

# A life in song

*After six decades in the industry, Randy Newman still finds no shortage of inspiration for his music.*

By Iain Shedden

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*Randy Newman: 'I'm the opposite of a workaholic.' Picture: Pamela Springsteen*

Randy Newman takes his humour seriously. “Sometimes I’ll write a song and the last joke is in the middle of it,” says the 73-year-old singer and composer. “That’s not right.”

Certainly there’s an abundance of humour — much of it satirical — on his latest work, the album *Dark Matter*, his first studio release since 2008’s *Harps and Angels*, which is released next Friday.

“It’s a funny thing,” he says with no hint of irony, “how much comedy I do. I’ve been thinking about that. When I was young the family would sit and watch comedy on television. My father liked it and my mother liked it and I liked it too. There’s nobody, apart from ‘Weird Al’ Yankovic, who has more comedy in their stuff than I do. I don’t know if the medium is good for it, but I like it, so I do it.”

It’s hard not to smile at the lyrical thrust of *Putin*, for example, a song from *Dark Matter* he released just before the US presidential election last year, which, with Newman’s tongue firmly in cheek, extols the virtues of the Russian leader, shirtless and otherwise.

“He can drive his giant tractor / across the Trans-Siberian plain / he can power a nuclear reactor / with the left side of his brain / and when he takes his shirt off / he drives the ladies crazy / when he takes his shirt off / makes me wanna be a lady.”

On the song *Sonny Boy*, bluesman Sonny Boy Williamson bemoans, from heaven, his place being taken at a concert by an impersonator. Then there’s the nine-minute opening track, *The Great Debate*, in which Newman’s songwriting and film composer chops go head to head in a genre-hopping epic based around the perennial argument of science versus religion, with an assortment of characters voicing numerous points of view.

“That was really hard to do,” he says. “I wondered whether it was possible, whether it would be clear enough for it to be interesting to people and whether it would be interesting enough to justify its length.”

Newman, who across his six decades as a professional tunesmith has written music for film, television and musical theatre as well as pop music for himself and others, has earned the right to indulge himself. Humour is one aspect of what he does, yet to suggest that his schtick is merely to raise a laugh would do him a great disservice. Much of his craft as a songwriter has been in the guise of cultural observer, digging around in the underbelly of America’s political and social malaise and melding his thoughts, in rhyme, to exquisite melodies. He’s a romantic, too, as ballads such as *She Chose Me* and *Wandering Boy* from *Dark Matter* demonstrate.

The Los Angeles-based musician has been crafting hit songs since he was 17. One of his best-known ones, *I Think It’s Going to Rain Today*, which appeared on his 1968 self-titled debut album, has been recorded by at least 50 singers since then, including Nina Simone, Norah Jones and Peter Gabriel.

“It’s amazing to think that something like *I Think It’s Going to Rain Today*, which I wrote in my parents’ house, is still around,” he says modestly. “Who would have thought it?”

That success is far from being an isolated incident. *You Can Leave Your Hat On*, *Sail Away*, *Simon Smith and his Amazing Dancing Bear* and *Mama Told Me (Not to Come)* are just some of the hits by other performers bearing his name. *Short People*, *Political Science* and *I Love LA* are among the many songs recorded by him that are, to use his term, still around. There’s also the Oscar-nominated *You’ve Got a Friend in Me*, which he wrote as part of the soundtrack to the animated movie *Toy Story* 22 years ago.

Newman became known for writing songs that were topical, scathing, loving and funny.

He has been nominated for an Oscar 20 times since film scores became his primary focus in 1981, when he penned the music for the movie *Ragtime*. He has won twice for best original song, once in 2002 for *If I Didn’t Have You* from the film *Monsters, Inc.* and then in 2011 for *We Belong Together*, from *Toy Story 3*. He also has three Emmys and six Grammys.

