

J O A N O S B O R N E

Joan Osborne always brings out the best in other people's songs. For her new record, she's tackling the works of a living legend – Bob Dylan. Acoustic caught up with Joan ahead of the UK release

WORDS: DAN HOBSON

Joan Osborne has always had a gift of interpreting other people's songs and bringing out the best in them. In 1995, she turned Eric Bazilian's 'One of Us' into a worldwide hit, sparking a multi-platinum career for the singer-songwriter. Osborne has now turned her attention to the works of Bob Dylan with new album *Songs Of Bob Dylan*. Osborne's own take on a number of Dylan's most loved tracks, the album spans early classics such as 'Masters of War' and 'Highway 61 Revisited' through to his later material, such as 1997's 'High Water'.

The release follows a series of concerts Osborne performed in the USA – *Joan Osborne Sings the Songs of Bob Dylan* – earlier this year. But this isn't the first time Osborne has had a musical connection to the great man himself. In 2003, she joined the surviving members of The Grateful Dead to sing 'Tears of Rage' with Dylan onstage. In 1998, she recorded 'Chimes of Freedom' with Dylan for NBC miniseries *The '60s* too.

Kentucky native Osborne, who moved to New York in the 80s, got her start performing her own songs in the city's downtown rock clubs, just as she began to rediscover Dylan's work with Oh Mercy. "When you're playing in the nightclub scene in Greenwich Village, his trail is everywhere," said Osborne. "Not just because he played in the same places, but because people still perform his music every night."

Inspired by the likes of Ella Fitzgerald, who put together an eight-album series of her takes on Cole Porter, Harold Arlen and other Songbook writers' classics, *Songs Of Bob Dylan* is released in the UK this month, so *Acoustic* thought it the perfect opportunity for a chat.

Where are you now and what are you up to?

I'm sitting in my car in a beautiful little town in upstate New York called Roscoe.

So the new album, *Songs of Bob Dylan*, is coming out this month. What can we expect from the record?

Well, it's songs from all through Dylan's career. I wanted to do that because I'm a big fan of his later works, a lot of stuff which many are not familiar with. *Love and Theft* from 2001, for instance, is a really great record – but I know Dylan fans who don't even know it.

For some years you've toyed with the idea of recording a series of Songbook albums, akin to Ella Fitzgerald's eight-album series. How come you chose Bob Dylan for the first?

I had a bit of a connection with Dylan anyway, having recorded his songs before. I also had the honour and privilege of singing with him before. I also thought that he had so many brilliant and classic songs that there would be

a lot of choice. You could do a whole series of albums of Dylan songs alone.

Sounds like you have more covers albums planned? Who would you tackle next?

