

>> This is Jennifer Gavin with the Library of Congress. Today we're pleased to be speaking with singer, songwriter Bonnie Raitt on the occasion of the Library of Congress receiving the papers of her father, the legendary Broadway singer and actor, John Raitt, and also on the launch of a website dedicated to his life and work, JohnRaitt.com. Ms. Raitt, thank you very much for joining us today.

>> I'm very pleased to be here, Jennifer. Thank you.

>> You were born into a family in which singing and performing were really part of the furniture. Your mother, Marjorie Haydock, was a noted pianist, and your dad, of course, had already made the leap from light opera in California to Broadway in New York by the time you were born. Tell us a little bit about your early memories of your father. Of course he'd already been Curly in Oklahoma and played Billy Bigelow in Carousel, which was a role that was pretty much written for his amazing voice, when you were either not born yet or a very small child. But he was still going strong on Broadway, of course, and really getting into the thick of his career when you were a young child. Can you talk about that a little bit?

>> It was wonderful for my brothers and myself to be able to have a dad that was around all day and play with us and take us to school and wash the car and hang out and do the, you know, climb trees with us and then at night he would get in his car and drive off to work, unlike most dads. And what he did, when we got to go in with him occasionally, even though we were you know like six and eight and four, my older brother and I got to go in and hang out back stage, what it was like for us was just we couldn't believe this guy who played this heroic wonderful part of Pajama Game, had so much fun back stage. I mean the excitement of the cast warming up and the orchestra tuning up and my dad sitting there with Andy Floyd, another cast member, putting on their makeup. I mean to have that as a child, you know, to be able to share in that, was such a thrill. And you know he just was having such a great time. It didn't seem like work to us and I'm sure that was not lost on me when I ended up choosing to do this for a living as well. So it was a thrill. And the camaraderie backstage and the support and the enthusiasm. And then of course to sit in the audience and watch the magic that happened every night was just an incredible gift.

>> Well of course all these shows we mentioned have been revived. I was absolutely crestfallen when I couldn't get tickets to the revival of the Pajama Game. But I grew up on that show. And songs like Hey There, A New Town is a Blue Town, which of course he sang in that show. And then everybody knows the fun numbers like Hernando's Hideaway and Steam Heat, even if they don't know the show personally. But then he went on after those shows and he did 25 years of Summer Stock. Talk about that a little bit.

>> Yeah I mean that was such an incredible gift to all the fans that couldn't make it to Broadway. And one of the things that sets my dad, one of the most special parts of him is that he really didn't feel that you should ever do any preferential, you know, play particularly well when you hit both coasts or you know where the show business elite were. You

know he wanted to bring the shows to the people and you know Carousel, Oklahoma and Pajama Game were his mighty three, which he's most known for, but he went on to do On a Clear Day and you know, Music Man, and in his later years he did Shenandoah and South Pacific and Zorba and Man of La Mancha, you know with a full head of white hair and so handsome and yet another round of heroic parts. But you know Kiss Me Kate and you know toured back and forth across the country every summer and that's where a lot of times we would get a week off from our summer camp and go and hang out with him on the road, which was really, really fun. And you know I think he played more leading man parts than anyone else in history. So he lived and breathed Broadway shows and it was amazing to me that he could actually remember, you know with a little bit of study he could actually switch from, sometimes he would do multiple shows in the same summer and have to go one week from one to the other so it was pretty astonishing that he was able to keep that repertory straight all through his career.

>> Well I would say so. Was there any trick you remember, the way he learned and prepared his parts or did he just get them in there and there they were for all time?

>> Well we were very lucky that he married our mom because she was a brilliant musician, she was his musical director and a personal pianist and accompanist on his concert stages and helped him pick his concerts. You know he did a lot of concerts as well as these shows. And she would rehearse him and we got to listen to that all day and I'm sure she ran his lines with him as well and you know they were really a partnership for the 30 years they were married so all during my childhood. So we got to watch him kind of bone up on his, you know, try to make sure he didn't take the monologue from one show and accidentally slip it into another emotional scene from another, which as the years go on I remember he was laughing about that because there was something in Shenandoah that reminded him so much of the philosophy of Zorba. But he did keep them straight.

