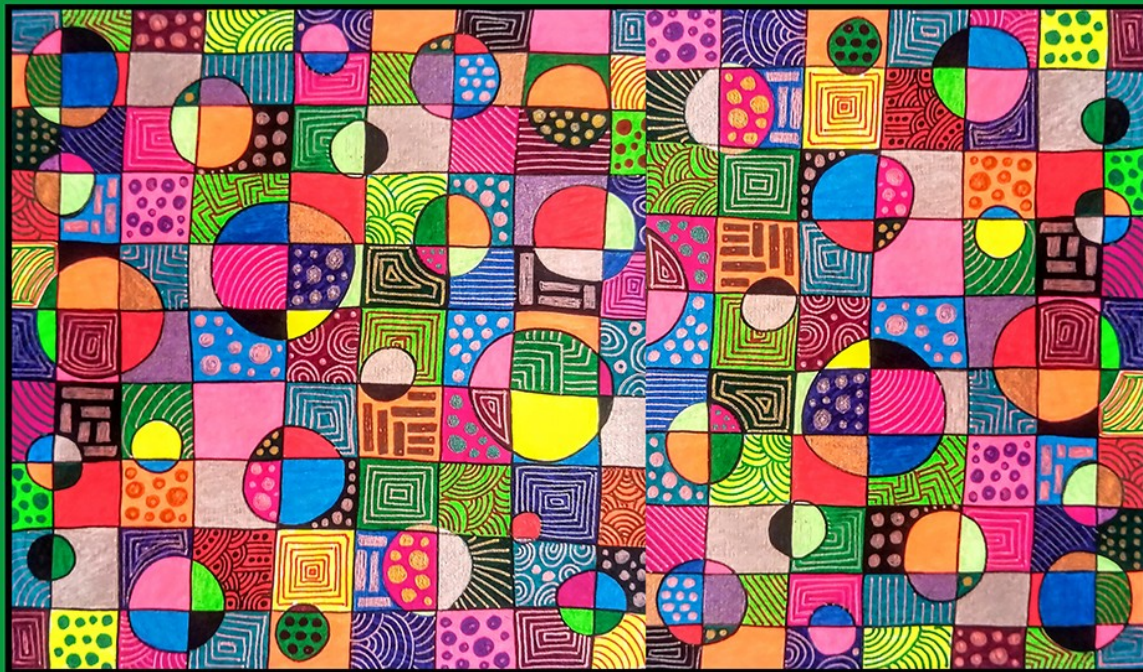


Our time is now

A farandole of JONATHAN RICHMAN songs



JC Brouhard

Vivonzeureux

Jonathan Richman lives his music first and foremost in the moment : he favours his brand new songs and the exchange with his audience at his concerts. He has released many records but rarely ponders this past : the few reissues are done without his input, there are no "deluxe" versions of his albums stuffed with extra tracks and no retrospective box sets. This means that even some of his fans only have a truncated knowledge of his output : some are only interested in the first incarnation of The Modern Lovers, others only have ears for the Beserkley era or discovered him with the "There's something about Mary" film. With the review of a farandole of more than thirty songs, "Our time is now" is an opportunity, to present a panorama of a half century of Jonathan Richman songs, from "The new teller " to "Cold pizza".



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JC Bouchard

— **Our time is now** —
a farandole of Jonathan Richman songs

Vivonzeureux

Our time is now :
A farandole of Jonathan Richman songs

2021

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Introduction

"I started singing in public in Boston in 1968. I knew I couldn't sing or play like the other guys did but I didn't want to. I figured I had feeling and that was enough. I knew I was honest."

Jonathan Richman, in a biography from August 1983
(<http://www.twintone.com/richman.html>)
quoted by Sean L. Maloney, *The Modern Lovers*, 2017

In 2019, my niece Julie made me a YouTube playlist for my birthday. This list included *Così veloce* by Jonathan Richman. I asked Julie if she was aware that, for years, I knew and cared a lot for Jonathan Richman. "Not at all", she answered. I also asked her if she knew him and why she had picked this song. She replied that she chanced upon it while looking for songs not sung in English, and that she had selected this song that she liked without knowing Jonathan Richman.

A while later, I was listening to records with my friend Christophe and, after a while, I realised that this big music fan only knew about Jonathan Richman's time with Beserkley Records. Yes, it was very productive, but it only covers the seventies. As is the case for many others, the last forty years of his musical output have

passed him by and he knows only a part or a period of his songs. Same goes for the Americans who watched him on Conan O'Brien's TV show in the nineties, those who had a good laugh watching his multiple scenes with Tommy Larkins in the *There's something about Mary* film. And then, like Julie, there are all those young fans who started coming to his concerts in the noughties after chancing upon a video on YouTube.

As for me, it took me a while to get to love Jonathan Richman's records. In about 1978, there was a false start when I wanted to discover what reggae was. I asked a shop assistant in my local department store in Châlons-sur-Marne to play Egyptian reggae for me, and I didn't like it at all !

A while later, Sonopresse, the French distributor for Beserkley, went bust. For some time, you could find many of the label's albums at the slashed price of 10 francs in the Assaut chain shops. As a high school student on a very tight budget, and not knowing the artists involved, I only bought one record the *Beserkley Chartbusters* compilation, even though I held in my hands most of the Jonathan Richman & the Modern Lovers albums. To this date, I still have regrets...

I had to wait a little more, until about 1982 when some friends made me listen to *Back in your life*, the album that notably includes *Affection* and *Abdul and Cleopatra*.

That was it, I was hooked. Since then, I have bought every Jonathan Richman record on release and I went to

as many of his concerts as possible. To be on the safe side, I even promoted two of these concerts in Reims in 1985 and 1992.

I've been thinking for a long time that, for Jonathan Richman, concerts are more important than records. It is in the live setting that he can share his emotions and have a direct interaction with his audience. His songs change with time and different circumstances, there are no two versions alike. The recording sets in stone one particular state of the song among others. The release of a record is useful to help restart the promotional machinery, it is its main use. Contrary to many artists, he doesn't tour to promote his records, he puts records out to be able to go on singing and meet up with his audience.

This might explain why Jonathan Richman doesn't seem very interested in the management of his "catalog" of records. It seems the few reissues that happened over the years were made without his direct input. There are a few scattered compilations for the Beserkley and Rounder eras but, contrary to what happens with most of the artists of his generation, there is no overall retrospective of his recordings, and even less of a comprehensive box set. No "deluxe" remastered reissue of the albums, with unreleased and rare recordings as bonus tracks. Most of the albums are only available on the secondhand market, or in digital form.

It is a coincidence, but this book is published in 2021, about 50 years after The Modern Lovers were formed and the year of Jonathan Richman's 70th birthday. Over this long period, he has always been very active, and it's not always easy to find one's way back along this path. Still, it is not here that you will find a retelling of this journey, which can be easily found elsewhere. And anyway, his songs tell a lot about his life. As it were, it is precisely my intention here to give an overview of this half century of songs, through the chronicle of about thirty of them. The aim is to facilitate the discovery of his repertoire for new fans and allow older ones to complete their knowledge and rediscover some lesser known songs.

Some albums are not represented. Not because they are less interesting, but because I tried to balance the selection and I limited myself to songs that I had enough to comment on.

Since the first concert (at the Théâtre Mogador in Paris in April 1978, I think) up until the latest tour in 2012, Jonathan Richman has had a special relationship with France, with quasi-yearly concerts over this period, some remarkable performances on Antoine de Caunes' TV shows (*Chorus* in 1979, *Houba Houba* in 1982), appearances on the compilations of friends at the APC label and the release of two tribute compilations of covers in the 1990s. And more importantly, he has often covered French songs and has himself written several ones with lyrics in our language.

This book positions itself along exactly the same lines. It is of course dedicated to Jonathan Richman, in gratitude for all the good times his records and concerts have provided me with over these forty years. And in expectation for the records and concerts to come.

Mareuil sur Ay, January 1st 2021

A farandole of songs

The new teller

Release :

Beserkley Chartbusters Volume 1 (1975)

The song opens with the voice of Jonathan on his own. Very soon, he is accompanied by handclaps. Then the instrumentation is fleshed out with bass, light guitars and drums. You can hear backing vocals later, and there's a 15 second guitar solo . Two more verses after the solo and the song is wrapped up in just 100 seconds. As for the topic of the lyrics, it's quite simple, as the author explained himself on stage at New York City Town Hall on October 29 th 1976 : *"This song it says to me about one thing, it's about having a crush on someone and I didn't have to try hard to write it cause I just walked out of the bank one day and started singing it"*.

And this is exactly what the song tells : a red-cheeked Jonathan pining for the new teller, other clients smiling as they see Jonathan queuing in the longest line and letting other people pass him by, and a girl who only needs to look at him to guess his feelings.

There is here everything that made me love Jonathan Richman's songs when I first listened to them : the lightness of touch, the excitement, the joie de vivre, the simplicity of a rock and roll with the barest bones.

This song holds particular place in his path : it is quite simply the very first song he ever published on record !

It was released in 1975 on *Chartbuster volume 1*, a compilation aiming to introduce the artists signed on independent Californian label Beserkley. The "chartbusters" tag was ironic as the label was fledgling and its signings (Greg Kihn, Rubinoos) were as unknown as Jonathan, the only exception being Earth Quake, who were behind the launch of the label with their manager Matthew King Kaufman.

Jonathan is given four of the eleven songs on this first album published by the label, as many as Earth Quake (Greg Kihn got two, The Rubinoos only one). At the end of side one, it is the very first released version of *Roadrunner* (the one later known as *Roadrunner Once*) which follows *The new teller*. On the B side, we find *Government center*, an original song which, like *Roadrunner*, was played by The Modern Lovers before the band split in 1974, and a cover which could act as a pledge of faith of *It will stand*, the hymn to rock 'n' roll released by The Showmen in 1961.

On this record, the songs are credited to Jonathan Richman alone. No Modern Lovers to back him up, but Earth Quake and The Rubinoos on two tracks each. I

think it is The Rubinoos who are present on *The new teller*.

In a piece published in Dangerous Minds in September 2019¹, Jonathan Richman recalled his meeting with The Rubinoos : "I met them in a recording studio in Berkeley, California in 1974. I was recording for a small record company at their invitation, and Tommy Dunbar, Greg Keranen and Donn Spindt were assigned to be my backing band. [...] I got along well with them from that time onwards. I lived out in Berkeley (by sleeping on the couch of the record company office-house) half the year recording and I'd hang around with them. I'd watch them rehearse and they would take me along when they played bars and clubs."

Apart from the fact that I'm very fond of it, *The new teller* holds a special place for me as *Beserkley chartbusters volume 1* is the first Jonathan Richman record I ever bought.

Unfortunately, Jonathan has never played *The new teller* at any of the concerts I attended, but I noticed that, on the few live recordings I've listened to, the audience clap their hands along to the song every time he plays it.

It seems queues were an inspiration for him at the time. In several live versions of *Abominable snowman in the market*, there is talk of the housewives stealing his place in the checkout line, and there is even a song, unavailable

on record, called *In the checkout line* (that you can track down on a bootleg called *The lost LP*, which gathers recordings from 1979), with these memorable lines : "*Well first they talked about me, then they talked about you and all the things they wish we wouldn't do, when Mama saw your mother in the checkout line*".

For a short song only released on a catalogue compilation (and reissued only on a few retrospectives), *The new teller* has had a remarkable posterity. At least if it is actually in reference to it that at least two bands named themselves (The) New Tellers.

1 https://dangerousminds.net/comments/the_rubinoos_by_jonathan_richman

Roadrunner

Releases :

Beserkley Chartbusters Volume 1 (1975) (Version Once)

The Modern Lovers (1976) (Version Twice)

Roadrunner single (1977) (Versions Once and Twice)

Morning of our lives single (1977) (Version Thrice)

The original Modern Lovers (1981) (Versions # 1 and # 2)

Live at the Longranch Saloon (1992)

If the best-selling Jonathan Richman title is *Egyptian reggae*, the one that is commonly considered a stone-cold rock classic is *Roadrunner*. Built on just two chords, this song is instantly identifiable, be it by the "One, two, three, four five six" counted at the start, the three-note "Blang !, Blang !, Blang !" riff or the "Roadrunner ! Roadrunner !" calls letting off steam in the chorus.

With six different versions released, this song must hold the record over all those recorded by Jonathan Richman, but it has rarely been played live since the end of the 1970s.

For a few years now, some have campaigned to make *Roadrunner* the official rock song for the State of Massachussetts, but some elected officials have a preference for Aerosmith's *Dream on* (Jonathan thinks his song is not good enough to deserve such an honour).

Anyway, if *Roadrunner* is an hymn, it is to cruising in your car around Boston, at night, listening to the radio. In *Roadrunner (Thrice)*, the live version from 1977, the feeling at the heart of the song is perfectly summed up : "I wouldn't say I feel lonely. I would say that I feel alive, all alone. 'Cos I like this feeling of roaming around in the dark, and even though I'm alone out there, I don't mind, 'cos I'm in love with the world."

When I discovered this song after buying *Beserkley chartbusters volume 1*, I often fantasized about a personalized version of it, suited to the vehicle I was using and to my home town, Châlons-sur-Marne. Instead of cruising in a car in the suburbs, I had the moped that my father previously used to ride to the factory for his shift-work and that was gifted to me on my 14th birthday, and I imagined trips in the biting Winter cold from the Saint-Thiébaud district to the rehearsal space of the Ouane Brothers Band in Fagnières, or from my friends' house in Coupéville to my grandparents' place on Martyrs de la Résistance street.

Sister Ray by The Velvet Underground is often presented as a model for *Roadrunner*. Sticking only to this one band, I'd rather link it to the long flights of organ on *Live 1969*, or an amalgam of the two successive song on *Loaded*, *Sweet Jane* for the riff and *Rock & Roll* for the love of radio and rock.

A non-musical influence is mentioned by Jonathan himself in a piece in ARTnews², that of Edward Hopper, particularly of *Gas* (1940). He explains that *Roadrunner* especially, a song about "*lonely nights on lonely highways and the way lights were like friends in the dark*" owes a lot to him.

Among all the available versions, the one I'd recommend especially is the one with a dirty sound and a fuzzed-up organ produced in early 1972 by John Cale and released in 1976 on *The Modern Lovers*. It is known as *Twice* since it was put on the B side of a single in 1977. The other versions of the period, live or produced by Kim Fowley, are more anecdotal, including *Version 2* on *Original Modern Lovers*, with Mars Bonfire on guitar instead of Jonathan, which dates from Autumn 1973 and which, at under three minutes long, is the most compact one. *Version Once*, with the band Earth Quake, released in 1975 on *Beserkley Chartbusters Volume 1*, is tamer and without organ, thus the guitars play a bigger role. *Version Thrice*, recorded in London at the same time as *Modern Lovers Live*, is the longest one and is all the better for it, especially as it is the only one recorded by this line-up of the band.

It is musically a very different song, but at the same time The Modern Lovers had a song in their set with is very close to *Roadrunner* lyrics-wise, *Ride down on the*

highway, except that in this instance Jonathan is not alone but in the company of a girlfriend.

I have not made an exhaustive inventory, but Jonathan wrote many songs about his native Massachusetts, starting with *New England : Fenway Park*, *The Fenway*, *Twilight in Boston*, *Winter afternoon by B. U. in Boston*, *As we walk to Fenway Park in Boston Town*,...

Roadrunner has often been covered. Twice within the Beserkley orbit, by The Greg Kihn Band in 1979 and Joan Jett in 1986. In 1984, The Jazz Butcher released a sped-up version as a single A side. The most notorious version is without contest the one recorded by The Sex Pistols, during a 1976 rehearsal and included in 1979 in the soundtrack to the film *The great Rock 'n' Roll swindle*. It is included in a medley with Chuck Berry's *Johnny B. Goode* and Johnny Rotten gets angry because he doesn't remember the lyrics.

As for myself, on February 5th 1988, in Brittany near Morlaix, I pulled myself up to the level of Johnny Rotten by joining Biff Bang Pow ! on stage in a deserted night club to cheerfully slaughter *Roadrunner*. One of the rare instances of me "singing" in public.

2 <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/muses-jonathan-richman-vermeer-monet-custom-chords-matisse-10807>

Pablo Picasso

Releases :

The Modern Lovers (1976)

Live at the Longranch Saloon (1992)

Take me to the plaza (2001)

I had noticed by myself that *Pablo Picasso* is a very linear song, very repetitive, but with my meagre knowledge in all matters of music technique, I would never have guessed if I had not read about it somewhere that it is built on just one chord.

