

# Prophet Motives



*For the average bod on the Clapham bendy-bus the name of Rickie Lee Jones (where it's recognized at all) is probably synonymous with her breakthrough single Chuck E's in Love. We know that the average Trouser reader is rather more au fait with the auteur's artistic output, however, her latest project may just be the most unusual in an already eclectic body of work. Collaborating with an old friend on an improvised musical interpretation of the words and teachings of Jesus Christ. Trevor Raggatt ventures within the veil to discover whether it's a case of divine inspiration or burn at the stake heresy*

**S**ermon on Exposition Boulevard is an extraordinary piece of work. When graphic designer/photographer/writer Lee Cantelon published his book *The Words* he always had a dream of turning it into some sort of musical form. Cantelon's book took the words of Jesus from the New Testament and translated them into a modern form. The intention was to make Christ's teachings accessible to those curious about their meaning and depth – particularly those who felt alienated from organized church and religion. The final product generated a great deal of interest and positive comment both from within and outside the church. However it was a chance meeting over an abortive dinner party which put in place the dominos whose falling would bring the project to life.

On his *pennyhead.com* website Cantelon eloquently relates the these events, 'It was late spring 2005. Peter Atanasoff and I had gone out to see an exhibit of Manuel O'Campo's paintings. After the show, we all went to dinner at Gloria's, Marc's favourite Salvadoran restaurant. When the food took longer than usual to come from the kitchen, I found myself talking with Marc. Our conversation turned to Peter's and my plan to record a spoken-word record based on my book, *The Words*. I told Marc that we were trying to do the project on a shoestring budget. So when Marc offered us the use of his art studio, which was just a few blocks north off of Venice Boulevard, we jumped at the opportunity.

'The walls of the warehouse studio were covered with Marc's large canvases, paintings that depicted piles of rocks and trash, sewage pipes, the careless refuse that represented the world we live in, and wounded dogs, something he did to express his feelings about war. We felt instantly at home, as if our heretofore vagabond project had finally found a home. We circled a date on the calendar, a red-Sharpie scribble that indicted our decision to begin recording on Exposition Boulevard [the road on which O'Campo's studio stands]. We dragged amps, microphones, and instruments down to Marc's space, converting it overnight to the semblance of a recording studio. As the music emerged, it seemed to suggest stories; of lost-ness, isolation, and spiritual yearning. These humble songs managed to evoke a place where music, language, and culture blurred into one prayer. Marc's cluttered studio, on a poor street in Los Angeles, was the sanctuary for this work. In mid-June, 2005. I asked Rickie if she would come across town to Exposition Boulevard and read from the book. We had selected two or three tracks that



we thought might work as backgrounds to her reading. Mike Watt had already completed the chapter called The Harvest. Peter and I were both anxious to add Rickie's voice to the project. For as long as I had talked to Mike about this, I had shared the same vision with Rickie, and felt that it was important to have a woman's voice reading the Jesus words. Rickie arrived in the afternoon, and we looked over a few chapters that might appeal to her.'

This begs a question as to how Rickie Lee Jones would approach a project like this where, unusually she was realizing another person's creative vision. In our interview she was quite emphatic about her role. '*Sermon...* was not my record per se; rather, I

was a guest, so I felt I was a part of something quite different from the very beginning. I knew it was great, I felt it. I knew it was great because of how it felt to sing; I was singing in a whole way, with all my body.'

However, her contribution wasn't simply as a convenient session musician. As the project developed she began to contribute more and more artistically, improvising the large majority of both her words and melodies, building on the musical soundtrack created by Cantelon and Atanasoff. 'I made up the lyrics, but I had no input in the production. I purposefully stayed out of it until the last few songs were recorded when I began to push the direction to keep

things moving. I did not create this musical production myself; Peter and Lee made the guitar 'beds,' if you will. I think the raw core of this album, the droning chordal production laid down a fine path for the singing and speaking, the chanting... My stuff is decidedly different, but all in all it keeps the whole record fresh and gives it a wider spectrum than it might have had otherwise. Putting *Nobody Knows My Name* with *I Was There*, and *Elvis Cadillac* with *Where I Like It Best*, these were bold juxtapositions, and they work...all of it works, perhaps because the theme or the intention overall keeps the work honest. I guess my contribution is more in *I Was There*, *Elvis*, and *7th Day*. The producer [Rob Schnapf] worked more on *Falling Up* and *Tried To Be A Man* and Pete and Lee are more the creators of the tracks overall, the atmosphere, especially for *Nobody Knows My Name* and *Where I Like It Best*. The album has all these great, diverse aspects and overall works great together. I made the songs themselves up, the lyrics and the melodies, but having Pete and Lee's guitar beds made all the difference. I wrote *I Was There*, *Tried To Be A Man* and *7th Day*, while the rest are all co-written.'