>> You and your two brothers could be termed Broadway babies, I suppose, but when you found your muse, you didn't head in the stage musical direction. How did your dad feel about your early explorations of Blues and Folks style music?

>> Well I loved doing musicals. I learned all the songs and did them in schools and camp so he knew I fell in love with that. But folk music was really coming up at the time of my childhood. In the early 60's, you know Peter, Paul and Mary, Bob Dillon and Joan Baez were you know just icons and all the kids in college that were my college counselors you know were playing guitar. Folk music was kind of a craze there in the late 50's and early 60's. So it was very natural that I would come home from camp and want a guitar and want to learn to sing like Judy Collins and Joan Baez. And so he was very pleased that I got pretty proficient on it and my mom never pushed me on piano lessons but I asked for them. And I was playing piano and taught myself guitar. And pretty soon I was entertaining my relatives in the summer camps, you know, sitting around the campfire and I just was doing it as a hobby. And I think he was very proud of me. You know as parents would do, they bring you out and play your piano piece for the relatives and I would play my songs. [inaudible] Civil Rights and

all that was married to how I fell in love with music. It was just part of my time. Then when I played the Blues later in my middle teenagers, I fell I love with the Blues, you know the Rolling Stones and the Beatles and the rock music and R&B, I was just a regular teenager. I think the first time he heard me play in a club and I did Howlin Wolf song, Built for Comfort, Not for Speed, both my folks were a little surprised at the suddenly so grown up and risqué kind of Mae West, Sophie Tucker and all the wonderful, Bessie Smith and Blues songs that I loved. You know they sort of knew that that was part of my personality but I'm sure it shocked them a little bit. But they were very, very supportive. My dad loved what I did and you know just always wanted me to get a little bit more sleep and not stay up so late.

>> Well of course we're all glad that you were, you know, at camp doing all this stuff because later you became a star of rock and popular music. With nine Grammys and 18 albums, I would think your mom and dad both would have been pretty proud.

>> It was pretty much a surprise to get, all of a sudden be offered a record deal and make a living at something that was basically a hobby. So you know I think that I definitely went into my family line of work and fell in love with the joy of singing and the great gift that it can be to raise money for benefits and bring you know, as my dad did, I love to tour the smaller cities in the country and take my music all around, as he did. I learned so much and admired him so much for really caring about musical comedy and taking it to the hinterlands and not being preferential for money or being a big star or having a hit record or you know only playing the big significant cities. I mean that wasn't what he was about and I think I learned a lot of that connection to the regular fans from him. And I think that's why I still have a thriving career 40 years into mine is that I took my notes from him.

>> One thing that must have been very satisfying I think for you and your relationship with your dad is that even as your career was you know really hitting on all cylinders, he was still being, you were both inducted into the Hollywood Bowl Hall of Fame, for example, in 2001, which was not long before he died, and of course you went into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2000 and he was nominated for a Grammy when he was 80 years old. Talk to me about that a little bit.

>> That was a fantastic thing. You know I had spent a lot of my early career revitalizing and bringing attention to some of the older Blues artists who I felt had really been neglected or you know put aside really and we owed so much to these Rhythm and Blues and Blues artists. And you know John Lee Hooker had a big hit the same year I won all the Grammy's for Album of the Year and all that. And then I looked and my dad was working less a little bit but still singing so great and I went why am I focusing on these older Blues artists who I love when I've got this legend in my own family? There's a whole new generation of kids and even his older fans that don't even know how great he still is. So he made another album on Angel Records, which is a subsidiary of my label, Capital, and I sang three duets with him, scared to death, singing with a full orchestra, as I had done on our PBS special. In 1990 we played with the Boston Pops, with John Williams conducting, so that was the first