The recording made circa 1972 found on *The Modern Lovers* opens with the volume fading in slowly and you get the impression that the band might have been playing for hours beforehand the circular riff of the song, the heavy rhythm, with a huge bass sound, and the guitar and piano answering each other. It is probably the one title in the Modern Lovers repertory that the closest in atmosphere to that created by The Velvet Underground in some of its sonic explorations.

But, on this foundation, it is its lyrics that make the originality of *Pablo Picasso*. The subject is not so much Picasso himself as a young New York guy who keeps being rejected by girls while Picasso, who was short in height, had an irresistible stare. You don't find that many lyrics with a hook as original as "*Some people try to pick up girls and get called assholes, this never*

happened to Pablo Picasso". This gives Jonathan a great opportunity to inventively rhyme "*Asshole*" with "*Picasso*", but what really nails it is the "*Not like you*" that comes right afterward !

I always assumed that, in this song, the author was referencing one of several persons he actually met while in New York. But, just before performing in Central Park (New York) in 2000, he gave this explanation³ : "*When I was about 18 years old I lived in this town. I grew up in the suburbs of Boston I moved to New York to hang out, try and act important and meet girls. I didn't have self confidence but I read this story of Pablo Picasso and he had self confidence.*". So it seems it is himself he is addressing in this song !

The live version recorded at the Long Branch Saloon in California in 1973 is rather close to the studio version. The main difference is that I can't hear any piano. Maybe there's no keyboard at all and Jerry Harrison plays a second guitar, but it's not easy to tell with this murky "bootleggy" sound.

In *Take me to the plaza*, filmed in concert in 2001, Jonathan with his acoustic guitar and Tommy Larkins with his drums succed in recreating an atmosphere close to the original version, the "*New York subway sound*" Jonathan sometimes mentions (it's probably no coincidence that the next song on the DVD is *Springtime in New York*). There is a small difference, though, with the succesful addition of a bridge or

3 <http://www.jojochords.com/songs/pablopiccaso.html>

something like that ("Some guys worry how they look, well they should know that not some handsome loverboy was Pablo Picasso").

The particular history of first generation Modern Lovers, who split in 1974 after having recorded a number of tracks but without having released any record, made possible the fact that the first published version of *Pablo Picasso* is actually a cover, by John Cale, on his 1975 *Helen of Troy* album, a year before the collection titled *The Modern Lovers* was released. As producer of The Modern Lovers, John Cale was well placed to know the song before everybody else. For my part, I first knew the original version and never cared much for this cover. The bass is less present, the electric guitars of Chris Spedding and John Cale dominate, and I'm not as fond of the singing.

This early cover was a sign of things to come. Actually, *Pablo Picasso* might had an impact on rock culture as big or even bigger as *Roadrunner*. In 1976, Talking Heads performed it live on stage (and that was even before they recruited Jerry Harrison), as Peter Laughner (ex-Pere Ubu) did in 1977.

In 1984, the version by Burning Sensations included on the original soundtrack to the *Repo man* film did not go unnoticed. Even with the addition of saxophone and keyboards, it is maybe the version closest to the original.

In 1998, my faves Television Personalities included *Pablo Picasso* on their covers album *Don't cry baby... It's only a movie*. There is a drum machine and the piano is the main instrument, but the main riff remains recognizable. Today, I have a much better opinion of this version as did at the time of the publication of my book *Television Personalities : Diary of a young fan*⁴ in 2017.

On the other hand, I don't like at all *Pablo Picasso*, as the song is presented in 2003 on David Bowie's *Reality* album. It is without too much surprise a pop-rock version, with the singing sped up, and the song is difficult to make out at the start, especially as it opens with an added chorus ("Swinging on the back porch, Jumping off a big log, Pablo's feeling better now, Hanging by his finger nails"). It's more like another song bouncing off the one by Jonathan Richman.

In a similar twist but more to my taste, there is *Gertrude Stein* by Phranc, on her *Positively Phranc* album in 1991. It is a transposition, with Pablo Picasso substituted for Gertrude Stein and New York City giving way to le Gay Paris, on a fast pace, with drums and acoustic guitar.

Ultimately, my favourite *Pablo Picasso* cover is rather recent. It was released in 2017 by Parisian band Les Daltons on their *Objet ancien* album. As, for years, I have been humming this song for myself, trying to apply French lyrics to it, I appreciate all the more that they had the good taste to successfully translate the

4 <http://vivonzeureux.fr/tvpsdiary>

lyrics into French. And furthermore, their musical arrangement is excellent and original !

More than with *Pablo Picasso*, Jonathan's interest in painters is best expressed in some of his other songs, such as *Vincent Van Gogh*, *No one was like Vermeer* and *Salvador Dali*. In 2018, in the *Muses* column of ArtNews⁵, he commented on the artists featured in his work as a musician and painter : Monet, Dali, Hopper, Vermeer and Matisse, for whom he suggests some chords diagrams that could match the blues and whites of his 1919 painting *Les persiennes*.

5 <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/muses-jonathan-richman-vermeer-monet-custom-chords-matisse-10807>

Old world

Releases :

The Modern Lovers (1976)

Because her beauty is raw and wild (2008)

SA (2018) (*The fading of an old world*)

During a fascinating musical conversation with Andrew Bird in 2017⁶, a few minutes before embarking on a duet version of *Old world* featuring Bird's drone violin, Jonathan Richman said of *The Modern Lovers* that it "was actually a collection of demo tapes that my band made and got collated into a thing and released a few years later and became what is known as the first album of that band"

It is obviously true, but each time I listen to it I tell myself that this collection of demos actually results in an album that is excellent from beginning to end, without any slack along its nine songs, several of which became classics.

When you look at the track listing, you incline naturally to oppose *Old world* and *Modern world* but, apart from these antagonistic titles, the songs have little in common and cannot be so easily opposed.

In *Modern world*, Jonathan begs a friend to drop her studies at Boston University to go on an adventure with him to discover the modern world that the United States are.

With *Old world*, as with *I'm straight*, he sets himself apart from the hippie revolutionary youth of his time. Here, it's not about drugs, but he opposes the prevailing neo-conformism by refusing to flatly reject the world and times his parents lived in. He knows this world is over and done with, but retains a certain attachment to it.

A similar feeling, some sort of nostalgia, can be found in later songs, such as *Corner store* in 1986 on *It's time for*, like an echo of Charles Trenet's *Coin de rue*, which he often covered on stage.

Old world is the only one of his early songs which Jonathan Richman re-recorded twice in the studio.

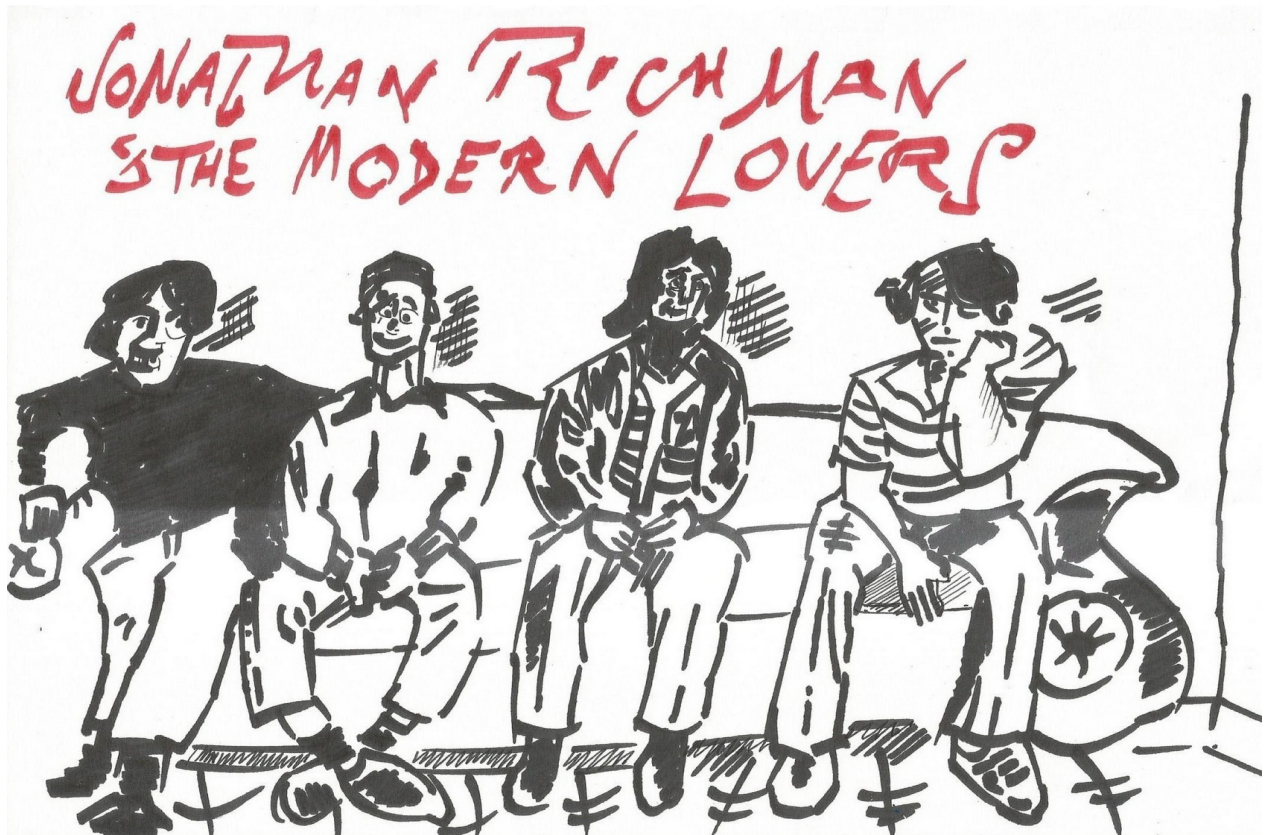
In 2008, in the liner notes to *Because her beauty is raw and wild*, where the second version is to be found, he reflects on what motivates these new versions, explaining that everything he sings is a work in progress, that he is always changing the words and melody. It is the case with this new version, featuring old pal Greg 'Curly' Keranen on bass, on which he insists on the farewell to this old world, with the disappearing traces of the 1950's. He also explains that he respects this old world but doesn't want to go back to this lifestyle.

6 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M6dBDc82om0>

With passing time, the old world that Jonathan knew in his youth disappears faster and faster and, in the third version, released in 2018 on *SA*, the song is even retitled *The fading of an old world*.

For this recording, he is accompanied by Nicole Montalbano on tambura and on mellotron by his other old partner Jerry Harrison, whose organ featured so prominently on the first version. In the end, this largely acoustic setup produces a drone effect which, paradoxically, evokes the memory of The Velvet Underground.

My friends The Jasmine Minks played an excellent version of *Old world* in concert in Leeds in 1989, opening for Moe Tucker, moreover. It was not released on record but is available on Soundcloud.



Philippe-Jean L'Incohérent, *Jonathan Richman & the Modern Lovers*, 2019.

Lonely financial zone

Release :

Jonathan Richman & the Modern Lovers (1976)

Jonathan Richman & the Modern Lovers is the first Jonathan Richman album, released in Spring 1976, a few months before the compilation of older tracks *The Modern Lovers*.

This record introduces a wide palette of styles he will build on in the forthcoming years : some predominantly acoustic fifties-style rock and roll, with backing vocals by The Modern Lovers, in the form of hymns to the United States like *New England* or the cover of the totem that is Chuck Berry's *Back in the U.S.A.* ; some love songs (*Important in your life, Hi dear*) ; a sequence of three of his songs likely to please children (*Abominable snowman in the market, Hey there little insect et Here come the Martian Martians*) ; and finally a version of the Christian hymn *Amazing grace*.

The one song that makes a perfect transition with first-era Modern Lovers is *Lonely financial zone*. It is slow and largely acoustic, but it proves to be the pedestrian and urban equivalent to the suburban paean to car driving that *Roadrunner* was.

What they have in common are loneliness and winter nights,

As with *Rockin' shopping center* on the same album, Jonathan is inspired by the beauty he sees in city buildings. *Government center*, the ode to civil servants at the Boston administrative building, also comes to mind. It was recorded both by the first Modern Lovers line-up, then for *Beserkley Chartbusters vol. 1*. If you want to know more about urban evolution in Boston in the 1970s and the local political landscape, you can read Sean L. Maloney's book *The Modern Lovers* (Bloomsbury, 2017).

Since the thought came to me about twenty years ago and I put both songs back to back on one of my mixtapes, I am unable to listen to Joy Division classic *Atmosphere* without telling myself that, as regards the rhythmic aspect of the song, the Manchester band might have been influenced, consciously or not, by *Lonely financial zone*.

On the next Jonathan Richman album, it is *Fly into the mystery* which, musically, reminds me of this song.

Dodge Veg-O-Matic

Releases :

Rock 'n' roll with the Modern Lovers (1977)

The best of Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers (1986)

Through the years, Jonathan richman has composed odes to various types of objects : his jeans (Wranglers, don't talk Levi's !), his Fender Stratocaster guitar, a chewing gum wrapper with faded colours found on a pavement, a neon sign, a rollercoaster... Among this inventory, it's no surprise to find a song in tribute to a car, especially as songs on this theme are as old as rock and roll. And after all, *Roadrunner* is a song about the joys of cruising at night in a car around Boston.

What's particular with *Dodge Veg-O-Matic*, is that the vehicle in question is a motionless automobile ! So, Jonathan makes arrangements with his friends to meet up in the car park to watch it vegetate. And his friends The Modern Lovers join him with backing vocals, and also a quasi-rockabilly double bass with a huge sound and a guitar which, specifically for this song, is acoustic, with the dirty sound of a Jew's harp.

For years, this Dodge Veg-O-Matic brought to my mind the image of one of these big fifties American cars, chrome-plated and with rounded forms, washed up in a

Boston car park. I thought this Dodge was a Veg-O-Matic model, same as in France at the same time the Ariane and the Chambord were Simca models. And everybody knows that, in the U.S.A. most cars have an automatic transmission, so the "matic" made sense.

When the Internet era came upon us, I searched more seriously for information about this model (to answer a question put by Florence on her site⁷) and, faced by reality, I had to come to the conclusion that the Veg-O-Matic was not a particular car make but a popular non-electric food slicer,...

As often, a clue could be found in the lyrics of the song themselves, when Jonathan says about his Dodge, "*I like to watch it vegetate, I like to watch it rot*". It is clear, then, that the car brought to a standstill – of an unknown model – is likened to something organic, like vegetables. So he nicknames it inventively his Dodge "Veg-O-Matic".

More detailed explanation is available on the version released for the first time in 1986 on *The best of Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers*, where the song itself is introduced by two minutes of dialogue – probably not improvised – between Jonathan Richman and The Modern Lovers. Here, Jonathan explains everything. He says that his car is a "*special Dodge Veg-O-Matic Boston model*", that it gets nowhere, it is sedimentary and has not moved for 3,000 years. He goes on to state that it's a relief that this wreck does not

7 <https://web.archive.org/web/20050315063726/http://faustine5.free.fr/Veg-O-Matic>

move as the Bostonians are the worst drivers in the country.

I only know one cover of this song, a somewhat garage rock version by American band Vehicle Flips, to be found on the *Friends like nations (1994-1997)* compilation. But, at the end of the 1980's, I helped Thierry Los, a fan working in advertisement, to get in touch with Jonathan. He had the crazy idea to convince him to authorize the use of *Egyptian reggae* for a TV ad for the Samos 99 brand of cheese ! The craziest aspect of the whole story is that he succeeded, as Jonathan accepted the offer and even recorded two versions of the TV commercial, concluding by pronouncing the "*La portion de lait des grands*" slogan with his unmistakable accent. In the end, the company opted for security and the ad was re-recorded for broadcasting with a French artist, Slim Pezin⁸.

In 1989, Thierry formed a band, initially with the aim to do live covers of another Boston band, The Remains. But they turned to The Modern Lovers when they came to choose a moniker : Dodge Veg-O-Matic. In 2000, a new line-up of the band shortened the name to Vegomatic.

That little sleeper car is to be found on the *Surrender to Jonathan* album. I think it's the only other Jonathan song about a car. Here again, the outlook of the car is

deceptive. The car may appear drab, bad and sad, but Jonathan is not fooled and is sure it's a high-class little car.

⁸ The three versions are available here :
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_7HhxMmuuo

I'm a little dinosaur / I'm a little airplane

Release :

Modern Lovers live (1977)

1977 was the year when Jonathan Richman became popular, particularly in the United Kingdom with the releases of *Roadrunner* as a single, of the *Rock and roll with the Modern Lovers* album and especially the very successful hit from the album, *Egyptian reggae*, an instrumental that's become a classic.

