

Late night secrets of the reclusive Joan Armatrading BA

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The singer-songwriter talks to Hugh Davies about her quest for education

Joan Armatrading, known for protecting her privacy and avoiding the excesses of pop stardom, has revealed how she relaxes after a concert - going back to her hotel room to write history essays.



Dedicated: Joan Armatrading

The singer-songwriter, who left school at 16 and has been at the forefront of British music for 30 years, has attained a BA (Hons) at the Open University and is now thinking of applying for a post-graduate course.

"It was hard, getting the degree," she said. "It took five years. I was on tour the whole time, so I would have to find time between gigs. I'd be in Seattle one day, and Florida the next. I'd write after a concert; this was my way of coming down.

"If I didn't manage to write after coming off stage, I'd get up early and do it. I remember being on a plane to Los Angeles and Jackie Stewart was sitting opposite. I worked throughout the journey. As we were getting off he said: 'Cor, you just didn't stop - all that time.' He just couldn't believe it. But you have to do it."

Armatrading, 52, was born on the West Indian island of St Kitts and moved to Birmingham when she was seven. With such classics as *Love and Affection*, *Down To Zero*, *Drop the Pilot* and *Me Myself I*, she has achieved 10 platinum discs, 18 gold discs and two Grammy nominations. Her 18th album, *Lovers Speak*, is about to be released and she is rehearsing for a UK tour.

Self-education had been a goal for decades, she said. "It's like saying to myself: 'You're not stupid, you have some sort of intelligence.' I had to leave

school to help my family. Getting a job was the thing.

"I used to watch the Open University programmes because they came on pretty late. I was really enjoying them, and then one day I thought: 'I'm really into it, why don't I just get on with it?'"

Armatrading studied the two world wars, colonialism and music. "I wasn't thinking of it while I was singing, but when I came back to the hotel I knew I had to write. I often wondered how I was going to get an essay back to England on time, and on a couple of occasions I was late with my work. You have to do the show and travel, so it was difficult.

"I didn't discuss it with anyone in the music business. I didn't tell my family or my friends. I just wanted to do it for myself. The only person who knew was my tour manager as he had to carry my books. He jokes that he wants half of the degree.

"I am very disciplined. I remember once my manager said: 'Oh Joan, we're all going out. You must come out with us.' I said: 'I've got to write an essay.' I wanted to write. I didn't want to be going out and ignoring my work.

"When you're on tour it's literally a gig in a different place every day. So you have to work out when to do your degree work. I managed to fit in a week at a summer school in York University and stayed in the dorm."

She added: "My name is Jaba - Joan Anita Barbara Armatrading . It's kind of silly, but I now think of my name - with a BA - as Jababa.

"The degree makes me feel really good about myself. I feel I have really achieved something. That might sound really strange - people will say: 'Oh you've done this, that, and the other in music.

"But the degree is the thing I feel I have really achieved. It's not the same as having written Love and Affection. Everybody says: 'That's a wonderful song. It means this special thing to me.'

"For me, writing music is God-given, it's within me, I don't have to struggle; it's something I didn't have to work for.

"The degree was a true challenge, something to be really proud of. I don't know if I could go to Oxford or Cambridge for an MA or PhD. It's more probable that I'd go to Birmingham or Liverpool where I have been given honorary degrees."

Part of her course involved music theory. "I didn't enjoy that at all. I read and write music, but to analyse why you're using a fifth here, or why a particular harmony is used, is not fun. It's a total turn-off, a waste of time. I've written the song - there it is."

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12 April 1997: Joan Armatrading [on her first guitar]