

JOAN ARMATRADING

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The *New York Times* has called Joan Armatrading "perhaps the best unknown pop star in the business," and *Newsweek* says Armatrading has single-handedly stretched the boundaries of pop music. Though Joan Armatrading's American reputation is still growing, her overseas credits are already those of a widely-established popular artist: she has sold close to six million records worldwide and has 19 gold and three platinum awards in a total of eleven different countries.

The 29-year-old British singer/songwriter's reputation among fellow musicians is extraordinarily high: Janis Ian is a fan, and Rickie Lee Jones has said: "How many female singer/songwriters are active now? Three . . . Joan Armatrading, Joni Mitchell, and me. And Joan is so good, it's a flip of the coin in terms of success. I wonder, 'why me and not her?' Her music seems more accessible than mine."

At England's Blackbush Festival, Bob Dylan asked that Joan open for him—to an audience of 280,000. And George Benson invited her to play guitar with him on Broadway, but her tour commitments prevented it.

Joan Armatrading's latest album, *Me Myself I*, produced by Richard Gottehrer (Blondie, Link Wray, Robert Gordon), ranges widely in style, from semi-classical songs like "I Need You" to reggae-infused works like "Simon," all of which are supported by a rock backbone achieved during New York recording sessions with instrumentalists like guitarist Chris Spedding and drummer Anton Fig (of Spider). "Her philosophy on this album," says Gottehrer, "was to stretch herself as far as she can go. She's a true artist."

Joan Armatrading's artistry is characterized by a stylistic uniqueness that Boston's *Phoenix* refers to as "brilliant unorthodoxy." Her use of her guitar, of her voice and even of melodic and lyrical content defies most musical conventions. The key to Armatrading's powerful individuality is her background as a child who spent most of her time alone, establishing her own viewpoint and her own ways.

Joan Armatrading was born in 1950 on the island of St. Kitts in the West Indies and moved to Birmingham, England, when she was seven. Her father, a bus driver and carpenter, was strongly against her interest in music. Though he was a musician himself, he would hide his guitar above a closet where Joan could not reach it. While her original ambition was to be a lawyer, at 14 she saw Marianne Faithfull on television, and decided to write her own songs.

But Joan's musical tastes were far different than those of the classmates with whom she seldom played, and whom she observed from a distance in the schoolyard during class recesses.

Initially she had little interest in pop music—while her school mates had pictures of the Beatles and Cliff Richards taped inside their desks, Joan's desk remained empty. For a school concert, she learned one Bob Dylan and one Paul Simon song, though until then she had not been familiar with their music. Joan remembers being unimpressed with Aretha Franklin and Otis Redding. Instead, she was drawn to the vastly different styles of country singer Jim Reeves, 40's crooner Nat Cole, hard rockers Free and contemporary rocker Van Morrison, who she says, "was the first person who made me listen to a record properly."

Joan never took a guitar lesson. Instead, she taught herself to play by picking notes until she found a chord that pleased her. The result was the unorthodox style the *New York Times* has called "splendid." In her isolation, she developed a vocal style equally unique. And her habit of observing others from afar led to an ability to write lyrical vignettes of diamond clarity, yet to invest them with a poignancy few songwriters can equal. As *Billboard* says, her songs "jump out at you and twist your emotions."

At 18 she joined the London company of *Hair* (and steadfastly remained the only cast member who refused to disrobe on stage). She went on to record her first album in 1973.

Joan Armatrading's five A&M albums, *Whatever's For Us* (1973), *Back to the Night* (1975), *Joan Armatrading* (1976), *Show Some Emotion* (1977), *To The Limit* (1978) and the EP *How Cruel* (1979) have garnered critical acclaim from all quarters: "A major singer-songwriter" (*Chicago Sun-Times*); "Defies comparison" (*New York Daily News*); "Fresh and invigorating" (*Los Angeles Times*).

Joan now lives in the English countryside, where she collects British comic books, antique autos and clocks. Though she holds herself apart from the social whirl of the entertainment industry, Joan Armatrading is, in the words of critic Robert Palmer in *The New York Times*, "a commanding singer with something to say."

