The late 80s was a period of taking stock for many established performers. Several, after a decade of experimentation, were returning to their roots, with artists like Neil Young, Paul McCartney, Joni Mitchell and Bob Dylan making albums as if the era of the synthesiser hadn’t happened. Arguably, the most successful of these returns to base, “Nick Of Time” by Bonnie Raitt was borne out of having creative freedom and a record company giving an artist the opportunity to do what they wanted. “Nobody expected it to sell well,” Raitt told “Billboard” in 2019. “They just said, ‘We’re not going to pay a lot of money for you, so just make a record that you want.’” And that is exactly what she did.

“Nick Of Time” made Raitt an overnight sensation at age 39, almost 20 years into her career. It is one of those albums that is often portrayed only as a dazzling run of statistics, facts and figures. And that is with good cause--“Nick Of Time” garnered five million sales, won Raitt three Grammy Awards and brought the much-respected cult performer into the global limelight. Yet, unlike many albums of its time, it still sounds fresh and vibrant today: not a museum piece of late 80s technology. There is little superfluous material here; the instrumentation solely serves the singer and the song. As a result, “Nick Of Time” sets its own universe, and a lot of that was down to the combination of Raitt’s experience and capability, and the choice of Don Was as producer.

Was--born Donald Fagenson--had made his name as performer, producer and writer with the experimental post-punk funk group Was (Not Was). He had worked in production on several low-grade UK outfits but was widely untested. Was met Raitt by chance in 1986 in LA, and the pair worked together the following year on Hal Wilner’s Walt Disney tribute album, “Stay Awake,” when Raitt paired with Was (Not Was) to sing “Baby Mine.”

Prior to “Nick Of Time,” Raitt had taken time away after the release 1986’s “Nine Lives,” which had had a problematic birth due to corporate reshuffles at Warner, her label since 1971. Originally recorded in 1983 as “Tongue And Groove,” it was rejected by the company, which was now viewing commercial rather than artistic success as its principal driver. It recanted three years later, and Raitt re-recorded half of the album. It was out of step with its
time, and only reached No. 138 in the US chart. Later, Prince—then at his peach and black peak—wanted to work with Raitt. However, the two tracks that were completed sounded simply as if Raitt were singing over a Prince backing track rather than a true collaboration. Hence, they did not revive, or alter, Raitt’s career.

Now without a deal, Raitt and Was began to work up the material that was to become “Nick Of Time” at Was’s home studio. Raitt never stopped playing live, and when Was saw her stripped-down show with bassist Johnny Lee Schell, he knew immediately that that was the approach he wanted to take. “No matter how cool a track we might eventually make, it had to work with just her alone,” Was told “Billboard” in 2019. “It was just about hearing her unadorned voice.”

However, virtually every record company turned Raitt down. It was only Capitol, who offered a deal similar to that a new artist would receive, who was willing to take her on board. There were few expectations, but they knew she had a small but fervent fanbase. So, the pressure was off. “Don and I decided that if I couldn’t make a song work with just myself and one instrument, it wasn’t the right song for me,” Raitt told “Q” magazine in 1991. “That’s why ‘Nick Of Time’...started out small and grew.”

To that end, Was skillfully captured Raitt’s very essence, letting the performance breathe. Largely recorded over a week at Ocean Way Studios in LA in 1988 (with later sessions at Capitol and Arlyn Studios in Nashville), 32 musicians in total appear on “Nick Of Time,” and, although some were household names (Herbie Hancock, Graham Nash and David Crosby); the majority of the recording was with sometime Beach Boy drummer Ricky Fataar, bassist Hutch Hutchinson and Johnny Lee Schell who played electric and acoustic, all supporting Raitt’s guitar, piano and slide, with Was overseeing.

“I fell back in love with what made me different in the first place,” she told “Q” magazine in 1991, “which is that I could play guitar and sing, and I didn’t need a whole crunching rock band behind me to sell a song.” Raitt’s delivery is a mix of honeyed experience (“The Road’s My Middle Name,” “I Ain’t Gonna Let You Break My Heart Again”), tender vulnerability (“Nobody’s Girl”), blues troubadour (“Too Soon To Tell”) and sweet storytelling (“Nick Of Time”).

The thing that grabs the listener is how immediate the album is. Less than 30 seconds into the opening title track, it is as if you are eavesdropping on Raitt’s conversation, being drawn immediately into her confidence. Talking about a friend’s ticking biological clock, her parents ageing and finding love later in life, Raitt at once sang about what many of her listeners, those who had grown older with her, were experiencing. Turning 40, it couldn’t all be about Cadillacs and beer.

At times, the Was (Not Was) influence was strong; the blend of soulful backing vocals—often Sir Harry Bowens and Sweet Pea Atkinson from Was’s repertory company (as well as Arnold McCuller), supporting Raitt’s remarkable voice. The strutting, Al Green-influenced “Love Letter” is a prime example of this. “Cry On My Shoulder,” too, is outstanding, Michael Ruff’s shimmering ballad that features Graham Nash and David Crosby on backing vocals, making the sound in unison that only they can. Although ostensibly a roots album, to these ears, “Nick Of Time” has more in common with a work like Anita Baker’s “Rapture,” as a skilled calling card for a vocalist’s talent and sounding like little else.
“Nick Of Time” became the epitome of a sleeper hit--released in March 1989, it grew and grew, firstly due to the VH1-friendly video for “Thing Called Love” with Dennis Quaid, and then bolstered by her Grammy success in Spring 1990, the album made it to No. 1 on the “Billboard” chart in April that year, deposing Paula Abdul’s “Forever Your Girl.” It stayed at the top for three weeks.3

“Nick Of Time” set Bonnie Raitt on a course she follows to this day, now a respected performing elder with a further eight studio albums to her name. In 2000, she was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and 22 year later, she attained a Grammy Lifetime Achieve Award. “Nick Of Time” is proof, that in the “me” decade, an artisanal product could be made discreetly and then, slowly but surely, go viral, letting the wider world into a secret held dear by so many of her admirers since the early 70s.


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