

Interview: Joe Jackson reflects on 'Fast Forward,' his earliest work and the dangers of nostalgia

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Joe Jackson (Photo: Jacob Blickenstaff)

By the time he'd made the leap from "Is She Really Going Out With Him?" to "Night and Day" in the course of releasing five albums in a four-year burst of creativity, it was clear that Joe Jackson's career was an ongoing process of forward momentum and restless experimentation. He does what suits him at the time and moves on quickly to whatever fresh new challenge lies ahead.

He's kept nostalgia at an arm's length, flirting with it on occasion (see "Night and Day II" or "Volume 4," a spirited reunion in 2003 of the bandmates with whom he'd recorded his first three albums decades earlier). But he's wary of indulging in it too much.

"It is really all about now," he says, in explaining why "Fast Forward" is his favorite thing he's ever done.

Released last year, the album was conceived as four EPs, recorded in four different cities with four different sets of musicians, the idea being to release them in succession. He combined them instead, and the result is one of Jackson's more ambitious efforts, starting

with the title track, an elegant piano ballad in which he reflects on the present by imagining what it would look like from the future or another planet. He's hitting fast forward, he sings, "'til I understand the age I'm in."

The song started, he says, as a circular chord progression that modulated through different keys before returning to its starting point. Our conversation follows suit, returning to the themes that songs addresses as he shares his feelings on his early work, nostalgia and why living for today is so important.



Joe Jackson. (Photo: Chart Room Media)

Question: Could you talk a bit about the inspiration for the title track?

A: It's actually got more words than anything I've ever written. It almost could have been three or four separate songs. It just sort of kept growing. It started off with a musical idea, which was just the chord changes and the idea that they could modulate to a different key and kind of go around in a circle and come back to where they started.

That may not mean a lot to non-musicians but that is what it started with, and the idea of this cycling made me think about moving through time and the old question of, "If you had a time machine, what era would you want to go to?" People usually say some kind of golden age of the past or what they imagine to be a golden age.

But the idea is you have a time machine and instead of going to the past, you go into the future so that you can look back at the present and try to make sense of it. So there's a lot of stuff in there about wrestling with the idea of what kind of time are we living in and can we even be objective enough to say anything about it? If only you could go into the future, you could look back and it's all been figured out and explained. And then it goes from there to the idea of actually being outside the earth, looking down at the earth from the moon.

Q: So the era you would go to is the future?

A: We all have our fantasies about wouldn't it be cool to be in Berlin in the 1920s or whatever. But I think nostalgia is a dangerous thing. It's a bit like a recreational drug that it's OK to have a bit of every now and again but you shouldn't get too much into it. And I try to avoid that. I've noticed other songwriters who are my sort of age seem to be writing a lot of nostalgia now. I was just listening to Squeeze's new album and it's blatantly nostalgic. I guess that's OK but I can't help but wondering if it's because you've run out of ideas, because you somehow have lost the ability to go forward. So I'm kind of wary of that.



Joe Jackson. (Photo: Chart Room Media)

Q: You do perform your older material live, though, right?

A: Yeah. And I'm always looking for new ways to do it — a new arrangement to the old songs, just to keep it interesting.

Q: You sing "Fast forward until I understand the age I'm in." Do you feel as though you understand the age you're in any better as you go through life?

A: No. Not at all (laughs). If anything, less. I think that people tend to be more cynical when they're young. The idea that people get more cynical as they get older is not necessarily the case. When you're, like, 21, it's very cool to be cynical. You think you know a lot more than you actually do. And as you get older, you let go of more and more certainties, if you like. You see more and more gray areas in everything.

It's much more important to find some sort of positive way of looking at things as you get older, I think. "Fast Forward" has a lot of contradictions in it. And ironies. On the one hand, it's struggling with trying to make some sense of the age we're living in. Some things seem really awful and some things are actually not so bad. And some things are funny. But ultimately can we really even see it clearly? Because we're right in the middle of it.

Q: I really like the humor in that song. It also strikes me, and this may be wrong, but as hopeful.

A: Yeah. I mean, the kind of hopeful part is the middle section where it changes. It gets out of that cycle I was talking about, that harmonic cycle. It breaks out. And I think that part really says, "Who the hell knows? Let's just try and enjoy it while we're here."

Q: When you sing, "Let's go back to the age of gold," why do you think people seem to find such comfort in the thought that there's a golden age we could return to. Donald Trump's campaign is based on this idea that we could make America great again — that it was better in the good old days. What makes so many people cling to that?

