



Bonnie Raitt

"I Can't Make You Love Me"

Luck of the Draw

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Capitol

I Can't Make You Love Me

Chris Oxley

I have two pillars of memory with respect to Bonnie Raitt singing the torch song ballad "I Can't Make You Love Me." The first one was when I stayed the night at my friend Billy's house and he left the radio on all night as we slept. As ridiculous as it sounds, that was strangely liberating and unobvious to me. Sure, I could recall in grade school having heard Huey Lewis and the News' "Hip To Be Square" at my friend Jeff's house while we slept, but that's because we fell asleep right after we raided the fridge and forgot to turn the radio off. I'd never once considered the simple idea of intentionally having music on during a school night slumber. The sky split open wide. Henceforth, I left the radio on quietly during the night at home as well. I remember hearing R.E.M.'s broody "Drive" for the first time this way.

Anyway, I had just gone through a puppy love breakup, yet at the time it felt bigger-than-life devastating to my junior high heart. But when I woke up in the middle of the night and heard "I Can't Make You Love Me" coming out of Billy's radio, there was something comforting about a person having written a song whose chorus completely got how I was feeling in the moment. They understood me, I understood them. "Okay, I'm not the only person going through this. Man, it does suck you can't make someone love you, doesn't it? Good God. I'll survive, I guess... and that's actually kind of a pretty melody."

Mike Reid grew up the son of a railroad worker in Altoona, Pennsylvania. He was a heavyweight champion wrestler and All-American defensive tackle at Penn State in the late '60s. When he was the number 1 draft pick of the Cincinnati Bengals in 1970, quarterback sacks and pass rushing were his thing. They say he was rather quick: you couldn't wait to take one step or he'd be all over you. He was an All-Pro in '72 and '73. When he signed his NFL contract for \$22,000, he was making double what his father made in a year.

After four years playing professional football, however, Reid was done. He dreaded game day, his knees bothered him, and all he thought about was the creative life he wanted to nurture. A music student and a classical pianist, he had played with major city symphony orchestras. Of course, he wanted to play sports, but he also wanted to write. We all have creative lives we want to nurture. Some pull at you more than others. Reid's pulled like a brute, like a champ.

At the risk of seemingly shirking common sense, Reid followed his heart. When he was at Penn State his coach, Joe Paterno, loved that one of his players was a music major, but still, think of the nerve it must take to walk into your old-school NFL coach's office in the mid-'70s and essentially say, "Football has been good to me, but what I really want to do is write songs."

It took a few years, but sometimes things take time. "Mr. Bojangles" composer Jerry Jeff Walker was the first to record one of Reid's songs in 1978. Six years later, Ronnie Milsap recorded "Stranger In My House," which won Reid a Grammy for Best Country Song. He was walking among giants. To put it in context, the list of songs which earned their writers the Best Country Song Grammy from 1981 to 1986 chronologically reads as follows: "On the Road Again," "9 to 5," "Always on My Mind," "Stranger in My House," "City of New Orleans," and "Highwayman." He became an All-American songwriter and

was later inducted into both the College Football Hall of Fame and the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame.

Reid's nerve and ambition were evident even in recent years when after writing a football opera, for crying out loud, he wrote a musical about his son without any commercial ambitions, saying he just wanted to do something for himself and the people he loves, following his heart once again. But in the early '90s, he had been commercially rewarded when after working on an uptempo bluegrass song for six months, he came up with a new gorgeous melody for it that totally moved his co-writer Allen Shamblin. They knuckled down, buckled down, slowed it down, put down lyrics inspired by a news story of a man down on his luck, and finished writing "I Can't Make You Love Me."

I love how unobvious that is, too. This guy who was a wrestler, a Penn State football hero, and an NFL quarterback pulverizer, wrote a beautiful tune on the piano for a song that would become somewhat of a standard, covered by acts such as Bonnie Raitt, Boy II Men, Bon Iver, and Adele. It reminds me of a time several years ago when I wandered into a bluegrass festival at a school in North Carolina. I saw a young man in a basketball jersey, baggy shorts, expensive sneakers, a backwards ballcap, and jewelry strutting in front of me past a group of older men—a band—who were dressed to the nines as country gentlemen. They politely but curiously nodded at him and I thought, "I wonder how long that dude is going to stick around this place. Cultures are colliding right here in front of me." Never mind the reason I was even in North Carolina in the first place was to play a jazz gig.

Anyway, I walked into the auditorium and watched as audience members flatfoot danced to a group performing "Orange Blossom Special." It was hot as hell, so I went back outside to the school parking lot and milled around when I came upon the same backwards ballcap guy again. This time, however—and I swear this is true—I found him SHREDDING the fiddle, jamming with those same country gentlemen, who now all had big grins on their faces. I felt as bad then as I do now for judging a fiddle book by its hip-hop cover.

My second memory was a few years ago, weeks after Lisa gave me the divorce papers. I thought all my i's had been dotted and t's crossed when I went to the court clerk's office. It had been a farce. The papers had been mailed to the wrong address, so they weren't filed correctly or on deadline by the time we had our first court date. The judge was supremely annoyed with me, her, and the court by all of it. He was wearing orange Crocs in our hearing. (The petty angels of my nature want to take a moment and note here he was not re-elected a few years later.) For a moment I entertained the notion it could've been a celestial sign we shouldn't be getting divorced, but perhaps the truth is sometimes the universe suffers bureaucratic fuck-ups like the rest of us. There was no going back on any of it. The marriage was d-o-n-e done. Rather than go into more exciting court paper details, I'll just say I had to take the documents I was handed in that moment, go across the street to a printing service, and get them notarized.

Talk about a walk of shame. Blah. The walk to Quick Prints behind the courthouse wasn't technically long at all, but my mind wouldn't slow down about the moment I was enduring. I knew I had to take my once-again heartbroken self in, hand papers regarding the failure and dissolution of my marriage to a sweet print shop lady I didn't even know, give her money I didn't have, so she could sign and stamp papers I didn't want, to end a marriage Lisa didn't want, because my state appointed this person an impartial witness to officially say these dumb documents weren't fake. I was as irritated as the judge.

The lady was nice and understanding and seemingly non-judgmental--at least, more than I was at the whole situation. And this is the part you were waiting for: while I was there waiting for her to go through the papers and stamp her notary public stamp of approval, yes, Bonnie Raitt crooning "I Can't Make You Love Me" played from the radio they had on in the office.

"I can't make you love me if you don't. You can't make your heart feel something it won't."

After I was just in the court clerk's office.

Regarding my divorce papers.

My divorce papers which were right now being notarized.

I knew I hadn't heard the song in years, but come on... here? Now? Couldn't they just wait and listen to the radio in their sleep like some people?

The moment was not unobvious. In fact, it was so on-the-nose and painfully referential to me... it was *hilarious*. I laughed at Raitt and Reid and the blaring song, thinking if this had been a movie we would've all rolled our eyes at how contrived it all was. The sweet notary public lady looked at me strangely after catching me chuckle and said, "There ya go." I thanked her, went outside, and laughed at the hole in the sky where God ran and hid after playing his funny joke.