In September, Jonathan Richman and The Modern Lovers played their first European tour and the concerts on the 17th and 18th at the Hammersmith Odeon in London were recorded. A few weeks later, in mid-November, to capitalize on previous success and, most probably, to benefit from the lucrative Christmas shopping period, these recordings were used to make up the *Modern Lovers live* album.

It is quite simply one of my favourite live albums ever. In the same category, I put *Live 1969* by The Velvet Underground, but beyond that and *Cigars, guitars and topless bars* by Dogbow1 I have to think to extend the list. It just proves how rare I find that a live album is

interesting in itself, especially for someone who did not attend the concert.

This album is a bit atypical. There is no songs from the first period Modern Lovers that the audience had just got to know, even though the band played a few on that tour (three of them were later released on single B sides). Of the nine tracks, five (including two instrumentals) were featured on the first two albums and the remaining four were previously unreleased, and have never been released again since, be it in a studio or another live version.

These four unreleased tracks are four great songs. I decided to review two of them together because they each open one side of the album and they are close in spirit, beyond their almost identical titles.

It is at this time that Jonathan Richman forged his reputation for writing songs for children. *I'm a little dinosaur* and *I'm a little airplane* fit perfectly in this category, and there are two more of this kind on the album, *Hey there little insect* and *Ice cream man*, in a famous extra-long version with multiple false endings. But to describe them as children songs is oversimplistic. These are songs full of *joie de vivre* that can please anyone with a mind open enough to laugh, sing and dance while listening to them. And it seems the adult audience at these rock concerts really took to them.

I'm a little dinosaur is a very short song that I loved on first listen. For once, it features children as well as the

titular dinosaur.

Here, the audience start laughing as soon as Jonathan declares "*I'm a little dinosaur*" and then "*I'm planning to go away*". For the rest of the song, it took me a long time and many explanations to understand what's happening and, in this particular case, the image of Jonathan acting on stage as the dinosaur is severely lacking. Indeed, for years I didn't realise that, at the time someone at the mic pleads to the dinosaur to come back while the backing vocals ask "*Where's the little dinosaur ?*", it is not Jonathan singing with a changed voice but a member of the band. And what is Jonathan doing at this point ? Well, in all likelihood, as can be seen on some online videos, he is prancing the stage on all fours, hiding behind the drums before a triumphant reappearance !

In 1987, Brennan Totten and Jonathan Richman appeared in the pilot for a TV show on a local cable channel, a pilot that was never aired. On the soundtrack for the interview⁹, led by the janitor of the station, you can hear Jonathan explain that the inspiration for *I'm a little dinosaur* came to him from Herbert the blue dinosaur, a character in a book by children which had brought back to him dreams he made when he was three or four years old.

Some could consider this song as lightweight throwaway, but it is a great achievement. It is enough to

show, as the rest of the album confirms, that we deal with an excellent band, with a finely expressed musical and vocal quality.

I'm a little airplane is another such instance, a good little rock and roller, with guitar solos and more backing vocals, going "*Nyaow nyaow*" this time.

In 1978, in a live version for Dutch TV show *TopPop* rather similar to that on the album (available online), there's the scale model of a plane on the drummer's charleston and the band is all smiles while it's being targeted by a squadron of paper planes. Jonathan has difficulties stifling a fit of the giggles.

Every time I listen to this song, I can picture myself extending my arms in a V in the recreation ground of Sainte Thérèse du Verbeau school in Châlons-sur-Marne, where I was a pupil in infant and primary school. I am reminded of the fairs, where I always chose a plane with a propeller and red light, because it could go up and give me more chance of catching the prize pompom waved by the owner of the merry-go-round.

This song was perfect for the *Sesame street* TV show clip it was used in in 1994. It was covered in 2006 by They Might Be Giants, a band who, by the way, has released records and played shows specifically for kids. There are at least two more different songs, probably more recent, sporting the same title.

These two songs, *I'm a little dinosaur* and *I'm a little airplane*, inspired me in 1987 to set up the *Des*

9 <https://medialoper.com/jonathan-richman-and-a-janitor-walk-into-a-bar/>

comptines pour tout le monde (Nursery rhymes for everyone) project. The idea was that Jonathan Richman would play rock rhymes in schools in Reims during his October 1987 European tour. I had an appointment about funding it at the local branch of the Education Ministry, where the official politely listened to me, but it went nowhere.

The morning of our lives

Releases :

Modern Lovers live (1977)

Morning of our lives single (1978)

This song was only ever released in a live version, but this particular version is just perfect.

I'm not into books on well-being, seminars on self-help or motivational manuals. And there's little chance I ever need to turn to them because, this song alone can fill all these functions. That's why it was one of the pillars of optimistic hip-pop, a pseudo philosophico-musical concept I derived from my radio show *Let's live happy ! (while we await our death...)*.

It's the end of the show, probably at the time of the last encore (Jonathan says "*Goodnight*" at the end, and the track is the final one on the album).

The song starts slowly, the pace is given by a guitar, small taps with the sticks and isolated bass notes. The instrumentation is minimal but perfectly measured out and, from the beginning, the audience claps along to the band in rhythm.

In this song, Jonathan talks to a girl friend and he seeks to encourage and empower her : "*I got faith in you. Sometimes you don't have it in yourself, but I got faith in you. And our time is right now, now we can do*

anything we really want to. Our time is now, here in the morning of our lives.".

Now you know where the title of this book comes from...

At this moment, he calls for support his friends in the band, Leroy, Asa and D. Sharpe, to tell her not to be afraid, that she's all right and that they love her too.

Something extraordinary happens in the last minute of this rather long song. At the end of the last chorus, there is a micro-pause, and you feel like the audience explodes, reacts ("*Yeah !*" and applause) and start clapping again more loudly for a coda during which the singer now visibly addresses everyone present, not just a friend : "*We're young now... Now's the time for us to have faith in what we can do. No need to fear, cause now's the time to have faith in what we can do.*".

It's powerful and moving, the kind of moment of collective joy and emotion that is not rare at a Jonathan Richman concert but which a recording can usually not convey.

The most surprising in all this is that this very beautiful song, which is anything but a pop nugget, was chosen as the A side for the first single culled from the album in England, even before the more obvious *New England*.

Following on from the success of *Egyptian reggae*, it was even ranked, very briefly, in the Top 30 of the local charts.

I have decided in this book to concentrate on officially released versions of the songs but, for this particularly

significant song, I have chosen to make an exception. Yes, the excellent live version is self-sufficient but, without making them available, Jonathan Richman has recorded other versions in the period between the *Back in your life* (1979) and *Jonathan sings !* (1983) albums, and these versions, circulated between fans, are interesting.

Listening to them, we learn an anecdotal detail (the friend he's talking to is called Carol) and more importantly, we discover that Maurice Chevalier was one of the inspirations for this song.

On stage at The Left Bank in 1981, he explains that he read a Maurice Chevalier book (I couldn't locate the source browsing through the book, but it's probably his memoir *Ma route et mes chansons*, translated in 1970 as *I remember it well*) in which he explained that, when he saw young lovers kissing on the streets of Paris, he liked to watch them because they were having a good time and he felt like going up to them to tell them something like "*My friends, enjoy it while you can*". This is what inspired an additional verse to the song.

In an unreleased 1981 session, it goes like this : "*If Maurice Chevalier were here today, he'd take us all by the hand and say : Enjoy it while you can. For me, it is the twilight, but for you it's the morning, ladies and gentlemen. Our time is maintenant, le time to do les choses, comment dit-on, tu vraiment veux, oui, le temps est maintenant, le matin de notre vie. (...) Nous avons la jeunesse maintenant.*". Formulated a little differently, but still in French, it went like this in a home session

circa 1979 with Andy Paley : "*Le temps est maintenant, le temps de faire les choses que vous vraiment aimez. Notre temps est maintenant, dans le matin de notre vie.*".

The one song of the same calibre I associate with this one is *Affection*. To confirm that the concept of youth is relative, one can also refer to *Just about seventeen* : whatever your age, every time you listen to *The Morning of our lives* you feel young, ready for a new start and full enough of life, for instance, to start singing another Jonathan Richman song, the hyper energetic and lively *I'm just beginning to live* (1985), whose main lyrics, apart from the title, are "*Wang a dang a dang a do a dang dang*".

But we should not fool ourselves. With the death of Leroy Radcliffe in January 2021, coming after those of Asa Brebner in 2019 and D. Sharpe in 1987, there would now be no one at all to answer Jonathan's call if he were to sing *The morning of our lives* today. We have a thought for them, reflecting on the fact that the morning of our lives is always too short.

Abdul and Cleopatra

Releases :

Abdul and Cleopatra single (1978)

Back in your life (1979)

After the four albums (including a compilation of older songs) released in 1976 and 1977, Jonathan Richman didn't release any album in 1978. This is in part due to the split of the band that recorded *Rock 'n' roll with the Modern Lovers* and *Modern Lovers live* at the end of a European tour in 1978, before the recording of the new album was finished.

So, *Back in your life*, released in 1979, is the fruit of several sessions, including four acoustic tracks recorded with Andy Paley and other friends. But two singles had been released in 1978 as a prelude to an album that was then meant to be called *Modern love songs : Abdul and Cleopatra* and *Buzz buzz buzz*, a cover of a 1957 Hollywood Flames song.

It is with the *Back in your life* album that I became a Jonathan Richman fan, and *Abdul and Cleopatra* is one of his songs that had the biggest impact on me, one of my totemic songs. I even wrote a series of two or three short stories, which have thankfully remained unpublished, with Abdul and Cleopatra as main

characters, in a vein more inspired by French writer Boris Vian than by Jonathan.

For years, I tried to understand what the line "*How I wonder where she's at-ra*" could mean. I had no chance to succeed since, in this instance, it is simply because the author went to even greater length than usual to make "at" rhyme with "*Cleopatra*"! It's probably specifically this line reviewers have in mind when they say that the rhymes in *Abdul and Cleopatra* reflect Jonathan's interest for American poet Ogden Nash, who has a reputation for surprising, sometime far-fetched rhyming.

What is the song about ? Love in the Middle-East. Abdul waits for his Cleopatra, he hasn't seen her for nearly a year, he pines for her but she's still the one. It will be her or no one, he knows his time will come. Musically, it is perfect, from the opening lone snare drum hit through to the backing vocals and handclaps, including the Eastern atmosphere, the electric bass sounding nearly like a double bass, the fifties-like echo and Leroy Radcliffe's guitar solo.

On stage, Jonathan made several times the link between this song and his personal history, with the fact he had been hoping to live a love story with the object of his affection, who was not free – and who had played Cleopatra in a high school play. On the *Houba Houba* TV show in 1982, he explained that he was unhappy

when he wrote this song but that he had wanted it to be funny, before launching on an excellent solo version, complete with guitar acrobatics and mimed hieroglyphic postures as a bonus.

With the mention of Cleopatra, the song can only echo *Egyptian reggae*, from the previous album. Also in 1977, the band played live what may have been an early incarnation of it, titled either *Abdul* or *Here we are in ancient Egypt now*, with different lyrics : Abdul drives a chariot or a gondola for the Pharaoh, the girls he tries to seduce tell him to get lost, but Cleopatra makes eyes at him.

If you look at it closely, you realise that *Abdul and Cleopatra* expresses the exact same feeling as *Back in your life* ("I will wait a long time, if that's what it takes"), with simply a different point of view : in *Back in your life*, played solo on acoustic guitar, Jonathan, who is named expressly in the lyrics, speaks in the first person.

in 1985, on the B side of *I'm just beginning to live*, Jonathan Richman recorded *Shirin and Fahrad*, a song which, beyond the association of two first names in the title, is very close to *Abdul and Cleopatra* in theme. The difference is that *Shirin and Fahrad* tells a more classic and less personal tale, in the style of *One thousand and one nights*, with an ending reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet*. It is in 1986, on the center label of the *It's time for Jonathan Richman & the Modern Lovers* album, that

we learnt that this recording is co-produced by Jonathan and one Gail Clook, who I'd bet once played Cleopatra at high school.

Affection

Releases :

Back in your life (1979)

I'm so confused (1998)

Love songs are a dime a dozen but, thinking about it seems affection songs are rather uncommon !

In the setlist of first period Modern Lovers, there was an epic song, *A plea for tenderness*, a 1973 version of which was released on *Live at the Longbranch Saloon*.

It is very different from *Affection*, but some versions contain the expression "*I've been starving for warmth*", which seems to anticipate it.

Listening to *Back in your life*, i was immediately won over by *Affection*, which touched me and which I consider one of Jonathan's great songs, in a line with *Hospital* and *The morning of our lives*. In this particular instance I was lucky, because this song was performed at the first two Jonathan Richman concerts I attended, in London on June 21st 1984 and also in Reims on June 13th 1985, with simultaneous translation of some words in French.

It is a slow song, but with a dynamic instrumental section, with it seems a few notes of organ or melodica subtly supporting. In the lyrics, affection is personified and ends up at one point alone and ignored in its corner.

The main point of the song is that it takes courage to reach out to others and show affection.

According to some concert reviews, Jonathan was sometimes submerged by emotion when he sang it live, as were some members of the audience.

You can watch online a very good live version, taped for Dutch show *TopPop* and broadcast on September 16th 1978. It is close to the studio version, which shouldn't come as a surprise as it's played by the same band who had just recorded it.

Affection had a strong impact right away after being played on this 1978 tour, even before it was released on record. A big fan, Plastic Bertrand, released in 1978 a different song, written by Lou Deprijck but also titled *Affection*, on the B side of the *Super cool* single. The feeling expressed is rather similar to the one in Jonathan's song, but emotionally we're not on the same level, with lines like "*My big dog that I like licks my hand and tells me in his own language Wa wa wa, wa wa wa, which means Affection*". If the link with Jonathan Richman was not obvious enough, it was confirmed with the release on pink vinyl of second album *J'te fais un plan*, which mentioned in its liner notes that "*Affection is dedicated to Jonathan Richman who is the most "indispensable" singer in our time*".

Affection was recorded again in 1998 for *I'm so confused* in a version that is not fundamentally different from the one on *Back in your life*, even if the backing vocals by the Modern Lovers are missing. And for once,

the "additional keyboards" by Ric Ocasek and Brian Sperber can be heard clearly. Lyrically, there's an added part about certain people in the audience who might be scared that Jonathan is going to ask them to hug their neighbour. This part is present in many live versions, including in 1983, with a new Modern Lover on saxophone, for a concert broadcast on the *Penthouse Magazine College Rock Concert* show, which was pressed on record for a few copies for syndication on some American radios.

In 2004, in the title song of the *Not so much to be loved as to love* album, Jonathan reflected on the feelings expressed in *Affection*. After the fact, he explains that he was searching for affection but was looking in the wrong direction, as he needed not so much to be loved as to love.

I rank *Affection* as one of Jonathan Richman's "classics", but bizarrely this song has rarely been covered. To my knowledge, only English band The Jazz Butcher have given it a try, on 1984 Glass label compilation *Shadow and substance*. It is a very lo-fidelity recording, with lots of echo on the vocal and visibly just a guitar as accompaniment, except for the backing vocals, which are duly present, as on the original version.

In the nearly 1980s in Lyon, France, the band Affection Place was named in reference to this song.

The neighbors

Releases :

Jonathan sings ! (1983)

Jonathan goes country (1990)

Jonathan, te vas a emocionar! (1994)

Jonathan sings !, is the first Jonathan Richman album released after I started getting interested in his music. It was released toward the end of 1983, when I was staying in England. I bought it when I came home for the Christmas break, dubbed it on cassette, and often listened to it once back in London, especially when I was walking my landlady's dog.

Four years had passed since the previous album, *Back in your life*, whereas, from 1976 to 1979, Jonathan had released three studio albums and a live one. Now, the record was out on a new label (Sire, linked to Warner Bros), but the British branch declined to issue it, so it found itself on Rough Trade a few months later), with a new Modern Lovers line-up (only bass player Greg Keranen remained from the band that split up before *Back in your life* was finished).

At first, I was a bit let down by this album. The sound was so much different, the production and the arrangements so lush compared to the records I had just learned to love that I had difficulties adjusting. But I

soon loved it and, in retrospect, you just have to look at the list of its ten songs to realise it's an excellent album, one of those in his output with the highest proportion of "classics".

The neighbors is a very particular song in Jonathan's work. It is a song written to be sung as a duo, which can be taken as a mini-theatre play in three acts, either a comedy of manners or a vaudeville.