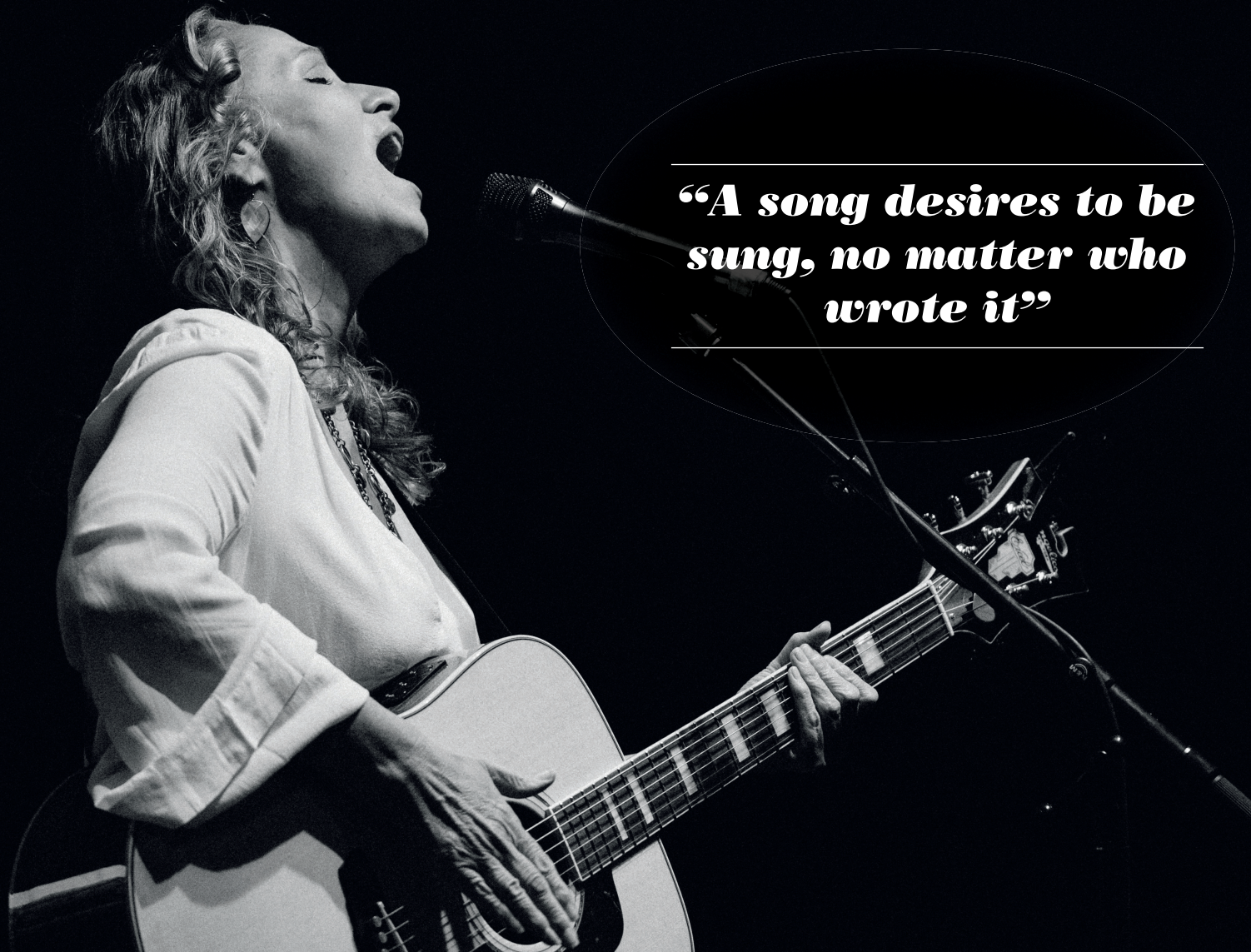
I'm hoping that this is a series as it's a really interesting creative challenge. I feel like it's something that people have responded to really well in the live shows too. Other artists I'd consider are Tom Waits, Lucinda Williams, possibly Neil Young.

Has Bob Dylan always been an artist who meant a lot to you?

I had a period of time when I was a little resistant to being a Dylan fan. Some of his songs have an edge of cruelty, misogyny even. But you just can't deny the accomplishments of his songwriting – he's like a Pablo Picasso



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“A song desires to be sung, no matter who wrote it”



figure. I understand that I don't have to like every one of his songs to be a fan.

Out of interest, what is your favourite Bob Dylan song of all time?

That's an impossible question. I can give you my top five today: 'Visions of Joanna', 'To Make Me Feel Your Love', 'Blind Willie McTell', and 'Positively 4th Street'.

None of which are on the album, interestingly... What was your selection criteria for inclusion?

I tried to find songs that suited my voice. Perhaps I will cover them another time. The songs on the album are ones that I thought I could find a way of doing.

You experiment with the arrangements on the songs. Were you nervous about 'messaging with' the songs of such a legend?

I think you have to be somewhat bold because if you just try to do a version of a Dylan song exactly like he did, or that loads of other people have done, then it's pointless. You have to be radical.

Where was the album recorded and how long did it take to finish?

We did most of the basic tracks with Jack Petruzzelli in the mountains of Pennsylvania. I liked the notion of getting everyone away from their day-to-day lives. We didn't take a long time recording, really, around five or six days. Then we did overdubs and so on in New York. We worked on it for a couple of weeks afterwards.

You're pretty much on tour for the rest of the year. Do you enjoy being on the road?

I really enjoy doing concerts, making music and hanging out with musicians; it's a nice bubble to live in. The travelling can really wear on you, though. I try to build in a little bit of time off so we can see a bit of the places we go to. Recently we did some hiking

in Oregon and saw the beaches in California. I have a 12-year-old daughter and spending time away from her is really hard.

What do you think Bob Dylan would think of the album?

Well, I would hope that he wouldn't get pissed at me [laughs]. I don't think so. I mean, why write a song? He just released his third album of standards, so he must understand that a song desires to be sung, no matter who wrote it. It continues to live only if people sing it.

What guitars do you use live?

I have a beautiful D'Angelico guitar that I take with me on the road. I also use it for writing when I'm on the road too. It's got a built-in tuner and Fishman preamp.

Will you return to the UK for a tour soon?

I'm really excited about the recording being released in the UK and I can't wait to come back and play some more shows there. I was there in April and really enjoyed it. It won't be long before I'm back there again. ■

**Songs of Bob Dylan is out now.
Info: www.joanosborne.com**