally pick this song, this song, and this song from these 3 albums, but they don't flow well together, so now what?" So there was a lot of juggling and compromising and scratching my head, and a lot of other people's input as well. Some of my favorite songs were left out in lieu of some more obvious ones. It's a radical distillation, for sure, but it'll serve its purpose as an introduction.

Q: You used to talk about how you never liked listening to your earlier recordings. Has that aversion changed with the passage of time and with this specific task in front of you?

A: Nope, no alleviation there. No sir! The only thing I can say that's vaguely positive is that this change in my life that's come with having a family and feeling well-loved makes it a little easier to go through that mortifying process of self-examination. It brings up a lot of self-loathing for me, so it helps if I'm in a happy place, to weather that process. But it was definitely ... hard. *[laughing]* If I was gonna distill my 20 albums to the stuff that I like, it would be a handful of songs, and they would all be from the last 2 records! *[laughing]*

Q: You actually did go all the way back to album #1. And in some cases you went with the live version of a song from *Living in Clip* instead of the original studio version ...

A: Well, you know, that record is, I think, one of my most-loved records, so I thought it should be represented. And then of course, it's a live record, and I'm a live performer first and foremost. For the songs of that era—because, of course, I was working chronologically—I could choose between the studio version or the *Living in Clip* version, and in some cases I preferred the live version.

Q: Is your other live collection, *So Much Shouting, So Much Laughter*, the only album not represented?

A: Nope, I don't think there's anything from *Imperfectly* [or *Up Up Up Up Up Up*]. And then the first two records aren't there literally, but [there are later versions of both] "Both Hands" and "Fire Door" from the first album. The stone skips out of the water a couple of times along the way, but most of the records are represented.

Q: In a sense your 1993 album, *Like I Said*, is a best-of, since it contains re-recorded versions of songs from the first two.

A: *[laughing]* Yeah, that was my first retrospective! That was at a time when I was touring alone in a small car, and carrying three albums seemed too daunting! I guess I kind of underestimated my record-making trajectory ...

Q: "Both Hands" must be the song you've released the most versions of. Can you talk about the role that particular song has played over the course of your life?

A: I think for longtime listeners of my music, that's kind of a classic song. It's probably first on the list of classic songs just because it was record one, side one, take one! It seems to have a special place in people's hearts. That was why Scot [Fisher, manager and RBR president] suggested I re-record that one in a new way. I had a lot of fun re-recording it with my new little band outfit. "Both Hands" has actually fallen off the live setlist almost completely as of the last few years, because it's very hard on my wrist. It happens to be Public Enemy Number One for my tendonitis. People won't be hearing it live anymore, so I'm pleased that there's a cool new version of it on the record.

Q: How did you pick which songs to re-record? Was it a matter of not liking the earlier versions of them, or was it more about wanting to incorporate the new band?

A: I guess it was partially dissatisfaction with the original recordings and part: "That would be a fun one to reinvent." There's never been a band version of "Both Hands" recorded. It's one of those songs that I'll play alone as an encore at the end of the night so it seemed like a good contender. "Shameless" on the other hand, is one I always play with the band, so to record it solo is fun and different. A treat for listeners who are really familiar with the originals.

Q: Most of the songs you've re-recorded have been around since the early '90s, but "Your Next Bold Move" [from 2001] is fairly recent by comparison.

A: That was a song that I wanted to include because I like it, and I thought it would be an interesting one to, you know, mess with: try some production ideas, flesh it out a little bit more.

Q: It looks like every one of the various bands you've played with is represented somewhere on the album ...

A: Yeah. It was a very intuitive, non-logical process of making the set list for these records, but I think that was also in my mind, to represent the instrumentation and the various people I've collaborated with along the way. And it was interesting for me to listen back to the various collaborations, and be struck by things like, "Wow, me and Andy [Stochansky, drummer from 1992-97] really had a thing! *[laughing]* Damn! That was fun."

Q: Given that you've mainly stuck to chronological order, why end the album with two early songs?

A: I guess with "Both Hands" there was a nice end-as-we-began thing since it's kind of like the first song I ever recorded. And maybe it's my years of making set lists, but "Overlap" has always kind of seemed like an end-of-the-night song. It's a song that holds up a mirror to the listener and the relationship between the singer and the

listener, which I wouldn't do at the beginning of a night, but maybe by the end, when we're all ready and in that sort of mood.