In Act I, Jonathan is at home alone with a friend. She wonders if maybe she should go as it's late and the neighbours might tell his wife if they see her leaving the next morning. Jonathan answers that his wife knows him well and he doesn't want to let his neighbors run his life.

In Act II, Jonathan is walking in the street with the same friend. She is worried again because they are hand in hand, close to each other. People might get the wrong idea. Jonathan replies that he understands that his neighbors might go and tell his wife if that's all they see, but his wife knows him better than that.

In Act III, Jonathan is alone at home with his wife. He remembers another situation, a night he spent at a friend's, Jill, when her companion Eddie was away. As soon as his wife utters the first "*Mhm mhm*" in reply when he tells her he was at Jill's, we understand things won't go as smoothly as hoped. It looks as if he sinks deeper in trouble every time he tries to justify himself ("*We had many things to discuss. First I showed her the daily newspaper. That's right. Then I showed her the*

funnies. There was no other business than that, I don't really know what the whole point was.")

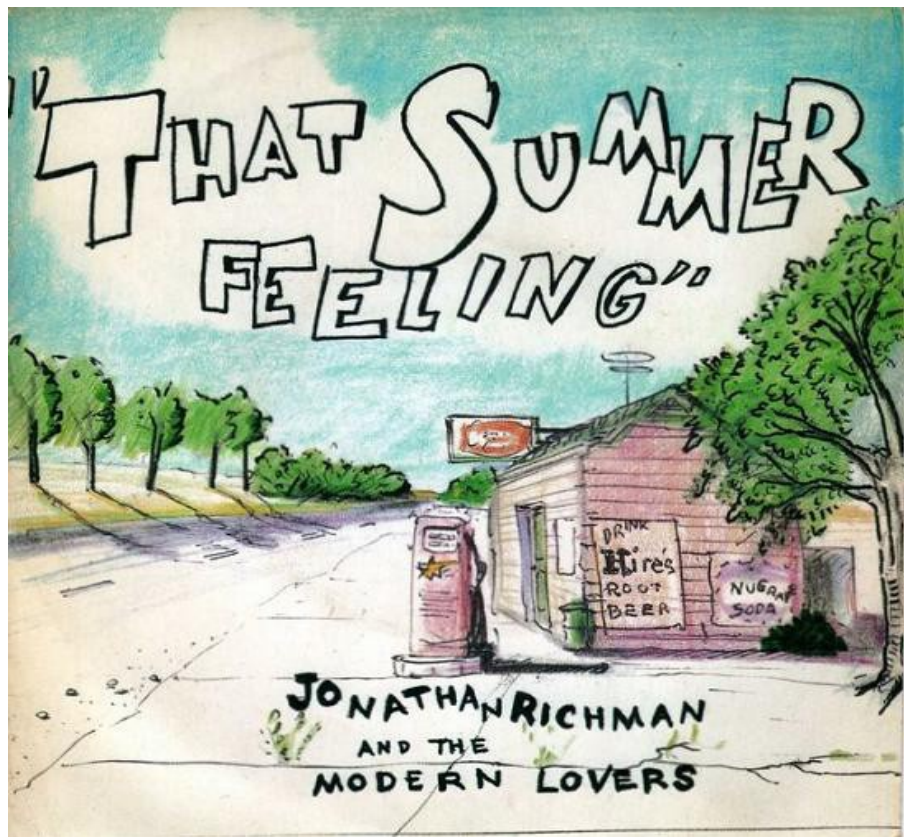
It's a song with a very original theme, in which Jonathan bets on sincerity and honesty. But the simple fact that the question is asked, and the consequences, show that things are not so simple. Especially as, even if it's likely, as Jonathan affirms, that nothing "*suspect*" happened, the sole account of the situation is suspect in itself.

Jonathan Richman has often rerecorded some of his songs along the way. But *The neighbors* must hold a special place as it is one of the rare songs he's released on three different studio albums (*Old world* might be the only other one). The 1983 *Jonathan sings !* version is sung by one the two Rockin' Robins, Ellie Marshall or Beth Harrington. It is Jody Ross who performs on the country version in 1990 and Evy Ledesma in Spanish in 1994. As much as I am a fan of *Jonathan goes country*, I never could appreciate *The neighbors* on this album, nor later the version in Spanish. I prefer the female singing and the backing vocals on the first version, and above all, the next two versions miss Act III, the funniest one, the one in which Jonathan, faced with his wife, squirms to try and justify himself. *The neighbors* is featured on several compilations, but every time it's the 1990 version that has been picked, for contractual reasons most probably.

I don't think Jonathan ever sang *The neighbors* on stage at the concerts I attended, even though he often played it

in the late eighties and early nineties. But, even if sung perfectly, the song lost much of its piquancy when not performed as a duo.

Jonathan recorded other duets with women, especially *Just because I'm Irish* with Julia Sweeney in 1995 on the *You must ask the heart* album ("*Just because I'm Irish he thinks that I should know every Irish bar in Manhattan*"). Very well, but to enjoy their funniest collaboration, you need to head to YouTube to watch the clip from the Conan O'Brien show in May 1994 in which Julia, a blushing and charming non professional singer, sings with Jonathan the unforgettable *Roberto the trainer*.



Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers, *That Summer feeling*,
7" and 12" single (Rough Trade, 1984, RT(T) 152)
Illustration : Jonathan Richman

That Summer feeling

Releases :

Jonathan sings ! (1983)

That Summer feeling single (1984)

I, Jonathan (1992)

Manifeste : A.P.C. (Section musicale) (2000)

Just a spark, on journey from the dark (3rd episode, 2020)

Nostalgia is the fuel of many great songs. *That Summer feeling* belongs in this lot, undoubtedly, but what makes it stand out is that it's not just a nostalgic song, like *Corner store* for instance, but a song addressing the listener to warn him that nostalgia is unavoidable and is bound to touch him at one point or another in his life.

The first released version, the opening track on the *Jonathan sings !* album, is perfect with the organ, the rounded bass of Curly Keranen, the female backing vocals of the Rockin' Robins... The lyrics all along are a tour de force, with a choice of universal situations (school, friends, girls, holidays,...). The great achievement is in the way this intangible feeling is grasped with just a few words.

When Rough Trade released the album in the UK in Spring 1984, they decided to issue *That Summer feeling* as a single and, as an artefact, it might well be

Jonathan's best achieved record, especially as the music and the cover art are so well matched. On the record, apart from *That Summer feeling*, there is another album track, the manifesto-like *This kind of music*, as well as the previously unreleased *The tag game*. On the cover is a drawing by Jonathan Richman, which once again can evoke Edward Hopper's *Essence*. Except that in this case the service station is not seen at night but in the full Summer light.

For a long time, only this version mattered to me. But today, when I listen back to the version released in 1992 on *I, Jonathan*, I realise that it doesn't pale at all in comparison with the first one. And Jonathan's singing on it might even be better. This version takes its time (Two minutes more, six in all), which makes room for an additional verse, the one about the little girl on the swing in the park with an ankle bracelet. The acoustic guitars are at the fore and this time the backing vocals are male.

In 2000, we were surprisingly gifted with a third version, on *Manifeste*, a compilation released by A.P.C.'s Section Musicale. No info is given on the date and conditions of recording, but it is older than the previous two because Jonathan introduces it by stating that it is one of his new songs and by giving a French translation of the title, "*Cette sensation de l'été*". He is either on stage or in a studio, but there was at least a small audience present, as there's clapping at the end. I

think this version dates from Jonathan's stay in France in 1982. He also performed *That Summer feeling* at his show at the Rex Club on May 19th. On this version, Jonathan Richman is alone with his guitar as sole accompaniment.

With the same setup, you can watch on YouTube a version recorded live on Australian TV in 1983, with acoustic guitar and finger snapping. There is a huge lot of echo on the voice, making for a quasi-rockabilly atmosphere in the vein of *Lonesome town*. He addresses his listeners several times by pointing a finger at the camera and seems overwhelmed by emotion at some point, unless he's just out of breath, but I don't think so. Among the persons watching him, sitting on a sofa, there is John Cale, who was doing promotion for his *Music for a new society* album.

That Summer feeling undoubtedly isn't Jonathan's most rock and roll or danceable song, yet it's precisely this one he performs with Tommy Larkins in a scene in *Kingpin* (the 1996 film the Farrelly brothers made prior to *There is something about Mary*). They're playing in a tavern when the Amish character played by Randy Quaid is invited to dance. He has only the time to quip "So that's rock 'n' roll. I like it" before being taken on by his partner's boyfriend and his gang.

The first released cover is the one in Spanish by La Buena Vida (*Sentir verano*) on the *Can you talk to the*

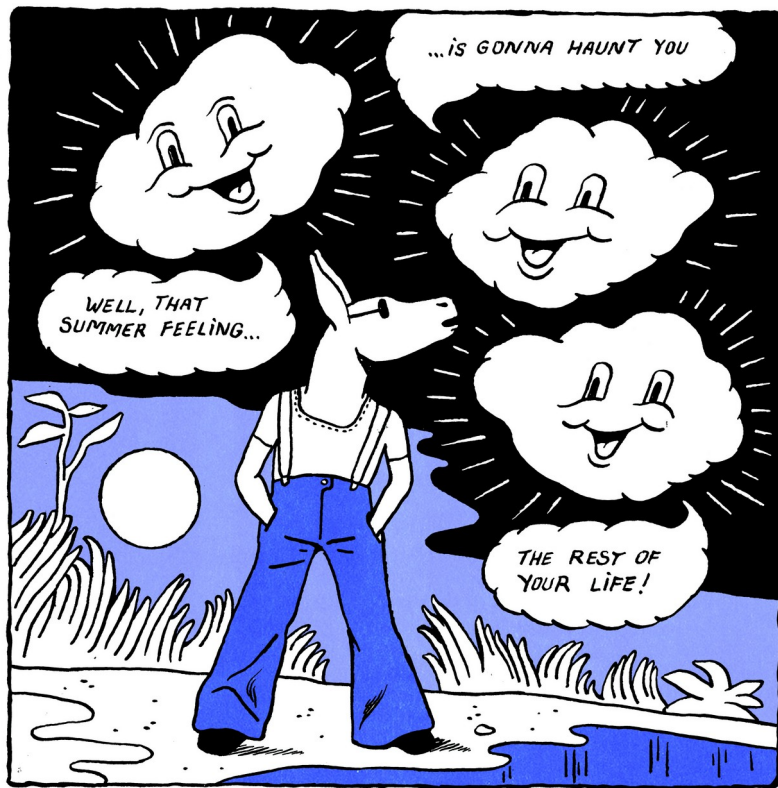
dude ? compilation in 1994. It's a very good performance as a male-female duo.

The following year, Scottish band BMX Bandits released their version on a single A side. What's surprising is that on this occasion they have a guest, soul legend Dan Penn. With its organ, this cover is closer in spirit to the *Jonathan Sings !* version.

The song was also covered by The Vaccines in 2012 on the *Please do not disturb* EP, in an acoustic guitar-based take based on the *I, Jonathan* version.

The title of the 2015 Mickaël Hers film *Ce sentiment de l'été* is inspired by that of the song. The song itself should have played a part in the film, but the scene that was shot was cut out of the film.

Jonathan Richman doesn't use the internet himself, but after six months without any concert because of the COVID-19 pandemy he nevertheless launched into a new project through his Blue Arrow Records label. *Just a spark, on journey from the dark* is presented in the form of episodes of 15 minutes of music put on sale on Bandcamp. In October 2020, in the third episode, marked by the presence of Tommy Larkins on congas, you can hear an actual brand new version of *That Summer feeling*. I can make out the chorus, but the verses are sung in a different melody, with unheard lyrics such as "When the day starts facing the dawn, and it's already hot by 9 A.M., and the smells on the town are so strong, and they just amplify all sorrow."



Fabio Viscogliosi, *That Summer feeling.*

The U.F.O. man

Releases :

Rockin' and romance (1985)

j Jonathan, te vas a emocionar ! (1994) (*El U.F.O. Man*)

In Spring 1985, I got hold of a Jonathan Richman promotional press file put together by Rough Trade Records. In it, his birth date, on May 16th 1951, was mentioned, as well as a forthcoming European tour in May-June. I don't know why, but this trivial piece of information struck a light in my brain and I told myself "What if we invited Jonathan Richman to play in Reims (my home town) for his birthday ?". I wasted no time in launching a call to listeners on my *Buffet froid* radio show, asking them to send in birthday cards to Jonathan. I got hold of about forty cards, mostly from my circle of friends and from other DJs at Reims Radio FM, but I did get a handful through the post from "real" listeners. I sent them to Rough Trade, explaining to them that we would be happy to welcome Jonathan Richman in Reims.

I recently found a postcard my friend Alan McGee sent me while on tour with The Jesus and Mary Chain, saying he would talk about my project with the people at Rough Trade. It never crossed my mind at the time, but with hindsight I think the support from my British

friends was decisive in making the project happen. We only got the OK with a few days of advance notice but, with the whole team at the radio mobilized, we were able to host Jonathan Richman & the Modern Lovers on June 13th in Reims, in the Wedding receptions room at the Maison Commune du Chemin Vert, for a concert followed by an interview broadcast live on the radio.

Everything went well, with sixty to a hundred persons present, except that we hadn't thought that the radio transmitter two floors above would interfere with the sound. So, the PA made a buzz all evening that we never managed to suppress.

I have only good memories of that evening but today, when I think about it, I do feel a little shameful. That's because, when it's someone's birthday, his friends or family stage a party for him and he's king for a day. But that day, it's Jonathan who gave us a present by coming to play for free, and the worst of it all is that, in the course of the evening, it didn't even cross my mind to offer him some presents or have a cake and candles on hand to celebrate at the end of the show !

The album was just out, but it arrived in shops in Reims only the following week. So it is that night, in concert, that I discovered most of the songs on *Rockin' and romance* (and even a few from *It's time for...*, released the next year).

The line up was made up of Jonathan on electro-acoustic guitar and vocals, Asa Brebner on guitar and backing vocals and Andy Paley on drums and backing vocals. With such a trio, they played pure rock and roll

that night, and one of the most unhinged songs in the set was *The U.F.O. man*, played twice I think, including one as an encore, and introduced with the precision that the French Mirage jets fly very very fast, but the U.F.O. man goes even faster.

It is a song that works very well live, with the "*Flying around*" and "*Over my town*" that you can repeat with the band while clapping in time. Even if the subject is an extra-terrestrial, the song is as often anchored in Jonathan's daily life: two places are mentioned, Tehachapi and Mount Shasta, which clearly locate the exploits of the U.F.O. man in the California desert where he had moved in.

The lyrics are very funny. I particularly enjoy the verse with the lines "*Well the U.F.O. man hit a cactus, flyin' around, you see he was flying upside down for practice, over my town*") with the acrobatic rhyming of "*cactus*" and "*practice*".

Listening to this song, you can only be reminded of *I'm a little airplane*, but also of two older songs with alien heroes trying to fit in everyday life, *Here come the Martian Martians*, where one of the points is to find out what kind of ice cream do the Martians like, and *The abominable snowman in the market*, in which the titular character has to be protected from the housewives' fury.

El U.F.O. man, the 1994 Spanish version on *Jonathan, te vas a emocionar !*, is played at a much less disheveled pace and without backing vocals. It is closer to the solo live performances around that time.

On the first volume of the tribute compilation *Can you talk to the dude ?*, also in 1994, there is a very good version of *The U.F.O. man* by Four One and Only's + The Jazz Butcher Singers.



Asa Brebner, Jonathan Richman and part of the audience at the concert in Reims on June 13th 1985.
Photo : Marc Roger

I must be king

Releases :

Rockin' and romance (1985)

Jonathan goes country (1990)

If *The U.F.O. man* is the perfect illustration of the rockin' side of *Rockin' and Romance*, then *I must be king* is pure romance. And it happens that both songs follow perfectly on from one another on the album.

It is an extremely simple song, nearly the archetype of a love song. The tone is openly sentimental and the lyrics are not afraid to err on the soppy side of the "Moon in June" type : "*Since we're like birdies, oh this must be Spring, and since she's my queen, well I must be king*".

A little earlier in the 1980's and in a similar vein, The Police had a huge hit with *Every breath you take*, except that, if you listen closely to the lyrics, Sting's song is about an obsessed and jealous lover, stalking his ex. To think that this misunderstood song is often played at wedding receptions ! Whereas, with *I must be king*, which was not as successful, love is simple and pure and the song would be perfect for weddings !