time I'd sung with him and then I got to do this recording. And low and behold we got lots of press and he was nominated for a Grammy. He was my special guest on all my shows in California when I played LA. He'd come up and steal the show, coming out and sing Oklahoma. And the entire Hollywood Bowl audience or wherever I was playing, whatever size theatre, you know every time he would come out on the road, they would just stand up and cheer and do rousing, you know, double courses of Oklahoma at the end of my show. So he was special guest at Radio City Music Hall. I did a whole tour where he was my special guest on the Red Rock beautiful amphitheater in Colorado, San Francisco and D.C. and the fans you know came to love him and love our very special connection on stage. And I still couldn't believe that every time we've sung together I look across and go oh my gosh, I'm speaking to John Raitt. I never, ever got over the thrill of that.

>> You know Broadway seems hotter than ever these days and you see it even in the evidence of the popularity of shows like the television show, Glee. How do you think your dad would view this sort of new generation of musical theatre mania? How do you feel about it?

>> I couldn't be happier and I think my dad, wherever he is, must be smiling just ear to ear. He's in, he really spent a lot of time mentoring young people, you know we have scholarship programs at USC, you know he at Raitt Recital Hall at Pepperdine University. He spent a lot of time teaching master classes and shepherding the next generation of singers and giving them tips about singing and you know acting and he would be so thrilled with the researchers and the exciting new era of enthusiasm for Broadway and for the history and for the new shows. I read somewhere how many you know thousands of applicants for theatre schools there are now in theatre departments and universities so he would be thrilled and so am I. I think the musical comedy is, especially in a time when people are so focused on television and video games.

>> What do you think your dad would want people to remember him for the most?

>> I think the thing that my dad would most want to be remembered for is nurturing a style of singing that comes so much from who he is as a person. He really believes that singing should be, you should sing like you speak. You shouldn't contort your vowels or your voice or the sound coming out of your chest into some kind of unnatural, you know, unbelievable way of making the music work. You know it's just not work. It should be effortless. You should believe the lyrics that you're singing. Make the connection with the people that you're singing to, whether it's your partner on stage or the audience. He's sang from deep within a place just so natural for him and I think that quality of power in his voice and emotion and subtlety and his ability to control what seemed effortless really was coming from such a deep place. And I know that we've talked about that in singing when he's you know instructed me. And I've asked him how he keeps his voice together and all that. The other thing that I think is that he took care of himself physically. He was an athlete and he always really respected his body and he felt that if you took care of yourself and your health and your attitude, which also he was incredibly positive, didn't believe in complaining. And he

came from that place and that's why his voice lasted as long is because he was vital all the way through his life and he was singing so beautifully even in his mid-80's, you know right up at his 88th birthday he sang and it was an incredible inspiration to me and to the rest of us.

>> Well I know here at the Library of Congress we were absolutely delighted and amazed to be getting his papers and making them part of collections that we hope will be used by people for centuries to come.

>> He makes me so proud to be, I mean I just, I was overcome with emotion when that connection was made. I'm so proud to know that people will be able to appreciate him and learn from him and then he will go on having this incredible legacy and effect of this glorious music of who he was as a person will be known and appreciated and I thank you all on behalf of our family and all those who loved John Raitt and have been touched by the magic of his voice.

>> We've been talking today with singer and songwriter, Bonnie Raitt, who's just launched a website dedicated to the life and work of her father, Broadway giant John Raitt. That site can be found at [www.johnraitt.com](http://www.johnraitt.com). In addition, the papers of John Raitt have just become part of the music collections at the Library of Congress, where they are available for researchers including possibly you. The John Raitt collection is the newest addition to the libraries unparalleled collections in the area of the American musical including those of George and Ira Gershwin, Richard Rogers, Oscar Hammerstein II, Fredrick Loewe, Allen J. Lerner, Leonard Bernstein, Irving Berlin, Charles Strauss, Howard Ashman, Bob Fosse and Gwen Verdon. You're welcome to explore these riches at the libraries music division on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. Bonnie Raitt, thank you for joining us today.

>> Thank you so much, Jennifer. We are honored to be part of this wonderful institution.