Cantelon gives more detail on the moment of epiphany when the effect that Jones was to have on the project started to become clear, 'Rickie said she was ready, and we did a test reading for levels. She read only a few sentences, and abruptly stopped. "This isn't going to work for me," Rickie said, and suggested that she sing her lines, and that, instead of reading verbatim from the book, she use it as a reference and improvise lyrics based on one or more pages. We all agreed that she should try this approach, and selected a track that we thought would serve her voice. I asked if Rickie would like to hear the track through her headphones, so she could get a sense of the melody, chord changes, and length. "Sure," Rickie said, and we played about twenty seconds before she stopped us. "That's good. I'm ready now," she said. "Just let it roll and let me see what happens." I closed the sliding fire door to give Rickie some privacy.

'I looked at Peter. What was Rickie planning to do? She didn't have any lyrics. She didn't even know what the song sounded like. The track started, two guitars, chords pounding out a tribal beat. "For a thousand years," Rickie sang. Her voice was plaintive, filled with sadness, timelessness. Rickie's performance had changed the project in the three minutes and thirty-four seconds it had taken to record what became *Nobody Knows*

*My Name*. Without hearing the track, and without lyrics, she had reset the direction for the project. She had emptied so much emotion into that song. I thought about the lyrics. "Did the anonymous Christ walk among us?" There were many implications in what Rickie has just "written." And more depth was to come...'

But how does an artist, even one as experienced as Rickie Lee Jones approach the improvisational process? It is a spontaneous confection of already assimilated influences, musical snippets and concepts or is the artist tapping into some deeper creative consciousness? The response is enigmatic but simultaneously enlightening, 'I am still, quiet; I do not plan. I might sometimes have a sense of a lot of movement, or a climbing... something like that. I do feel I am tapped into a powerful stream...'

Cantelon recalls the aftermath of that moment of inspired creation, 'She turned and walked out into the early evening, absorbing slowly what had just happened. I walked up Exhibition with her, but we didn't talk. She had emptied so much emotion into that song.' The improvisational nature of the process raise concerns for the writer – could that lightning be bottled and should they continue with the approach. Cantelon says, 'I didn't want to impose this on Rickie, but we all agreed to record another track. Peter and I picked some music we thought would work, and waited. "How about the chapter on prayer," I suggested when Rickie had returned – physically and emotionally. She read a few pages from the book, then put the headphones on. Again, Rickie was hearing the song for the very first time. "I wanted to pray," she sang. Five minutes later there was only silence. The first two songs, *Nobody Knows My Name* and *Where I Like it Best* were finished. We never did go back and change one note of these tracks. Instead of a literal reading from the book, Rickie was guided to say what she felt in her spirit, to answer without thinking, to seek without implying that she knew, or could know, the answers.'

I asked Jones how closely she feels her improvised lyric adheres to the vision set out in Cantelon's book. Had she imposed her own individual interpretation on the material? 'The spirit of the book is what we, or at least what I, have come to regard as addressing, "What is this living spirit? What is it's purpose? What did it say then and what is it saying now?" How do we speak the words to evoke the spirit, as opposed to just reciting the words? I was happy when this project was over, for it seemed to me to evoke

an exciting and provocative spirit in me, a soothing and intelligent idea of what Christ seemed to have done in his lifetime. He was tough, sweet, brash, risky, challenging. He did not fit in, he was disregarded in his own hometown but he was loved in Jerusalem by the people...but then the forces of the establishment had him killed. That's his life more or less, and what he had to say was if your faith was pure and absolute, if you had concentrated intention even as small as a grain of mustard, then there is nothing you could not do. Pure faith is a powerful manifesto and manifestation, and to arrive to your faith through non-violence, through non-violence in thought, language and intention, is powerful. Imagine leaving behind every single person you have seen who said he was Christian or said she wanted to convert you. Leave them behind and only listen to the source of the material... So with this in mind, I read and then I sang. I figured my source was pure, and coming out of my heart. I had no intention except to listen and convey the voice that resonated with me. I do not doubt myself, I am as loved as anyone by God, and there is no reason why I might not be able to hear the voice or spirit, and there is no reason why YOU cannot. So I feel I have put a lot of myself into this project. It is not longer simply "The Words" project, but I think it is a very powerful and loving description of what I felt and saw when I thought about this man, his times, his friends, and his words..."