The original 1985 version is also very simply arranged, with Jonathan Richman alone on guitar, and only backing vocals as extra accompaniment. With this

backing, there is something nearly biblical, a gospel fervour, especially when he sings "*These days of joy I stand and weep*" or "*They've put us side by side*". The "*They*" seems to reference a "higher power", probably the titular one in the 1992 song *A higher power* ("*It's magic the way we got together, there's magic around us in the air (...) there must be a higher power somewhere*").

With slightly altered lyrics ("*Since we're like music, well it must be swing*"), the version on *Jonathan goes country* is one of the most Nashvillian songs on the album. Driven by Tom Brumley's pedal steel, who used to be a member of Buck Owens' Buckaroos, it is faster and more fully orchestrated. Covered by a commercial country artist, you imagine this song becoming a hit and being played on AM radio in the South of the United States. You don't feel the same emotion, however, and my preference goes to the first version.

Just about seventeen

Release :

It's time for Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers (1986)

To me, *It's time for Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers* is like a sister release to *Rockin' and romance* : it came out just a year later, is produced once again by Andy Paley and is also soaked in a basic classic sound of Rock and Roll, Rhythm and Blues and Gospel, grounded on guitars, saxophone (played by Jonathan) and backing vocals.

The album was released on Upside in the USA, on LP and CD, and by Rough Trade elsewhere, on LP only. It has never been reissued since.

For the European tour in tie to the album release, the line-up was even more basic : Brennan Totten and Andy Paley on acoustic guitar and backing vocals (guitars whose body could be used as percussion) and Jonathan on vocals, of course, but with a saxophone in lieu of his usual guitar.

There were several dates in Spain and, on April 19th 1986, they played at the Bikini in Toulouse. I should have seen them perform at the Eldorado on April 21st 1986 since, with two friends, we had driven to Paris especially for the occasion. But, after the sound check went down uneventfully in the afternoon, the event was

cancelled at the last minute in the evening, because the venue had been shut down by the authorities for safety concerns.

To thank his disappointed audience, Jonathan played outside in front of the venue for a few minutes (I had not yet arrived) but, before leaving for good, there were still a few absolutely dejected punters, some of whom had travelled from far away. So, Jonathan, Andy and Brennan played together once more, with both guitars. As there was a small crowd on the pavement on the boulevard de Strasbourg, and two cops watching closely over the event, Jonathan insisted on addressing them before playing one last song : "*Gendarme, c'est possible, pour encore une fois ?*". They did not answer, which meant they did not oppose it, and we were gifted with a full version of *Just about seventeen*. The song had just been released, but the audience clapped and sang along, reprising in unison the "*I'm about seventeen*" and "*Wang Dang Do Dang*" lines. It's the shortest performance by Jonathan Richman & the Modern Lovers I ever witnessed, but it was a perfect moment and I associate *Just about seventeen* with it, especially as I think it was never performed at the Jonathan Richman concerts I attended since.

As for the song itself, its theme is simple, but original : I know what the calendar says, but I feel as if I was 17 years old, I'm not going to die soon and I love the world like a boy chasing his first girl so, what's the point in

worrying about the numbers, I feel like I'm about seventeen.

If needed, this song, along with many others, proves wrong those who tend to confine Jonathan Richman to the part of a naive or light-headed singer : you can be adult and be aware of it while keeping intact your energy and joy of living.

The more the years go by, the more this song means to me. Today, I'm 57, I know it but I still must pinch myself sometimes when, once again, I realise I'm the oldest person at a work meeting, or I catch myself discussing retirement age with friends or family. I wouldn't stretch it to 17, but very often I don't feel very different from when I was 27. Especially when I listen to Jonathan Richman songs !

On the question of age, there's also *Nineteen in Naples* on *I'm so confused*, in which Jonathan recalls his misadventures on holiday in Italy, and particularly *Not yet three* on *Jonathan sings !*, probably the only song ever with a three year old narrator retorting to his parents who think he should sleep when he's not tired : "*I'm stronger than you, you're simply bigger than me*".

Closer

Releases :

Jonathan Richman (1989) (*Closer* and *Cerca*)
¡ Jonathan, te vas a emocionar ! (1994) (*Cerca*)

If *I must be king* could nearly pass for a song of courtly love, worthy of the troubadours, *Closer* is much more adventurous as a love song, being set in the marital bed. Few rock and roll songs have dared tread on this terrain, except maybe to evoke adultery. Actually, lyrics rarely seize on what actually happens under the covers. Elvis Costello's *Mystery dance* is one exception, with the would-be Romeo trying to discover his left foot from his right in the middle of the night, thinking that it's no use looking at pictures in magazines when you don't know what they mean.

Closer was released on Jonathan Richman's untitled album from 1989, the first without a credit for The Modern Lovers, played solo, except for two covers, *Blue moon* et *Sleepwalk*, on which Curly is on bass and Ron Wilson from The Surfaris on drums. It is also the first time two versions of the same song are included on an album, and the first time again he translates one of his songs in Spanish.

Probably drawing at least partly from life experience, but with a good dose of humour and some distance, *Closer* presents us with vignettes of married life, starting in the bed with his wife trying to find room to sleep. But Jonathan would like to be closer to her, "*closer*", we see what he means, he asks with a wink. My favourite verse is the last one, in which, after an interlude in a restaurant, it's back to a bed scene, with Jonathan snoring up a storm, with his wife lying next to him. He touches her arm and their legs start to intertwine, and that's good news, as he always wants to get closer !

Both original 1989 versions differ not only in the vocals in English or Spanish. For *Closer*, the acoustic guitar arrangement is enriched soberly but efficiently with electric guitar stabs, full of rockabilly-style echo. On *Cerca*, there is only one guitar.

On *¡ Jonathan, te vas a emocionar !* (1994), the acoustic guitar on *Cerca* is more to the front. This version is slower, softer. Its lyric provide the album title, *Jonathan, you're getting excited !*.

Since she started to ride

Release :

Jonathan goes country (1990)

After the first untitled "solo" album in 1989, Jonathan Richman surprised his fans again the following year with an album whose title made its point perfectly clear : *Jonathan goes Country* !

But the move is made with some restraint and not without humour, starting with the cover art. On the front, Jonathan, wearing a grey suit jacket, is pouting when presented with a pair of Western boots by a seller. On the reverse, he is seen walking away from the shop, the legs of his trousers tucked in his brand new red boots.

Humour of this kind is not completely foreign to Country. I recently chanced upon an independent 1984 album by de Johnny Bennett, with a title that could belong to a Jonathan song (*Two cheeseburgers and a chocolate malt*) and a similar sleeve : the singer is pictured in his car, pulled up by a policeman, trying to order two cheeseburgers from him. And on the back, he finds himself sitting handcuffed outside the vehicle !

As Jim Bessman explains in his liner notes, creatively, Jonathan Richman doesn't approach things very differently on this album. It's just that he uses country music as a starting point. And to record this album, he

stayed well away from Nashville, Tennessee and headed to a neighboring state, in Springfield, Missouri. And there's hardly any session musician on the album and no syrupy strings. Instead, we have two producers and most of the musicians who belong to a famed local band (known as The Morells and later as The Skeletons), who lean more toward rock or Americana than Country and Western.

So we have an album in the honky-tonk spirit, infused with Buck Owens' Bakersfield sound, the style of country most influenced by rock and roll. It's no coincidence if, among the guest musicians, apart from piano player David Byrd, who has played among others with Lonnie Mack, we find pedal steel guitar player Tom Brumley, a former member of Buck Owens' Buckaroos.

Among the twelve tracks on the album, there are five covers, four new recordings of songs from Jonathan's own songbook (a practice inaugurated here, which would become common with the following albums, but on a smaller scale) and so only three new songs, but all of them very good (the other two are *Reno* and *You're crazy for taking the bus*).

Since she started to ride is a perfect choice to open an album. It is about a woman and horses, so we're plunged right away in a purely Country & Western theme. But Jonathan also relates a personal experience, so it's not a

pure stylistic exercise and it's in line with the great majority of his songs.

And what is this experience ? Well it's simply that Jonathan doesn't see his wife much anymore since she started getting interested in horses. She is tired in the evening and outside most of the day, and would live in the pasture if she only had a tail. Horses ? Humans ? If she had to rank it, you'd bet on they that gallop and need fly spray.

The song is short and taken at a brisk pace, with electric guitar and pedal steel parts that follow on from one another. Contrary to most country weepers, the singer states the fact without insisting too much, and especially without feeling pity for himself.

This song was covered on a CD EP by Australian band Custard, and by Scottish band BMX Bandits on a compilation of radio sessions tracks released only in Japan (elsewhere, BMX Bandits have also covered another song from this album, *I can't stay mad at you*, and *That Summer feeling*).

On the evolution of couple relationships, there would be in the following years *The girl stands up to me now* (1991) and *Not just a 'Plus one' on the guest list anymore* (1996).

Monologue about Bermuda

Release :

Having a party with Jonathan Richman (1991)

includes :

Down in Bermuda

Release :

Rockin' and romance (1985)

She cracked :

Releases :

The Modern Lovers (1976)

The original Modern Lovers (1981)

Live at the Longbranch Saloon (1992)

Bang Bang Lulu

Usually, Jonathan Richman favours improvisation on stage, not knowing in advance which song he will play, often switching quickly from one to another. His *Monologue about Bermuda* seems to be an exception : over nearly seven minutes, it amounts basically to a stand-up routine which he performed several times near identically during his 1991-1992 concerts. At the time, he appeared alone on stage with his guitar, as he did in Reims on March 9th 1992.

It is one of these live performances that is included on the *Having a party with Jonathan Richman* album, a somewhat bizarre album, without musician credits but not entirely solo, recorded live but only partly.

The track starts with a version of *Down in Bermuda*, a 1985 song from the *Rockin' and Romance* album. The lyrics are presented in dialogue form with Jonathan answering the question of an undefined person, asking him if he ever went to Bermuda. The answer is yes, he once played there with his band.

(I've long wondered how The Modern Lovers ended up plaing Bermuda. Actually, the archipelago is one of the favoured destinations for Spring break, the ultra-partying vacation period for American students. And it happened that the owners of the Inverurie Hotel in Bermuda were from Cambridge, Massachusetts, near Boston. As they were looking to book a band for the week in 1973, a neighbour, Charlie Giuliano, suggested they hire a local band he knew, The Modern Lovers ¹⁰.)

And he goes on, explaining that this stay changed him after he realised how stiff he'd been.

At this point, the course of the song is suddenly broken up by a new question, to try and understand what he means when he says he was stiff.

There ensues a proper music lesson, impeccably performed with his guitar, in which Jonathan reflects for

10 https://www.berkshirefinearts.com/03-16-2013_modern-lovers-vs-aerosmith.htm

the first time in a long while on the music The Modern Lovers mark one used to make, and he makes fun of it, basically. We are granted a version of *She cracked* just to prove that this self-confident band, playing loud with a fair amount of equipment, actually produced a music that was monotone and rigid.

What really made an impact on him during this trip is the star band on the island, The Bermuda Strollers, "old" musicians about forty years old who played calypso. And he makes his point by playing a few measures of their version of *Bang bang Lulu* and by pointing out, supporting his demonstration with his guitar, the quality of play of the guitar and bass players (There is a recording of *Bang bang Lulu* on the *Bermuda Strollers* '73 album. Listening to it years later, I realised that, just by himself, Jonathan perfectly renders the spirit of their performance).

The influence of The Bermuda Strollers on Jonathan Richman was strong. Not only his attitude toward music was changed, which hastened the demise of The Modern Lovers mark one, but he also started listening to calypso music and, as he once explained on stage in Binghamton in a somewhat different version of the *Monologue*, he drew inspiration from it by stealing and modifying the calypso beat to make up songs such as *Here come the Martian Martians* and *Abominable snowman in the market*. And this influence was felt all the way to

Australia, where a Jonathan Richman cover band named itself The Bermuda Strollers...!

The following year, on the *I, Jonathan* album, the same process of quotation of musical analysis was on used on the *Velvet Underground* track, with an interpolated extract from *Sister Ray*.

I was dancing in the lesbian bar

Releases :

I, Jonathan (1992)

Surrender to Jonathan (1996)

Take me to the plaza (2001)

The Bridge School concerts: 25th anniversary edition
(2011)

Jonathan Richman has rarely ventured into disco music, except incidentally with *Give Paris one more chance*, in which the memory of the boys singing Bee Gees songs on the steps of Montmartre sometime gave him the opportunity on stage to launch into one of the songs from the *Saturday night fever* film. Otherwise, I think that his only truly disco song is *I was dancing in a lesbian bar*.

The outline of the song is simple, based on real-life events, most probably : one Friday night, Jonathan is dancing alone in a rather stiff-lipped bar when some kids approach him and tell him to follow them if he really wants to dance. And soon, he finds himself dancing in a lesbian bar.

If combined, two songs on the previous album, *Having a party with Jonathan Richman*, seem to forecast this one, *Cappucino Bar*, about a trendy place that stifles

Jonathan to the point that he has to rush outside to play rock and roll, and *They're not tryin' on the dance floor*, in which the clients in a bar dance naturally, slowly and without showing off.

The mere mention of a lesbian bar usually triggers giggles in the audience, but this particularity is mentioned casually, without comment and without lingering on the customers in the bar. It is not a problem if it lies in an industrial zone and it wouldn't matter if it was a bikers or blue-collar workers bar. We understand that what matters is that there's a good atmosphere and you can have great fun dancing.

In his lyrics, Jonathan has great fun opposing other bars, sometime resorting to acrobatic rhyming such as with "stop and stare" and "laissez faire" : "*In the first bar they were drinking sips, in this bar they could shake their hips*" or "*Well in the first bar things were controlled but in this bar things were rock and roll*".

Two studio versions were released on album four years apart. They are different, but for once I love both equally, without preference. On *I, Jonathan*, with male backing vocals and John Gorton on bass, the song sounds like slightly slowed down minimal disco. Whereas on *Surrender to Jonathan*, also with backing vocals, but female, and with Dan Eisenberg on organ, the version is rockier, with amped-up guitar solos full of effects.

In the 1990s, Jonathan was a regular guest on TV show *Late night with Conan O'Brien*, for live performances that surely allowed him to reach out to a new audience.

In his solo 1993 appearance, you can see him lay down his guitar and show off his dancing skills, a feat that will become a staple of his performances of this song. And there will be many of them, as it is often played live, with Tommy Larkins providing the beat and the audience singing "*I was dancing in the lesbian bar, Aouh ! Aouh !*". The song has become a classic, maintaining its disco side, even when using only an acoustic guitar and drums. In Nantes in October 2000, Jonathan pulled so much on the lowest string of his guitar to produce a slap bass sound that I feared it was gonna break !

Two live versions were released, one on the 25th anniversary compilation of the Bridge School concerts, the other on the DVD *Take me to the plaza*. The first must have been recorded on October 17th 1998. You can watch on YouTube the whole of the 15 minute concert, as well as the one on the following day, October 18th. On that day, the version of *I was dancing in the lesbian bar* is particularly remarkable as, after gifting the audience with a proper dance demonstration (acrobatic leg twirls, moonwalk-type slides on the ground, Egyptian poses,...), Jonathan is wrapping up the song when he realises that he's forgotten his guitar solo. No worries : a nod to Tommy and the beat starts

again, Jonathan picks up his guitar and the omission is soon rectified...

The celebration of the joy of dancing and the pleasure of doing so through the night are a constant in Jonathan Richman's repertoire. They're particularly present in *When I dance*, *Dancin' late at night* and *The night is still young*.

The number of covers of *I was dancing in the lesbian bar* is evidence of its impact. I spotted four of them, by Miami on the *Costume of sand* EP (1997), Luca on the *Fractions* album (2007), The Rocks on the B side of the *Heartbreak City* single (2006) and They Might Be Giants through their Dial-a-Song service (2015).

You can't talk to the dude / Let her go into the darkness

You can't talk to the dude - Releases :

I, Jonathan (1992)

j Jonathan, te vas a emocionar ! (1994) (*No te oye*)

Take me to the plaza (2001)

Let her go into the darkness - Releases :

You must ask the heart (1995)

Live from 6A – Late night with Conan O'Brien (1996) :

There's something about Mary (1998)

Take me to the plaza (2001)

It seems to me that Jonathan Richman has often been depicted as an incurable optimist, nearly to the point of being dumb, an innocent looking at life through rose-tinted glasses. It misses the mark, of course, and you only have to look at the whole scope of his songs to realise that he tackles all aspects of life in their diversity, good sides and bad sides, happy times and sad ones.