*You’ve Got a Friend in Me* ended up being the theme song and features as a leitmotiv in all three *Toy Story* movies. Newman, whose scores include *James and the Giant*

*Peach* (1996), *Meet the Parents* (2000) and *Cars 3* (2017), says he had no inkling that *Toy Story* would be a success. “At one stage there were three or four movies on the go,” he says. “There was *James and the Giant Peach*, *Toy Story*, *Cats Don’t Dance*. I thought *Cats Don’t Dance* would be the most successful and it barely came out.”



Next up for Newman as composer is *Toy Story 4*. He also wrote a piano score for this year’s Noah Baumbach comedy-drama *The Meyerowitz Stories (New and Selected)*, which stars Dustin Hoffman, Emma Thompson, Ben Stiller and Adam Sandler.

One might think, having digested his list of achievements, that Newman, who still tours regularly, is a workaholic. As with many things, he finds humour in that notion.

“I’m the opposite of a workaholic,” he says. “You don’t take nine years to make a record if you’re a workaholic. There are people like (composer) Johnny (John) Williams who write all the time. Every day he writes something. I don’t go in there unless I have to.

“I’ve been that way since I was a little boy, since I was 15. I don’t like to write. A lot of writers don’t like to write, but they don’t complain about it as much as I do.”

Apart from a brief stint in New Orleans with his family as a toddler, Newman has always lived in Los Angeles. Three of his uncles were Hollywood film-score composers, so his gravitation to that profession is not surprising. However, it was a passion for artists such as Ray Charles when he was a teenager that drove him to become a performer as well as a writer. He released one single that bombed when he was 18, which prompted him to concentrate on writing and arranging. He wrote a string of hits for artists such as Gene Pitney, Dusty Springfield and Petula Clark in the 1960s before releasing his self-titled debut album in 1968, which included songs of his already released by other artists. It wasn’t a commercial success, but critics liked the combination of his sharp lyrics and theatrical musicality. Through the 70s, albums *12 Songs* (1970), *Sail Away* (1972), *Good Old Boys* (1974) and in particular *Little Criminals* (1977) cemented Newman’s place as a singer-songwriter who could draw

from many sources — pop, country, blues, rock 'n' roll, jazz and musical theatre — while telling stories that were at once topical, scathing, loving and funny.

The producer of those early albums was Newman's childhood friend Lenny Waronker, who was A&R chief at Warner Brothers. His name is also on *Dark Matter*, alongside David Boucher and *Harps and Angels* co-producer Mitchell Froom. Musically there are parallels between this latest album and those 70s ones, but there's also a sense on *Dark Matter*— on which lavish string arrangements jostle with any number of styles, from vaudeville to gospel — that Newman is pushing the boundaries. There's a filmic element to the material, as if the almost constant scoring for movies over the past 36 years has had an incremental influence on his songwriting.

“Because of the movies, I think that keeps me in shape,” he says. “Songwriting has an influence from the films because I like to go somewhere. So it influences me in that way. I like melody and I like sequence. I like to have some kind of a tune unless there is some reason not to. That's not the style any more. I listen to a score with some other musicians and I say, ‘Why doesn't it just go somewhere?’ It's a love scene and there's two people standing there and it goes nowhere. Music is not going to distract you from the movie if it goes somewhere ... but that's how it is today.

“In terms of writing for film, I like orchestras and I love working with musicians and writing for orchestra. I don't think I would do that if the song didn't need it. I would hope not anyway. I've done that before, where I've written and over-arranged something just because I wanted to write for orchestra. I'm very aware of that and I don't think I would do it now.”

Newman's love of orchestration was apparent on his last visit to Australia, in 2011, when he performed in Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney with symphony orchestras. He's hoping to come back here next year to promote *Dark Matter*, but not in symphonic mode, “although, if I can find a foolish promoter I'll do it”, he says.

“I like playing with orchestras so it would be great. The thing I like best of anything I do is the performing part of it. It's easy. People applaud. What's not to like?”

## **IAIN SHEDDEN**

### **Music writer**

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