Bearing in mind the improvisational nature of her contribution I wondered whether, for Jones, *Sermon...* was just a musical project or something she saw as more akin to recorded performance art? 'I was telling stories and ideas that I sensed were connected to my own emotions while telling a story of the larger world, such as in *Where I Like I Best*, which was my take on the *Lord's Prayer*: "Tell us rabbi, tell us how to pray". I started it out there and gave the person who is asking the question the primary focus, an identity. "I wanted to pray" she sings, "I wanted to let you go on your way...and anyway I wanted to know why they laid their dying in the street next to the restaurant where people were eating...and I wanted to pray". In other words, I chose to introduce you the listener to a human being who is having a hard time, who sings, "Tell me father, heavenly mother, how do you pray in a world like this?" And then, when He answers, He says what Christ said, exactly: "When you pray, pray alone in your heart...where no one else can hear". Most of this is Christ's sentiment and more or less his exact words. He says "Don't pray



like the people who make a big noise and parade out in the street so that everyone can see them.” He says “Don’t pray by rote, over and over...” Christ said that.’

Clearly Jones has an admiration for the principles espoused by Christ in the New Testament. However, how does her own spirituality align with accepted Judaeo-Christian teachings? How does she relate to the teachings of the church and the source material of the scriptures themselves? The response is emphatic, ‘I do not relate to the teachings of any church. I do not believe in or accept any dogma, any man-made prescribed attachments or rules put upon this fellow’s Words. I like his Words, I can follow his reasoning, and his great heart. I think doing this album has helped me define that, and while I’ve always known that I didn’t like organized religions, I didn’t know how much I liked Christ until I made this album. I have always been part of the invisible world and believe in it; I’ve operated under this belief always. And while I don’t think my beliefs need be transcribed or followed, I do think they make sense.’

She continues, ‘But each person must find their own way; each person

is meant to find his or her own way. That is the problem with religion today, since it often prescribes that no one can find his own way, and that everyone should follow one specific way and that (and this is the evil part) if you don’t, you don’t get any candy. I don’t believe anyone can translate this for you. Nor that anyone can threaten you with it. If they try to do so, they clearly have no idea what the Words say. You don’t go to hell if you don’t say “Jesus” a certain way. All this bullshit that has been attached to the Words needs to be addressed and dispelled. If it means getting rid of old religions, than so be it. I simply suggest on this album that one should truly follow Christ’s Way, in their own way, and that is all. I know that that may sound as radical as it sounded when he said it 2007 years ago, but hey, a good idea is a good idea.’

Since the start of the year Rickie Lee had been touring *The Sermon on Exposition Boulevard* as part of her live show. In April the tour crossed the Atlantic with a couple of gigs in the UK before heading off to Europe. More UK shows are planned for late May. One can’t help but wonder how such a spontaneous artistic expression

translates into a live arena repeated night after night. She’s philosophical about this, ‘As far as performance art... well in a way that is what this album is. And all music is that, in some sense. This record has a bit of that about it. We do it live differently every night; it is an ever-moving thing. I hope people start to record and film and document (the performance) every night, and they are invited to do so. Each night the music happens differently than every other night, so fans of my work, or of this record, can hopefully have a good time tracking its progress from night to night, from performance to performance.’ A refreshing and enlightened approach to the live show. Perhaps, then, in these days of MySpace and YouTube there’s never been a more appropriate time for Jones to continue plying her spiritual and musical path – sharing *The Words* with the World.

*Sermon from Exposition Boulevard is available from New West Records. All quotations from Lee Cantelon extracted from his account of the creation of the album at: <http://www.pennyhead.com/Sermon/>*