And even in love, not everything is rosy. We saw with *The neighbors* that trust can easily be replaced with suspicion. And then, there is *Couples must fight*, which affirms that quarrels are essential for a healthy

relationship, or *True love is not nice* ("Well you knew from your first flirt that love was here to hurt").

I linked these two songs initially released three years apart because they are both concerned with the dark side of love within couples that do not involve Jonathan himself. No, he addresses friends and nearly takes on the role of a marriage counselor. A counselor who doesn't mince his words and pushes for radical decisions. And there is also a mirror effect, as in *You can't talk to the dude* Jonathan advises a woman to ditch her guy, while in *Let her go into the darkness*, it is a man that he tries to persuade to give up his ex-partner for good.

On the recorded versions of *You can't talk to the dude*, be it the original one or the one in Spanish (both are close musically, but on *No te oye* there's the added bonus of Ned Claffin's piano and The Baltimores' backing vocals), Jonathan doesn't go much into detail. He is content with explaining to his friend that she can't even talk with her guy, that he reacts badly when she speaks her mind, that she's losing her sense of humour and things will only get better once she leaves ! We don't know anything more, except that the guy doesn't eat his food but shovels it down.

On stage, the song was often transformed into a comedy sketch, with Jonathan on both sides of a dialogue, using his voice and the woman's. And here the portrait gets more detailed. The dude is a musician, who has potential (he's 42...), sponging off his girlfriend, living in a dirty flat with cat and dog hairs, litter and spoiled

milk, so much so that Tommy was disgusted when he visited.

Often, Jonathan introduced the song by addressing the women in the audience : "*It's time to get rid of your stupid boyfriend*". But in Paris on October 25th 2000 at the Café de la Danse, a venue which suited him perfectly, in which he played on each of his European tours over a dozen years, he for once unwittingly made the audience laugh by declaring in French "*Sortir avec les poubelles*", which means "*Get out with the trash bins*" !

This song was covered live by The Lemon Twigs in 2017 and Car Seat Headrest in a 2020 lockdown livestream. It also inspired the title of *Can you talk to the dude ?*, a tribute in the form of two compilations of covers released in 1994 and 1966 by French label Alienor.

I didn't launch into a vocabulary analysis of his lyrics, but it's obvious references to dark and even black are scarce in Jonathan Richman's songs. That's what is surprising with *Let her go into the darkness*, which deals with letting someone venture toward the dark side of life.

This time, the friend Jonathan is talking to can't keep himself from intervening after his girlfriend has gone back to her previous guy. He thinks it's not good for her, that she will take up drugs and alcohol again. Jonathan explains that it's no use steeping in, that he must let her

make her decisions and draw her own conclusions. At one point in a verse, he advises his friend, without more explanation, to take his sheets to the laundromat (maybe to start over with a clean sheet?), which earns us in the chorus a fun surprising rhyme with the simple incongruous repetition of "*It's alright*" and "*Laundromat*".

The original version is very good. Built as is often the case on an acoustic guitar foundation, it is punctuated with organ notes and accompanied discreetly by male backing vocals.

A version recorded in July 1995 for Conan O' Brien's TV show was released in 1997 on the *Live from 6A* compilation. Jonathan is backed up by Tommy Larkins on drums and by the show's house band, led by The E Street Band's Max Weinberg. Initially, the take is close to the album version, but there are added electric guitar solo parts.

And this makes for a good transition with the third version, released in 1998 on the original soundtrack for the Farrelly brothers film *There's something about Mary*. As with *True love is not nice*, *Let her go into the darkness* was not written specifically for the film, in which Jonathan and Tommy make multiple brief appearances, but it is perfect for the scene in which it's used, toward the end. Recalibrated and heavily condensed for the occasion, there remain in 78 seconds only a few lines perfectly picked from a verse, the chorus and especially in conclusion an exhilarating

fuzzed-up guitar solo that takes up more than half the song.

Thankfully, I first watched the film in its original English version. Because, for the French release, they could have just subtitled the songs, but instead a French singer was called for to dub the songs. It is very bizarre to see Jonathan on screen and to hear him express himself with the voice of another and it's a very painful experience, not particularly because of Olivier Constantin's performance, because no one could have pulled off this impossible mission.

On stage, this song also often included a sketch section, sometime performed successively in several languages (English, French, Spanish, Italian, Arab !), with the guy trying to reason his ex and her explosive retort. Jonathan's conclusion : "*See, I was right, you shouldn't have said anything*".

On the *Take me to the plaza* DVD, filmed as a duo with Tommy Larkins in concert in 2001, both *Let her go into the darkness* and *You can't talk to the dude* are featured, and both include a comedy sketch routine, very brief for the first, with Jonathan impersonating both voices, only in English, and a little longer for the spoken introduction of the second.

To hide a little thought

Releases :

You must ask the heart (1995)

Surrender to Jonathan (1996)

From what they know of him through his songs, many imagine that, in life, Jonathan Richman is frank and direct.

That's what he seems to think too, but this song serves the purpose to analyse an episode in which he "*tried to hide a little thought*" from a woman, most probably his partner.

Neither the verb nor the noun lie are mentioned in the lyrics, but it is clearly what they are about, in the benign form of lying by omission. And it only concerns a "*little*" thought and it's only an attempt at covering it up, because of course it didn't work out : when someone honest tries to lie, it is as plain as the nose on their face and they're spotted right away.

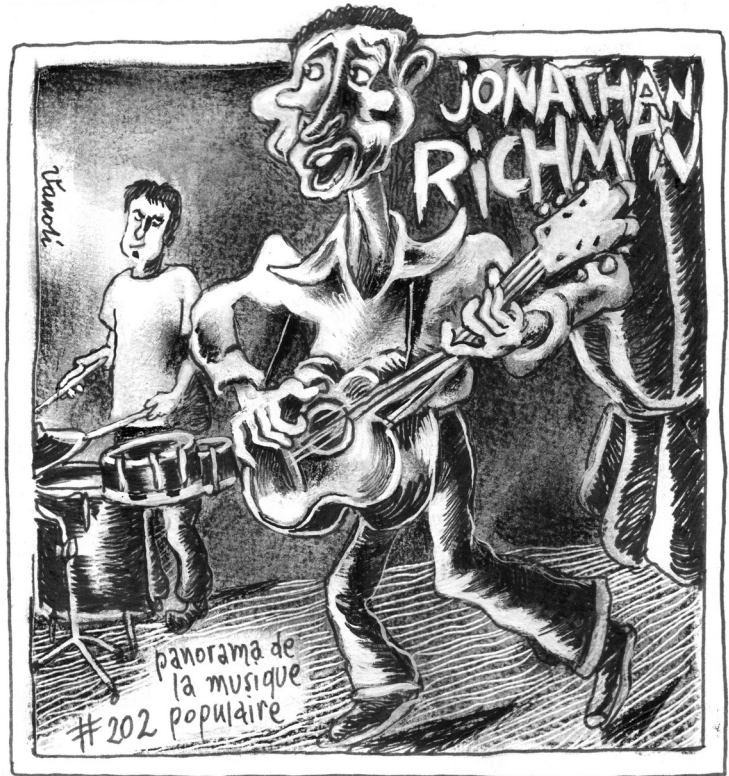
With the maturity of someone in his forties and the benefit of hindsight, he analyses the consequences of his dissimulation. He is civilised and doesn't say each thing on his mind, but with someone he knows very well, it's unlike him to keep mum. And the simple fact to have withheld the thought gives some importance to this little thought which, like a worm in a fruit will taint everything in a wink.

The song was highlighted as the opening track on the *You must ask the heart* album in 1995. The tempo is rather slow, punctuated by conga and piano (no drums). For the short solo part, it's first acoustic guitar and then electric.

Uniquely, it is as early as the following year that the song was recorded again, on *Surrender to Jonathan*. For once, I think I prefer the second version. The arrangement is less minimal and the rhythm is a little faster. Tom Larkins' drums and Nick Augustine's bass mark time more insistently. Dan Eisenberg's organ is substituted for the few piano notes. For the first time in a good while, it is with this electric line-up that Jonathan Richman would tour in 1996-1997.

The band Hefner recorded a cover of *To hide a little thought* for a BBC radio session in 1999. It was released on the B side of the *I took her love for granted* single. It's a good take on it, very faithful to the original version, and it underlines the intrinsic quality of the song.

On YouTube, you can also watch a nice live version by These Flawed Whores at the Ukulele Festival in Melbourne in 2015, with three singers and an accordion solo.



Vincent Vanoli, *Jonathan Richman - Panorama de la musique populaire # 202*, 2020.

Just look at me

Release :

Surrender to Jonathan (1996)

Surrender to Jonathan should undoubtedly be filed in the "divorce album" category, along with such records as Bob Dylan's *Blood on the tracks* or Marvin Gaye's *Here, my dear* de Marvin Gaye. And yet, this album doesn't bear the hallmarks of such albums : no rancour, no recriminations, no despair... No, instead Jonathan manages every time to find a positive way to reflect on this separation. The feeling that best defines the spirit of the album is expressed in the title-song "*To win in love, you must surrender*" (and not fight nor defend yourself). He even goes as far as covering *When she kisses me*, a song from *Having a party with Jonathan*, one of the many inspired by his partner.

The record opens with *Just look at me*, and the first words are "*Well, she herself might never come back but she's with me here because a heart that's once known love is never the way it was*". So, she's gone, but what can't be destroyed are the good times spent together and, even if she probably won't come back home, you just have to look at Jonathan to her smile and her laugh.

The album is produced by old pal Andy Paley, with rich arrangements and a full band, piano and accordion included, with the Vine Street Horns as guests. The song is jaunty, with Dan Eisenberg's organ as the main instrument, weaved around Jonathan's vocals.

Among the other songs tackling this theme on the album, there's the even more jaunty *Not just a plus one on the guest list anymore*, which tries to express the point of view of his wife, who didn't want to feel like a fifth wheel anymore, who wanted to express her personality, and do so without him. There's also *My little girl's got a full time daddy now* in which, once again, he finds a positive aspect to divorce, which will change his relationship with his daughter and incite him to care better for her.

But however, the album closes on a more somber note with *Floatin'*, which is about a rather nightmarish dream, in which he floats in a raft on the ocean, with his family left far behind and hard to find.

The lonely little thrift store

Release :

I'm so confused (1998)

I'm so confused followed swiftly after the film *There's something about Mary*, the hit comedy in which Jonathan and Tommy made many apparitions. But the overall mood of the album remains close to that of *Surrender to Jonathan*, rather morose. This can be felt especially in the title song and the last two tracks on the record, *The night is still young* and *I can't find my best friend*.

The album is produced by The Cars' Ric Ocasek (a Boston band whose drummer David Robinson was an ex-Modern Lovers). His touch can be felt on the record – notably as he contributes "additional keyboards" – but it remains discreet and the contrast is not striking with, for instance, the sound on *Surrender to Jonathan*. I think it may be only by chance if the song I've picked is the only one recorded in Florida rather than at Electric Lady studio in New York.

In 1986 on the album *It's time for Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers*, the song *Corner store* was very nostalgic, but it also showed a fighting spirit in defense of small shops ("*I don't care if it costs more money to shop there (...), I don't care if you have to walk longer,*

I'll walk further, I'll pay more"), whereas what comes out of *The lonely little thrift store* is mostly sadness, even if musically the song is jaunty and upbeat.

Before entering the shop, Jonathan describes its surroundings, with cracks in the sidewalk and garbage on the ground, a Mexican restaurant and a barber shop next door that has known better days. The hard luck store itself is from the thirties and the hats in it smell of moth ball.

When I buy secondhand records in France, I often have a thought for their previous owners, or even their children in case of very old ones, because I know that, if these objects are on sale, it's most probably because they are deceased. Here, there's a mention of a 101 Strings album, but the stuff on sale mostly evokes sad and dark couple stories for Jonathan: the avocado green appliances smell of domestic violence, the popcorn poppers looks sad because its short life it's had, as it was once a happy wedding gift but when they split it too got left.

So, this is an excellent but not happy song that Jeffrey Lewis, a fan and clearly one of Jonathan Richman's heirs, covered energetically with his band on stage during a European tour in 2009.

My baby love love loves me

Releases :

Take me to the plaza (2001)

Not so much to be loved as to love (2004)

¿ A qué venimos sino a caer ? (2008)

After a few rather dark years/albums, *Her mystery not of high heels and eye shadow* in 2001 marked a change of tone, a song such as *Yo tengo una novia* (I have a girlfriend) being quite explicit. The title song is also about this newfound love.

It is an album I really love, with its ten songs in English followed by four in Spanish. I didn't pick any of them for this book, but *My baby love love loves me* makes a good transition between this album and the next one, *Not so much to be loved as to love*.

It was first released on the *Take me to the plaza* DVD, filmed in December 2001 in concert in San Francisco. The set list is made up of a third of older titles, a third of songs from *Her mystery not of high heels and eye shadow* and, as is often the case at Jonathan Richman concerts, a third of brand new songs, sometimes still being written.

My baby love love loves me is a quite plain song, a celebration of love with, literally, a religious fervour ("I

prayed, I asked and I was blessed") and he was rewarded with even more than he prayed for.

In the live version, as is the case for nearly every concert since the second half of the 1990's, Jonathan performs on guitar in a duo with Tommy Larkins on drums. We are presented with a rather long instrumental section, before the song concludes with dancing and mic-less singing.

The studio version, released in 2004 on *Not so much to be loved as to love*, is not fundamentally different from the concert version, but it better communicates the joy of this new love, with handclaps and backing vocals which reinforce the gospel effect, and it is illuminated by Ralph Carney's brief intervention on brass.

Objectively, whether you look at the lyrics or the music, this song is built up with next to nothing but, customarily for Jonathan Richman, the spirit, the energy and the joy of living sweep up everything and, whether listening to a record or in a live setting, you end up clapping your hands, singing your heart out and dancing.

You can have a cell phone, that's OK, but not me

Releases :

You can have a cell phone that's OK, but not me single (2008)

sold on its own or included as a bonus with vinyl copies of *Because her beauty is raw and wild* (2008)

May 7th 2008 at the Nouveau Casino in Paris. As an encore for his concert, Jonathan Richman performs for the second time that night his song *You can have a cell phone, that's OK, but not me*. He obviously laps it all up. I'd even say he has as much fun as a crazy puppy, trying to part the audience in two to have them sing the chorus of this brand new song.

It's quite uncommon to see him act like this on stage. Usually, audience participation at his concerts consists mainly in clapping hands, singing and smiling but, apart from asking for a beat when he played solo, I think I have never seen him use this kind of method. But I think no one is duped and that Jonathan as well as the immense majority of the audience enjoy the piquancy of the situation : nearly all of those who heartily sing the chorus have a phone in their pockets and a good deal of them have used it during the gig, to snap pics, record, film, text or even talk on the phone !

According to various testimonies, the same scene happened at most of the dates of the North American tour which followed immediately. So, when the release of the *You can have a cell phone that's OK but not me* single was announced, I first thought that, in a surprising fashion for an independent label that updates its website once a year, Vapor was doing it to answer some sort of buzz that this song might have started. It might be partly the case, but I later learnt that the single had actually been available for a while, as a bonus to the vinyl version of the *Because her beauty is raw and wild* album.

To me, this record is entirely placed under the sign of irony. Irony to witness phone addicts saying they don't want one. Irony, of course, that this song is released only on vinyl, an out-of-date technology, even though it's still widely in use, including by myself. In 2008, a fan was naively wondering in a comment on Jojoblog if the single included a coupon to download the tracks digitally. I replied, without much risk to be proved wrong, that, taking into account Jonathan Richman's attitude to some technologies – he has asked that Jojoblog and his label mention that he does not use the internet or own a computer – and the topic of the song, you could be certain that the single would NOT include a download coupon.

It is also paradoxical to observe that this short song, in which Jonathan Richman wonders what he'll do when

public pay phones disappear, especially as he's often on tour, recorded exclusively with acoustic instruments (guitar, piano and drums if my ears don't deceive me), is in a style close to The Stooges' 1969, with the same number of chords anyway (that is a single one, you can't do with less I think, or maybe two in total). Which makes this release the closest in style to first period Modern Lovers since Beserkley put out *Roadrunner* in 1976 or, to keep the light tone of this less-than-two-minute song, the best-realized acoustic parody of these early Modern Lovers.