A: I don't know. I think because in some ways it's true, you know? (laughs) But it's not the whole story. And you can't go back so you have to go forward. You've got no choice, really. I think earlier ages tend to get simplified and romanticized. And the longer you live the more you see that. When I see really young kids indulging in '80s nostalgia, it's kind of funny to me because, you know, I was there (laughs).

And when you were there it all seemed a lot more complex and many-sided. In retrospect, it's easy to make something into this kind of neat little retro package. There's a line in "Fast Forward" about "the past is all sorted out and tied up with pretty ribbons on it." Or something like that.

So that sort of fantasy, if you like, of returning to the past, I think, is the idea of it being a comfort zone in a way, because we think we've got it all figured out and the present is much harder to understand. I mean, I'm very interested in early jazz, for instance, which is something I think not a lot of people are. I sometimes think, "My God, wouldn't it have been cool to be in Chicago in 1931 when Louis Armstrong was first playing there?" So I can play that game, too.

Q: Sure. I mean, I wish I could have seen the Kinks in 1965.

A: Yeah. Well, me too. (Laughs)

Q: You talked about the cynicism of youth. Do you find that you've gotten less cynical?

A: Yeah, definitely. Although it depends on how you define cynicism, I suppose. In terms of just cultivating an attitude of everything is a can of worms, it's not very clever. Because as you get older, you've seen a few worms. And it's not so funny anymore? So I believe you have to think positively. Not in some naïve, starry-eyed way, like, "Everything is beautiful." Because everything isn't. But I think you have a choice to think positively or not. It's not to say that you don't see what's bad or what's wrong.

Q: What do you think of your earlier records when you look back on them now?

A: Well, it's a mixed bag, you know? Some I like more than others.

Q: I guess I meant the first few.

A: The first few. I mean, they're very different.

Q: Sure. I mean "Beat Crazy" is different than....

A: Yeah, well, the first two are really one. The second one is really part two of the first one. They're very much alike. And I think they're good records for the time. They were very much of their time and place. And that's what I hear. If I listen to those records now, which I don't, but anyway, they just absolutely scream London '78, '79. And I think they're just fine as far as that goes.

Q: They scream it well.

A: I think they're pretty good. I'm not saying they're not. There are some songs on those first two albums that I like. I think they stand up well. "Beat Crazy," I think, didn't really work. "Jumpin' Jive" was a musical vacation, just to escape and do something completely different just for the fun of it. And "Night and Day" was a big change of direction.

It's funny that you said the first few records and a lot of people kind of lump them all together and I think from "Look Sharp" to "Beat Crazy" to "Jumpin' Jive" to "Night and Day" is a pretty huge range. I mean, I think "Night and Day" was the first record where I really felt like I was being completely myself. And I really didn't think that people would like it. I was really nervous while making that record. And defiant, you know? I just thought, "I'm gonna do it this way. And if you don't like it, tough (expletive)." And no one was more surprised than me at how successful it was.

Q: You came of age — or came to our attention, really — in that late punk, early New Wave era. Did you feel a connection?

A: I didn't, really. I was overqualified to be a punk. I had already been to music school and things like that. I didn't feel connected to it but I did like it. I was excited by it. And I was there. I was in the right place at the right time at the right age. I made my first album in London in 1978. It wasn't really punk at that point. I think in the States a lot of things got kind of mashed together that in the U.K. were perceived as being rather different.

But you can always play this game. I mean, really, is it all a million different genres or is it just all pop music and who cares? It depends on how far out in space you go to look at it.

Q: Other than now, do you have a favorite era of your career or a point that you look back to with a particular amount of pride? Or is it really all about now?

A: It is really all about now. I'm always most interested in my latest work and I think that's the way it should be. Otherwise you really should stop. You should give it up. Even if you don't feel like you've made some sort of great artistic breakthrough, you should at least feel excited about what you're doing and having fun with it. If it ever stops being fun, it's time to hang it up.

I mean, definitely my favorite album of mine — at the moment anyway — is “Fast Forward.”

Q: It is great.

A: Thanks. I think it's good, too. It was supposed to be four EPs. You probably figured that out. The original idea was to release one at a time. And no one really wanted to do that except me (laughs). So that didn't happen.

Q: That would have been cool that way. But I think it holds together as an album as it is.

A: Yeah, it does. I mean, if I had been planning it as an album, I probably wouldn't have made it so big and diverse. But it still comes across as being in four parts. Especially if you get it on vinyl, it works great as a double album but you have one part per side. So hopefully some people will pick up on that.

Joe Jackson

When: 8 p.m. Thursday, June 16.

Where: Scottsdale Center for the Performing Arts, 7380 E. Second St.

Admission: \$45-\$85.