

Joe Jackson
Rain

When Joe Jackson went into an East Berlin recording studio with the rhythm section that has accompanied him, off and on, for nearly three decades, he had the most strikingly simple line-up in mind: just piano, bass, drums and his unmistakable, eternally yearning voice. As he later pondered a name for this compellingly to-the-point collection of ten new songs, he took a similar approach. "I wanted something elemental because that's the kind of album I wanted to make," Jackson explains. "There is no padding on it at all; the album is stripped to the bare essentials, so I hope it has a timeless quality. The title seems to fit."

The natural elements were indeed a leitmotif, not so much in the words of the songs themselves as in Jackson's surroundings as he created them: "It seemed like rain was a constant companion. It always seemed to be raining when I was working on these songs, and it rained every day while we were recording them. But I like the rain, and I don't understand why for many people it has this automatic association with doom and gloom. What would we do without rain?"

Rain may have the occasionally melancholic moment, but it also boasts plenty of humor, swing, sophistication, barbed social commentary and even some punk-like rocking out – no guitars necessary -- on "King Pleasure Time." "Rush Across the Road" evokes a split-second moment of sweet recognition between two former – or soon-to-be – lovers, while "Wasted Time" gently examines both the longing and regret in an affair gone sour. "Too Tough" balances the swagger and vulnerability of an emotionally guarded character in a classic Jackson arrangement that features big, dramatic choruses and a rough-edged lead vocal. "Good Bad Boy," with quick shuffling rhythms and a rollercoaster of a piano solo, skewers the pre-packaged rebelliousness of a modern-day rock star or fashion model.

In its adventurous spirit as well as its piano-based sound, the material on Rain recalls Jackson's 1982 *Night and Day*, the best-selling and most critically lauded album of his career, and its equally well-regarded 2000 sequel. On the original disc, Jackson had created a gorgeous love letter to his newly adopted home of New York City, incorporating Latin rhythms and a cinematic, Gershwin-like sweep in his work. The album yielded the multi-format Top Ten hit, "Steppin' Out" and showcased for his widest audience ever Jackson's stylistic breadth as a composer. Jackson has since moved on to an apartment in Berlin, which currently boasts the kind of anything-goes cosmopolitanism that epitomized Manhattan when Jackson had first arrived there. But he still manages to evoke a magical sort of New York City-inspired urbanity in his songs, the aural equivalent of a movie classic from half-a-century ago, filmed in shimmering black and white. As Jackson admits, "I lived on and off for twenty years in New York. You spend so much time in one place it gets into your bones and into your heart."

It's especially present on "Uptown Train," which has the offhanded, hip feel of a vintage Ramsey Lewis, piano-trio jam. Jackson is well into his groove before he starts his

vocalizing, punctuating the number with some very soulful falsetto singing. Says Jackson, “As you might be able to tell from that track, I’ve been listening to a lot of jazz stuff from the late fifties and early sixties, a lot of classic Blue Note records, a lot of Horace Silver and Art Blakey, Lee Morgan and people like that.”

The playful mood Jackson evokes on “Uptown Train” belies the surroundings in which Jackson and longtime band-mates Graham Maby (bass/vocals) and Dave Houghton (drums/vocals) cut *Rain*: “We recorded in a very interesting place called Planet Roc in the Eastern part of Berlin. It had been a major East German radio station, a huge complex that used to have close to 20,000 people working in it. Now half of it is derelict, which is really weird; it’s gradually being converted into studios, production companies, things like that. But it has this sort of desolate, Communist kind of feeling to it, which I like.”

Fans who have been following Jackson’s live shows in recent years will already be familiar with a few of these tunes, in particular, “Too Tough,” which started appearing on set lists around 2004. Jackson explains, “It got finished about the same time as ‘Citizen Sane.’ It’s been about three years. I wasn’t in a hurry to make a new album. I promised myself that I wouldn’t make a record until I had an album’s worth of songs that were the best I could do. I think several of these songs are the best songs I’ve ever written, and I wanted to have 10 or 12 songs that I felt that way about before I put out another album. I used to be a bit of a workaholic, but I am now much more patient. The quantity has gone down, but the quality has gone up.”

In 2003, Jackson reunited with his original Look Sharp! band-mates -- Maby, Houghton and guitarist Gary Sanford – to record *Volume 4*, the fourth studio album they would make together. It also marked 25 years since they’d worked on Jackson’s star-making debut disc. The group toured for seven months, then released the concert recording, *After Life*. Jackson subsequently embarked on a solo piano tour, co-billed with Todd Rundgren. *Rain*, then, is the best of both worlds. Jackson explores a pared-down sound within a comfortable band format, a mix that, he decides, has helped his songwriting: “There are quite a few songs that I can play solo if I had to, and that was never the case in the past. I was always thinking of band arrangements as I was writing songs. It’s a bit of a new approach, really. I have been trying to write songs that are bulletproof, that could be done in a very simple way and still work.”

But Jackson emphasizes that he has no intention of going it alone right now; in fact, Jackson, Maby and Houghton have full-on European and American tours planned for 2008: “It’s so great to go out and play with guys you know so well. Apart from the fact that we have fun on the road, that we’re friends, the shows are very spontaneous. We’re able to give and take because we know each other so well. We make our shows different every night, which is great.”

Despite his early image as dapper new-wave rocker in skinny tie and pork-pie hat, Jackson has never allowed himself to be limited in where he can go as composer or performer. In the eighties, he explored reggae, jump-blues and Latin rhythms, and he produced several memorable film scores. A decade later, he segued into long-form

composing and won a Best Pop Instrumental Recording Grammy in 2000 for his 1999 Sony Classical release, *Symphony No. 1*, which featured jazz and rock players instead of a traditional orchestra.

“I’ve always been pretty diverse,” Jackson concludes. “If you go back and listen to the first album, you might find that it’s pretty eclectic. I think that artists, especially new ones, get slotted into one movement or genre or another. People were so anxious to put me in a certain category that they didn’t notice how eclectic *Look Sharp!* was, so they acted surprised a bit later. It’s kind of ironic.”

Rain, then, is not surprising at all – at least for those of us who have been following Jackson’s extraordinary 30-year career. It’s just another genre-stretching effort from an artist who continues to extend the boundaries of his craft.

-- Michael Hill