When we refuse to suffer

Releases :

Because her beauty is raw and wild (2008) (Versions I and II)

You can have a cell phone that's OK, but not me (2008) (Version III)

In his liner notes for the *Because her beauty is raw and wild* album, Jonathan explains that everything he sings, even an old song such as *Old world*, is a work in progress : he keeps changing the words and melody. And I'm convinced that, to him, it's always the latest version that matters the most, that is, as a rule, the one he performs on stage at one of the dozens of concerts he plays each year. The versions that make it on a record are one among many, not especially the most important. This might partly explain why, starting in 1990, he has started including new recordings of previously published songs on his albums.

Still in his liner notes, he goes on to explain that, lately, he has taken to include two versions of the same song on a record, for a contrasting effect. Actually, I think this custom dates back to the *Jonathan Richman* album in 1989 with *Closer* and *Cerca*, which differed by the lyrics in English and Spanish but also by the music. Here, he mentions the "twin" songs on the album, *Le printemps des amoureux est venu* and *The lovers are*

here and they're full of sweat, but in this case they sound very different from one another and the approach for the lyrics diverge greatly from one language to the other.

As for *When we refuse to suffer*, the record is broken as it is not only two but three different versions that were released simultaneously. The first two on the album, while the third ended up on the B side of the *You can have a cell phone that's OK, but not me* single, released separately but also included with the vinyl issue of the album.

Both songs have little in common musically, but Jonathan expresses roughly the same sentiment in *When we refuse to suffer* as he did with *Affection* back in 1979. In *Affection*, he said that you had to give this feeling a chance to express itself and not let it stand alone in a corner without having anything to do. With *When we refuse to suffer*, he explains that you have to be able to feel things and that it implies that you must sometimes accept suffering in all its forms (even benign) and not always try to shelter under illusive protections, such as air freshener for bad smells, air conditioning for heat and Prozac for depression. Because otherwise you cheat, nature ultimately wins and you end up suffering more.

The lyrics of the three versions are very similar, but there are variations each time, in the choice of examples mostly.

On the first version, the shortest one, the instrumentation is the same as the basic one at concerts since the end of the 1990's, with Jonathan on acoustic guitar and Tommy Larkins on drums, with the only the addition of backing vocals by Roger and Miles Montalbano.

The second version opens with a strident electric guitar and includes several guitar solos with this sound. It instantly brings to mind the original soundtrack for the film *Revolution Summer*, released the previous year, especially both versions (again...!) of *Francine's theme*, an instrumental also introduced by a loud electric guitar. On this version, there's the addition of electric bass, played by Miles Montalbano, an ex-member of Sister Double Happiness and the director of *Revolution Summer*. There 's also an accompaniment consisting of handclaps, and Jonathan sings the last lines in a voluntarily exaggerated tone, which gives a nice comic effect.

The third version of *When we refuse to suffer* comes probably from the same session as the second, but it sounds like a cross between the first two, with a balance between acoustic and electric tones.

This song was performed in 2013 by the Spanish Free Fall Band on their 10-inch covers album *Songs our days pass along vol. I*.

Sa voix m'attise

Release :

O Moon, Queen of night on Earth (2010) (two versions)

In 1998, based on the French language songs released on record by Jonathan Richman since 1989 (*Que reste-t-il de nos amours ?*, *J'aime Paris au mois de mai*, *Mustapha*) and on others he performed on stage (by Trenet and Aznavour, again, but also by Maurice Chevalier), I imagined in *Jonathan chante !*, a story published on my webzine, that he would sing in February 2003 at the Victoires de la Musique awards in Paris, in front of the guest of honour Charles Trenet, following a residency at the Café de la Danse, the release of an album sung entirely in French (including translations of some of his own creations, *Affection*, *C'est moi ton roi* = *I must be king* and *Au matin de nos vies* = *The morning of our lives*) and opening for Charles Aznavour at the Olympia.

For this fiction of anticipation, I also drew from his already published tales of an American infatuated with Paris, *Give Paris one more chance* (1983) and *French style* (1996).

Unfortunately, my predictions didn't come true and, if we have been gifted with a Spanish language album,

; *Jonathan, te vas a emocionar !*, as early as 1994, we're still hoping for a record sung entirely in French.

However, gradually through the years that have elapsed since the missed appointment of 2003, you could say that Jonathan sows the seeds of such an album. Indeed, he has started releasing original songs in French, five to this day : *Les étoiles* and *On a du soleil* in 2004 on *Not so much to be loved as to love* ; *Le printemps des amoureux* est venu in 2008 on *Her mystery not of high heels and eye shadow* ; *Silence alors*, *silence* also in 2008, on *¿ A qué venimos sino a caer ?*, a compilation of songs in Spanish, Italian, French and English featuring four new compositions, this one included ; and *Sa voix m'attise*, the one I picked, released in two versions in 2010 on *O Moon, Queen of night on Earth*.

Like any great poetic creation, the lyrics of *Sa voix m'attise* are grammatically and semantically inventive. To describe a voice that plays with colours, words and sounds, an average Frenchman like me would certainly not have used the words "*olive et brune*" ("*olive and brown*"). And the choice of the verb, "*m'attise*" ("*pokes the fire in me*") is original and pertinent. In common language, you would more probably have used "*m'échauffe*" or "*m'excite*".

The first version is special because drums and percussions are its main instruments. The guitar is at the

back and it's amplified when Jonathan shouts "*Tommy !*" to launch a solo that takes up nearly the whole second half of the song. On stage, Jonathan would put down his guitar and add even more to it by banging a bell with a stick.

The *Reprise* is slower and more "usual", with Jonathan accompanying himself on acoustic guitar, some percussions, discreet this time, and a few notes of accordion. You can hear echoes of Trenet.

No original song written in French has been published since 2010, but on *Ishkode! Ishkode !* in 2016 there was a cover of Charles Trenet's *Longtemps*. Enough to let us continue to hope one day of hearing on record versions of songs that Jonathan has often performed on stage with lots of emotion, like Trenet's *Coin de rue* and Maurice Chevalier's *Place Pigalle* and *Paris je t'aime*.

Wait ! Wait !

Releases :

O Sun single (2015)

Ishkode ! Ishkode ! (2016)

After about fifteen years and six albums on Vapor Records, a record label launched by Neil Young, Jonathan Richman started in 2015 releasing records on Blue Arrow, a new label started by a record store in Cleveland.

The first simultaneous releases were two 7" singles. Contrary to the two sides from the other 45, *Keith* (a tribute to Keith Richards), *Wait ! Wait !* and its A side *O Sun* were included the following year on the *Ishkode ! Ishkode !* album.

Listening to *Wait ! Wait !*, I can't keep from thinking that the child who is its main character might well be the baby in *Not yet three* who has grown and protests because his parents drag him away because he's transfixed by what he's doing or watching and wants to stay a little longer and wishes days would last more than 24 hours.

Wait ! Wait !'s lyrics are partly inspired by Juan Ramón Jiménez, specifically *Poem #49* in his collection *Eternidades 1916-17*. I had never heard of him, even though his reputation is strong enough for him to have been awarded the Nobel prize in literature in 1956 ! We

can make a guess that the lyrics in the verse sung in Spanish are lines from the original poem.

As soon as the introductory riff on acoustic guitar kicks in, you know the song will have the lively spirit found in many of Jonathan Richman's songs with a classic foundation, in line with *La Bamba* or *Hang on Sloopy*, such as *Parties in the USA* for instance.

The song really takes flight with its chorus and the surprising arrival of an organ with a well dodgy sound, typically garage, which plays a few notes insistently until the end of the song. From this moment, like the friends present in the studio who sing backing vocals, you can't keep from snapping your fingers and clapping your hands while you dance. You really find yourself in the territory of ? and the Mysterians or Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs.

On the same album, with as exuberant an atmosphere and the same garage rock foundation, there's also *Outside O' Duffy's*, about meeting a girl outside this shop or restaurant, with the female backing vocals sounding like they're mocking Jonathan.

Cold pizza

Release :

Just a spark, on journey from the dark – Épisode 5 (2020)

Correct me if I'm wrong, but Jonathan Richman hasn't toured Europe since 2012, the year he played once again near my home at La Cartonnerie in Reims. But on the North American continent, he has been touring constantly, always in tandem with drummer Tommy Larkins. I didn't check the numbers but I'd say that during all this time they must have played at least a hundred dates a year.

When the COVID-19 struck in the United States in Spring 2020, an ear whetting series of concerts had been announced with Jonathan on the same bill as Bonnie 'Prince' Billy. I think these concerts were able to take place, but since then everything has been cancelled. It is the first time in nearly half a century that he has been faced with the impossibility of interacting directly with his audience.

Besides, Jonathan has deliberately chosen not to participate directly in internet culture. Only his booking agent and his label are allowed to represent him online. But, when you come up against a brick wall, you have to make choices and, from September 2020, Blue Arrow

Records has been selling online a series of recordings titled *Just a spark, on journey from the dark*. Alone or with a few friends, he supplies us each time with about fifteen minutes of new unreleased recordings, obviously recorded live in the studio, with a mix of old and new songs.

Episode 5, released in November 2020, includes notably an excellent version of *New kind of neighborhood*, as well as two new songs, *I found a new love that opens this door for me* and an ode to a very popular dish, *Cold pizza*.

To Jonathan Richman, food is important. He declaimed it in 1989 on the *Jonathan Richman* album with his Rabelaisian poem *I eat with gusto, damn ! you bet*, in which he explains that he eats with such enthusiasm that it's considered a crime in France ("*No don't bring me napkins waiter sir, just bring some trash can liner*"). He also displays his sweet tooth with the very precise order of an ice cream he passes in *Double chocolate malted (It's time for, 1986)* and explains in *He gave us the wine to taste* (2004) that you have to taste the wine, not talk about it and let it go to waste.

As for pizza, in the few interviews he's granted in recent years, usually in writing, he has mentioned several times his sideline in traditional masonry, explaining for instance that he builds bread or pizza stone ovens for his friends.

Traditional masonry for quality pizza, but the ones he sings about in *Cold pizza* are more like the Saturday night pizzas when there's sport on TV, delivered in a cardboard box, which are cold and dry the following morning beside the cola without fizz, when you're woken up by the bell for a package delivery.

Jonathan visibly has great fun adding toppings all through the song, asking the person he's speaking to not to be choosy, to eat his slice even if the pizza's not vegan. After all, "*Some people have real problems so just knock it off*".

As for the music, the ingredients are like the pizza's, as basic and traditional as possible : a guitar, acoustic but undeniably rock and roll, congas and handclaps, and friends singing in unison as accompaniment. A way to end a difficult year in the most cheerful possible way.

Now is better than before

Releases :

Rockin' and romance (1985)

¡ Jonathan, te vas a emocionar ! (1994) (*Ahora es mejor*)

There is something about Mary (1998, only film/DVD, not on CD) (*Ahora es mejor*)

In a section in *Mojo* magazine (n° 326, dated January 2021), when asked when was the last time he cried, Jarvis Cocker answered that it was when he watched Jonathan Richman perform *Now is better than before* in 1994 live on the TV show *Later... with Jools Holland*. It's a good illustration of the impact that Jonathan can have on his audience.

This interpretation, alone on guitar, truly is full of emotion. The lyrics of the first verse have been altered to adapt to his then current sentimental status : "*Sometimes I think that I'm just a comfort to her, that it's not sexy like it were. Why aren't we happy anymore ? Now is better than before*". The 1994 Spanish version has this same first verse.

The original version was released in 1985 on *Rockin' and romance*. With just an acoustic guitar and female

backing vocals answering him, it's one of the many great achievements on this album.

The song was translated into Spanish for *¡ Jonathan, te vas a emocionar !* in 1994. No backing vocals for *Ahora es mejor*, and the version suffers for it a little.

In the film *There's something about Mary* (but not on the original soundtrack), you can hear a snippet of a version of *Ahora es mejor*, in one of the many scenes Jonathan and Tommy Larkins appear in. In this case, the song must have been picked for its Spanish feel because the scene is far removed from the delicate atmosphere of the song : disguised as a Mexican combo, on the cruise ship *La Rumba*, they perform it at a slow afro-Cuban tempo to make the tourists dance, with a Tommy who can hardly refrain from smiling !

Now is better than before was covered several times by World of feathers, remarkably in 2013 before a concert in Norwich, on the steps of a stone staircase. Une version parfaitement dans l'esprit de la chanson.

Now is better than before is simply a beautiful love song, but to conclude this book I've chosen to take its title literally : Our time is now, and now is better than before. Better than before, because anyway the past is irreparably gone and thus out of reach. As for the future, it is at best uncertain and unknown. The present is all we have, so we'd better enjoy it !

The best way to enjoy Jonathan Richman's music in the present is to attend one of his concerts and share this experience with him and the other persons present in the room. In early 2021, this is still not possible, but the recordings are here to compensate for it. Whether they are recent or several decades old, whether you listen for the first or the thousandth time, the emotion you feel is this of the present moment, even when memories arise. And, to expand on the good times, don't hesitate to explore Jonathan Richman's songs beyond those presented here.



Pascal Comelade, Egyptian reggae, 2020.

A saraband of instrumentals

For this book, I chose to only review songs with lyrics, but instrumentals play an important part in Jonathan Richman's discography. They feature on most albums and his biggest commercial hit, *Egyptian reggae*, happens to be an instrumental, taken from an album that totalled three of them.

There's also a short fully instrumental album of film music, *Revolution Summer*.

In the list, *Yo Jojo !* and *Tandem jump* are two surprising but not that rare instances of instrumentals with vocals !

Several of these instrumentals are covers, which could have ended up in the next list, but I chose to gather all the instrumentals here. *Mustapha* makes the list between both lists because this cover has been recorded both with and without vocals !

1. **Egyptian reggae** (1977, *Rock and roll with the Modern Lovers*)
2. **Yo Jojo !** (1986, *It's time for Jonathan Richman & the Modern Lovers*)
3. **Maybe a walk from Natick High School** (2001, *Her mystery not of high heels and eye shadow*)
4. **Francine's theme** (Reprise) (2007, *Revolution Summer*)
5. **Lover please** (1979, *Back in your life*)
6. **Tandem jump** (1992, *I, Jonathan*)
7. **African Lady** (1988, *Modern Lovers 88*)
8. **The sweeping wind (Kwa ti feng)** (1977, *Rock and roll with the Modern Lovers*)
9. **Your good girl's gonna go bad** (1991, *Jonathan goes country*)
10. **Blue moon** (1989, *Jonathan Richman*)
11. **That's how I feel** (1995, *You must ask the heart*)
12. **South American folk song** (1977, *Rock and roll with the Modern Lovers*)
13. **Mustapha instrumental** (1994, *Think about Mustapha*)
14. **Vacant lot** (2007, *Revolution Summer*)
15. **Grunion run** (1992, *I, Jonathan*)
16. **I can't stay mad at you** (1991, *Jonathan goes country*)

A flock of covers by Jonathan Richman

When they played student nights in universities, The Modern Lovers must have played many cover songs (I have not picked them here, but there are trace elements with The Velvet Underground's *Foggy notion* and ? and the Mysterians' *96 tears* on the *Live at the Longbranch and more* album).

On his own albums or on singles B sides, Jonathan Richman kept on at the same pace : one of his first four published songs was a cover and Chuck Berry's *Back in the USA* is featured prominently on his first album.

If the first covers drew mainly from the bottomless well of often obscure early rock and roll/doo wop tracks, the scope then widened considerably and this list reflects it.

For one recorded cover, there are perhaps ten others played live. I gave the priority here to the covers released on record, but I included at the end of the list two songs that had a great impact on me when I heard Jonathan perform them and that I wish he had recorded, Charles Trenet's *Coin de rue* and Domenico Modugno's *Vecchio frack*.