Q: There are a couple of things on the album that aren't exactly major songs of yours, like a couple of brief instrumentals from *Revelling/Reckoning*, for instance. Does that have to do with the concept of flow you were talking about earlier?

A: Yeah. Part of *Revelling/Reckoning* were these little guitar segues that were somewhat unique to that record, and at the beginning of disc two [of *Canon*], the songs I wanted to use didn't flow nicely from one to the other, so I utilized those little segues.

Q: I'm also thinking of "Distracted," the little bit of stage patter from *Living in Clip*, which you've placed at an interesting point on disc one of the new album.

A: Well, you can see the way I constructed it; [that excerpt is] reflecting on the era of music that directly precedes it on the [compilation] record, and the kind of critical response to it, and I thought in that live sojourn on disc one, into *Living in Clip*, that you should hear the girl *talking*. It's an element that I noticed as I poured back over my records: talking and laughing at the beginning or end of a song. I guess I must have had the instinct again and again along the way to sort of bust through the screen of the recording studio and show the process, like the wiz coming out from behind the curtain. So you can sort of get a glimpse not just into the song but the reality of the people recording.

Q: The poetry collection, *Verses*, contains several spoken word pieces, others that are clearly poems, and a few things that most readers will recognize as songs of yours. Were any of the ones in that last category originally intended as "poems" rather than as "lyrics"?

A: I think of most of the writings in that book as being poems—spoken word, as you say—that sometimes on recording would have musical backdrops, but in my mind are still more poetry than song. Then there are a handful of songs that I chose that were definitely born as songs, like "32 Flavors." I have a binder with my complete song lyrics that I carry around in my backstage gear for pulling out old songs and rehearsing them; I was looking through "the complete lyrics of an i d." and just kind of singling out songs that seemed to marry well with the poems. Like if there was a thematic angle that needed to be included. For instance, I chose "Imagine That," because it's a song that places me onstage, which is such a big part of my life and experience.

Q: Then there are some completely new works in *Verses*, which we've never seen before.

A: Yes, there are some poems in there that I've never recorded or performed.

Q: You've described both of these projects as "stories of a girl"—that girl being you, of course. Do you see them as two ways of telling the same story, or very different stories?

A: Well, like I was saying to Sekou [Sundiata] in our conversation [printed at the back of *Verses*], I sort of think of everything I write as maybe chapters of a story. I think I can pretty much, as a writer, as an artist, only purport to express *myself*. Of course I'm describing the world along the way, and my perceptions of the world but, as with any artist, it's really me that I'm talking about! My first day in figure drawing class in art school, the teacher had us stand in a circle and draw a portrait of the person standing across from us. So we all sketched away for ten minutes, and then [the teacher said,] "Okay, everyone, turn your sketchpads around," and without exception, the portrait looked like the drawer! [*laughing*] I've never forgot that. It's very true with critics; I can see a lot about who *they* are by the way they talk about *me*. We're all really revealing ourselves when we describe the world around us, and so I guess I look at these bodies of work, as the story of a girl on her journey from adolescence to womanhood, from alien to citizen.

Q: Speaking of sketching, *Verses* also contains, for the first time, a lot of your paintings and drawings.

A: That's a very tender area for me; I'm very pleased with how the book came out, but of course I've never put drawings or paintings of mine out there in the world at large in such an exposed way, so I feel kind of vulnerable about that. I'm a novice painter; I never pursued it in any depth, so I haven't developed that form of expression deeply—but there it is, sitting next to this form of expression, writing, which I *have* been working on and developing my whole life! It's kind of a queasy feeling for me *[laughing]*. So that's where I'm hanging my insecurity at this point.

Q: Has this act of putting out two retrospective projects simultaneously made you think about the act of looking back in general?

A: An interviewer told me the other day, “The suspicion when somebody puts out an album like this is, they're done.” *[laughing]* It's all cover albums and Christmas albums from here on out. And so I guess if anything I would just like to say, “I'm not done!” *[laughing]*, “You don't get off that easy!” But I definitely feel like this is something of a turning point in my life, maybe it's just the huge change of becoming a mother, but I think, in terms of my work as well, I'm transforming again. And in terms of making records, I feel I've only just begun! I have made a lot of recordings that I'm dissatisfied with but I'm a little older now and a little wiser, and now I'm gonna get it right!

[phone interview with Ron Ehmke, 8/27/07]