1. **Buzz buzz buzz**
(The Hollywood Flames, 1978, *Buzz buzz buzz*)
2. **Que reste-t-il de nos amours ?**
(Charles Trenet, 1989, *Jonathan Richman*)
3. **It will stand**
(The Showmen, 1975, *Beserkley chartbusters*)
4. **Back in the USA**
(Chuck Berry, 1976, *Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers*)
5. **Satisfied mind**
(Red Hays, 1991, *Jonathan goes country*)
6. **Mustapha**
(Traditionnel / Bob Azzam, 1994, *Think about Mustapha*)
7. **The theme from Moulin Rouge**
(Muriel Smith, 1988, *Modern Lovers 88*)
8. **Stop your sobbing**
(The Kinks, 2002, *This is where I belong: The songs of Ray Davies & The Kinks*)
9. **Rodeo wind**
(Ronee Blakley, 1991, *Jonathan goes country*)

10. **J'aime Paris au mois de mai**
(Charles Aznavour, 1997, *The unreleasable tapes*)
11. **Chapel of love**
(The Dixie Cups, 1978, *Spitballs*)
12. **I'm sticking with you**
(The Velvet Underground, avec Moe Tucker, enregistré en 1974, publié en 1980, *I'm sticking with you*)
13. **Amazing grace**
(Traditionnel, 1976, *Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers*)
14. **The heart of Saturday night**
(Tom Waits, 1995, *You must ask the heart*)
15. **Action packed**
(Ronny Dee, 1989, *Jonathan Richman*)
16. **Here it is**
(Leonard Cohen, 2008, *Because her beauty is raw and wild*)
17. **Coin de rue**
(Charles Trenet, En concert)
18. **Vecchio frack**
(Domenico Modugno, En concert)

A sardana of covers of Jonathan Richman songs

Pascal Comelade holds a special place in this list. Alone or with the Bel Canto Orchestra, he covered *Egyptian reggae* multiple times in concert or on record (including a 15 second piano haiku version !). What's more, he agreed for his visual interpretation of this instrumental to appear here.

Otherwise, ever since John Cale's version of *Pablo Picasso* in 1975, covers of Jonathan Richman songs are not uncommon.

This highly subjective selection includes four tracks from both volumes of the *Can you talk to the dude ?* tribute compilations released by Bordeaux, France label Aliénor in 1994 and 1996.

Taken together, these tracks offer a complete and varied panorama and, if compiled, would make for a very nice album to listen to.

1. PASCAL COMELADE : Egyptian reggae (since at least 1986)
2. NOISE ADDICT : Back in your life (1994)
3. LES DALTONS : Pablo Picasso (2017)
4. JOHN WAYNE SHOT ME : I'm a little dinosaur (2004)
5. SQUAD FEMELLE : Afternoon (1994)
6. PETER ASTOR : Dancing late at night (1993)
7. HEFNER : To hide a little thought (1999)
8. FOUR ONE AND ONLY'S + THE JAZZ BUTCHER SINGERS : The U.F.O. man (1994)
9. THEY MIGHT BE GIANTS : I'm a little airplane (2006)
10. THE WALKMEN : Fly into the mystery (2004)
11. TELEVISION PERSONALITIES : Pablo Picasso (1998)
12. JOAN JETT AND THE BLACKHEARTS : Roadrunner (1986)
13. BMX BANDITS : That Summer feeling (1995)
14. THE FEELIES : I wanna sleep in your arms (1990)
15. GALAXIE 500 : Don't let our youth go to waste (1988)
16. ROMEO SUSPECT : Tandem jump (1996)
17. LA BUENA VIDA : Sentir verano (That Summer feeling) (1994)

I hear what's underneath : a virtual album of unreleased songs

Very often, Jonathan Richman sings his new songs in concert. For one reason or another, be it that his feelings change or the song does not satisfy, some of these songs are never recorded. And some songs that were recorded were never officially made available (that's the case here for instance with *Underneath* and *Better*).

Fans have been trading recordings of these songs for a long time. Nowadays, they can be found on blogs or on YouTube but there was a time when I would receive cassettes by mail from fellow fans from all around the globe.

Proceeding as with my virtual record label Vivonzeureux Records, I assembled here a selection of some officially unreleased songs. As I've never heard them, some of them really are virtual, such as for instance *C'était toujours toi*, played at the Café de la Danse in Paris in 2003, that I like to think might be a French version of *It's you*.

Two of these songs have been released, but on not-for-sale promotional records : *I'm a jerk*, a hilarious version of Bo Diddley's *I'm a man*, played live in 1983 for the College Rock Hour radio show, and *Time stopped when we held hands*, tucked onto a promo CD of the *I'm So Confused* album.

Three of the songs I picked were performed on TV. The disguised ad for *Crazy Eddie* in 1979 and *Tahitian hop* in 1982 on French TV shows hosted by Antoine de Caunes and the hilarious duo with Julia Sweeney *Roberto the trainer* on Conan O' Brien in 1994.

1. Underneath (I see my father)
2. Better
3. Tahitian hop
4. C'était toujours toi
5. This little light of mine
6. Roberto the trainer
7. In the checkout line
8. Abdul – Here we are in ancient Egypt now
9. Five year old feeling
10. I'm a jerk
11. My name is Jonathan
12. She lives in a rock and roll house
13. Crazy Eddie
14. Sea
15. Older girl
16. Time stopped when we held hands

A tarantella of other songs

For this book, I had to make difficult choices to pick the songs, as I wanted to keep a certain balance between albums and time periods.

Here is the list of the songs I pondered most over before rejecting them.

I don't plan a second volume for this book but, if ever there was one these songs would automatically be included.

1. **Hospital** (*The Modern Lovers*, 1976)
2. **Someone I care about** (*The Modern Lovers*, 1976)
3. **Abominable snowman in the market** (*Jonathan Richman & The Modern Lovers*, 1976)
4. **Afternoon** (*Rock and roll with the Modern Lovers*, 1977)
5. **Fly into the mystery** (*Rock and roll with the Modern Lovers*, 1977)
6. **My little kookenhaken** (*Modern Lovers Live*, 1977)

7. **Back in your life** (*Back in your life*, 1979)
8. **My love is a flower (Just beginning to bloom)** (*Back in your life*, 1979)
9. **Not yet three** (*Jonathan sings !*, 1983)
10. **I'm just beginning to live** (*Rockin' and romance*, 1985)
11. **Vincent van Gogh** (*Rockin' and romance*, 1985)
12. **New kind of neighborhood** (*Modern Lovers 88*, 1988)
13. **When I say wife** (*Having a party with Jonathan Richman*, 1991)
14. **The night is still young** (*I'm so confused*, 1998)
15. **Her mystery not of high heels and eye shadow** (*Her mystery not of high heels and eye shadow*, 2001)
16. **El joven se estremece** (*Her mystery not of high heels and eye shadow*, 2001)
17. **Silence alors silence** (¿ *A qué venimos sino a caer ?*, 2008)
18. **Outside O' Duffy's** (*Ishkode ! Ishkode !*, 2016)
19. **My love she is from somewhere else** (SA, 2018)
20. **¡ Alegré soy !** (SA, 2018)

Discography

1975

BESERKLEY CHARTBUSTERS VOL. 1 (compilation)

The new teller
Road runner
Government Centre
It will stand

1976

JONATHAN RICHMAN & THE MODERN LOVERS

Rockin' shopping center
Back in the U.S.A.
Important in your life
New England
Lonely financial zone
Hi Dear
Abominable snowman in the market
Hey there little insect
Here come the Martian Martians
Springtime
Amazing grace

New England / Here come the Martian Martians

THE MODERN LOVERS

Roadrunner
Astral plane
Old world
Pablo Picasso
She cracked
Hospital
Someone I care about
Girl friend
Modern world

1977

Roadrunner (Once) / Roadrunner (Twice)

ROCK 'N' ROLL WITH THE MODERN LOVERS

The sweeping wind (Kwa ti feng)
Ice cream man
Rockin' rockin' leprechauns
Summer Morning
Afternoon
Fly into the mystery
South American folk song
Roller coaster by the sea
Dodge Veg-O-Matic
Egyptian reggae
Coomyah
The wheels on the bus
Angels watching over me

Egyptian reggae / Roller coaster by the sea

MODERN LOVERS LIVE

I'm a little airplane
Hey there little insect
Egyptian reggae
Ice cream man
I'm a little dinosaur
My little Kookenhaken
South American folk song
The morning of our lives

The morning of our lives / Roadrunner (Thrice)

New England / Astral plane

1978

Abdul and Cleopatra / Oh Carol

Buzz buzz buzz / Hospital (Live)

1979

BACK IN YOUR LIFE

Abdul and Cleopatra
(She's gonna) Respect me
Lover please
Affection
Buzz buzz buzz
Back in your life
Party in the woods tonight
My love is a flower (Just beginning to bloom)
I'm nature's mosquito

Emaline
Lydia
I hear you calling me

Lydia / Important in your life

1981

THE ORIGINAL MODERN LOVERS

Road runner #1
She cracked
Astral plain
Walk up the street
I wanna sleep in your arms
Don't let our youth go to waste
Dance with me
Girlfren
Road runner #2

1983

JONATHAN SINGS !

That Summer feeling
This kind of music
The neighbors
Somebody to hold me
Those conga drums
Stop this car
Not yet three
Give Paris one more chance
You're the one for me
When I'm walking

1984

That Summer feeling / This kind of music / The tag
game

1985

ROCKIN' AND ROMANCE

The beach
My jeans
Down in Bermuda
The U.F.O. man
I must be king
Vincent van Gogh
Walter Johnson
I'm just beginning to live
The Fenway
Chewing gum wrapper
The Baltimores
Up in the sky sometime
Now is better than before

I'm just beginning to live / Circle I / Shirin and Fahrad

1986

**IT'S TIME FOR JONATHAN RICHMAN AND
THE MODERN LOVERS**

It's you
Let's take a trip
This love of mine
Neon sign
Double chocolate malted

Just about seventeen
Corner store
The desert
Yo Jo Jo
When I dance
Shirin and Fahrad
Ancient long ago

1988

MODERN LOVERS 88

Dancin' late at night
When Harpo played his harp
Gail loves me
New kind of neighborhood
African Lady
I love hot nights
California desert party
Everything's gotta be right
Circle I
I have come out to play
The theme from Moulin Rouge

1989

JONATHAN RICHMAN

Malagueña de jojo
Action packed
Everyday clothes
Fender Stratocaster
Blue moon
Closer

I eat with gusto, damn ! You bet
Miracles will start to happen
Sleepwalk
Que reste-t-il de nos amours ?
A mistake today for me
Cerca

1990

JONATHAN GOES COUNTRY

Since she started to ride
Reno
You're the one for me
Your good girl's gonna go bad
I must be king
You're crazy for taking the bus
Rodeo wind
Corner store
The neighbors
Man walks among us
I can't stay mad at you
Satisfied mind

1991

HAVING A PARTY WITH JONATHAN RICHMAN

The girl stands up to me now
Cappuccino bar
My career as a homewrecker
She doesn't laugh at my jokes
When she kisses me
They're not trying on the dance floor

At night
When I say wife
1963
Monologue about Bermuda
Our swingin' pad
Just for fun

1992

I, JONATHAN

Parties in the U.S.A.
Tandem jump
You can't talk to the dude
Velvet Underground
I was dancing in the lesbian bar
Rooming house on Venice Beach
That Summer feeling
Grunion run
A higher power
Twilight in Boston

LIVE AT THE LONGBRANCH SALOON

Someone I care about
Dance with me
She cracked
Hospital
Womanhood
Dignified and old
Girlfriend
Foggy notion
Ride down on the highway

Pablo Picasso
A plea for tenderness
The mixer (Men and women together)
I'm straight
Wake up sleepyheads
Don't let our youth go to waste
Roadrunner

1994

¡ JONATHAN, TE VAS A EMOCIONAR !

Pantomima de "El amor brujo"
Harpo en su harpa
No te oye
No más por fun
Papel de chicle
Los vecinos
Campadrito corazón
Melodía tradicional ecuatoriana
Shirin y Farad
Reno
Cerca
El U.F.O. man
Ahora es mejor
Sabor a mí
Una fuerza allá

1995

YOU MUST ASK THE HEART

To hide a little thought
The heart of Saturday night

Vampire girl
Just because I'm Irish
That's how I feel
Let her go into the darkness
The rose
You must ask the heart
Nothing can change this love
Amorcito corazon
City vs. country
Walter Johnson
Nishi

1996

SURRENDER TO JONATHAN

Just look at me
Not just a "Plus one" on the guest list anymore
The little sleeper car
French style
Surrender
I was dancing in the lesbian bar
To hide a little thought
Egyptian reggae
When she kisses me
Satisfy
Real drummer straight from the hospy-tel
My little girl's got a full time daddy now
Floatin'

1998

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY

There's something about Mary
True love is not nice
Let her go into the darkness

I'M SO CONFUSED

When I dance
Nineteen in Naples
I'm so confused
True love is not nice
Love me like I love
Hello from Cupid
If she don't love me
The lonely little thrift store
Affection
I can hear her fighting with herself
The night is still young
I can't find my best friend

2001

HER MYSTERY NOT OF HIGH HEELS AND EYE SHADOW

Her mystery not of high heels and eye shadow
Springtime in New York
Me and her got a good thing goin' baby
Couples must fight
I took a chance on her
Maybe a walk from Natick High School
Give Paris one more chance

My love for her ain't sad
Leaves on the sidewalk after the rain
Tonight
Yo tengo una novia
El joven se estremece
Con el merengue
Vampiresa mujer

TAKE ME TO THE PLAZA (LIVE DVD)

Let her go into the darkness
My baby love love loves me
Springtime in New York
Pablo Picasso
I was dancing in the lesbian bar
I love the world
Yo tengo una novia
My love for her ain't sad
Couples must fight
Give Paris one more chance
Not in my name
Take me to the plaza
Her mystery not of high heels and eye
El joven se estremece
Girlfriend
The world Is showing me its hand
The night is still young
You can't talk to the dude
Nineteen in Naples

2004

NOT SO MUCH TO BE LOVED AS TO LOVE

Not so much to be loved as to love
Sunday afternoon
Vincent van Gogh
Cosi veloce
He gave us the wine to taste
Salvador Dali
My baby love love loves me
In che mondo viviamo
Behold the lilies of the field
Les étoiles
The world is showing it's hand
Abu Jamal
On a du soleil
The sea was calling me home
Not so much to be loved as to love (Version)

2007

REVOLUTION SUMMER

Weeds breaking through the concrete
Revolution Summer theme
Francine's theme
A chill in the night air
Music for next year's jukebox
Hipster cafe
Vacant lot
Hope's theme
Francine's theme (Reprise)
Hope's theme (Reprise)

Weeds breaking through the concrete (Reprise)
Now what ?

2008

BECAUSE HER BEAUTY IS RAW AND WILD

Because her beauty is raw and wild
No one was like Vermeer
Time has been going so fast
Es como el pan
Our drab ways
The lovers are here and they're full of sweat
Le printemps des amoureux est venu
When we refuse to suffer
This romance will be different for me
Old world
Our party will be on the beach tonight
When we refuse to suffer
Here it is
As my mother lay lying

You can have a cell phone that's OK but not me /
When we refuse to suffer (Third version)

¿A QUE VENIMOS SINO A CAER ?

¿A que venimos sino a caer ?
Es como el pan
Vampîresa mujer
Celestial
Le printemps des amoureux est venu
Cosi veloce

Yo tengo una novia
In che mondo viviamo
Silence alors, silence
My baby love love loves me
Ha muerta la rosa

2010

O MOON, QUEEN OF NIGHT ON EARTH

O Moon, Queen of night on Earth
These bodies that came to cavort
If you want to leave our party just go
I was the one she came for
Sa voix m'attise
We'll be the noise, we'll be the scandal
The sea was calling me home
Winter afternoon by B. U. in Boston
The bitter herb
Sa voix m'attise – Reprise
My affected accent
Even though I know I am the wind and the
Sun, I
The sea was calling me home – Reprise
It was the time for me to be with her

2013

La fiesta es para todos / La guitarra flamenca negra

2015

O Sun / Wait ! Wait !

Keith / They showed me the door to bohemia

2016

ISHKODE ! ISHKODE !

Whoa ! How different we all are !
Ishkode ! Ishkode !
Wait ! Wait !
O Sun !
Without the heart for chaperone
'A nammurata mia
Let me do this right !
But then ego went away
Outside O' Duffy's
Longtemps
Mother I give you my soul call

That's all we need at our party / Sad trumpets of
afternoon

People are disgusting (publié en ligne)

2018

SA

SA
My love she is from somewhere else
The fading of an old world
O Mind ! Let us go home
A penchant for the stagnant
O mind ! Just dance !
This lover's lane is very narrow

¡ Alegre soy !
Yes, take me home
And do no other thing
The sad trumpets of afternoon
SA

A penchant for the stagnant / Not so much to be loved
as to love

2020

**JUST A SPARK, ON JOURNEY FROM THE
DARK**

8 episodes of about 15 mn each released online

2021

**JUST A SPARK, ON JOURNEY FROM THE
DARK**

A second series of episodes is being made
available

Credits

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Television Personalities : Diary of a Young Fan (2017)

JC Brouchard :
Felt : Ballad of the Fan (2011)

And in French :

Pol Dodu : Vente interdite (2018)
JC Brouchard : Television Personalities : Journal d'un
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(2014)
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Pol Dodu : L'ange au Soupir (2003) *

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