

March 12, 2019

Media Alert: Vince Bell “Ojo” (Mulatta Records MUL039) Street Date: April 3, 2018

Vince Bell - Voice, Guitar, Pedro Cortes - Guitar, Handclaps, Patrick Derivaz - Shaker, Robert Dick - Flute, Contrabass Flute, Ranzo B. Harris - Bass, David Mansfield - Banjo, Dobro, Lap Steel, Violin, Valerie Dee Naranjo - Gyli, Kalimba, Percussions, Renaud-Gabriel Pion - Clarinet, Piano, Rob Schwimmer - Continuum, Piano, Dave Solider - Violin, Handclaps, Satoshi Takaeshi - Drums, Laura Cantrell - Guest Vocalist

<http://www.vincebell.com>

<http://mulatta.org/Ojo.html>

CD Review: <https://medium.com/@danouellette/the-most-overlooked-album-of-2018-vince-bells-america-meets-jazz-Ojo-d9b558a49e6a>

Now that all the dust has settled on the lists of what were deemed the best critically applauded albums in 2018, it's high time to factor in what were the most overlooked—the tragically underappreciated or even totally missed recordings that have now been swept under the rug, drifted out to sea or dumped from consideration. Granted there is a plethora of music bombarding us with the mediocre or the derivative or the just plain horrendous to hear. But then there are the hidden sonic surprises that must be heard because of their singular speech and creative reserves that were decidedly not designed for the commercial world. Think art gallery of music.

At the top of the neglected pack is Texas-born, Santa Fe-based Vince Bell's remarkable *Ojo*, which slipped in largely unnoticed among the chart busters with its unconventional, oblique and magical clout. As such, its uniqueness created a milestone of Americana meets avant-garde jazz with Bell's sagacious and humorous poetry, roughhewn spoken-word readings and improvisational instrumental freeform created on the spot. No charts, no direction, no rules. But an impressive collective of players—from a flamenco guitar star to a French bass clarinetist to a continuum ace—sculpting a piece of art.

“Making *Ojo* was an extraordinary experience with brilliant musicians,” says Bell. “Everyone's opinion was regarded, and at heart it was a great improvisation to see my work from my journals applicable to an album setting. It's a pleasure to bring a new format to the art of American music.”

Ojo is produced by an intrepid threesome. Singer-songwriter genius Bob Neuwirth led the charge in getting Bell to open up his journals of writings and brought into the session country vocalist Laura Cantrell and David Mansfield, who plays banjo, violin, dobro, lap steel on the album. The classical-cum-popular Soldier String Quartet violinist Dave Soldier, who owns Mulatta Records which released the album, enlisted musicians from different musical worlds, including flamenco guitarist Pedro Cortes, piano/continuum player Rob Schwimmer, jazz bassist Ranzo B. Harris, contemporary classical-meets-new jazz flutist Robert Dick, clarinetist Renaud-Gabriel Pion, drummer Satoshi Takeishi and Saturday Night Live percussionist Valerie Dee Naranjo. Engineer/musician Patrick Derivaz worked on the juggling of the session as well as with Neuwirth on collaging the music into the 36-minute collection of 11 songs.

“Bob had been talking about doing this album for more than 20 years,” says Soldier. “If you bring in the top players, they really want to work hard—even if they had never played together but did know each other by reputation. They want to have pride and play well. Bob, Patrick and I chose the poems and

then tried them out with different musicians that Vince had never encountered. As much as I was one of the producers, I really saw myself as a coach.”

“We recorded for three days in a former bank repurposed as a studio on New York’s Wall Street that Dave found and set up as a studio,” says Neuwirth. “Then we worked in Patrick’s Brooklyn loft, cutting and pasting what you hear in the true improv spirit.”

Derivaz knew it was going to be three days of surprises. “During the recording process, everything was happening in the studio,” he says. “As engineer, it was challenging to switch gears and move the equipment around. Most of the album was created in the studio, but then after we used some other bits of Vince’s poetry to get the right mood. It took a little while with Bob, but it was fun working together in dealing with the different parts.”

“No one got told a note of what to play in the studio,” says Bell. “I was in an isolation booth. Bob pointed to the players and said, play. Then he pointed to me and said, read. Bob had told me that we needed to do an album, then he said: your words, not the music. Most recording sessions are a bore, but this went by quick with an extraordinary band. I was the content. If Bob, Dave or Patrick didn’t like something, I’d throw it away and write something else. It’s not how we learned it from the Beatles—write a three-minute wonder and you’re out. Today it’s a crowded area with a lot of white noise in that room. We decided to go a different way.”

Described by T Bone Burnett as “shamanism” in an “avant-psychebilly” setting, *Ojo* mystifies with the dusty opener, “A Little Poetry,” an intriguing four-perspective chapbook with Vince’s grizzled voice and eerie continuum support by Schwimmer, who Soldier says is the “fastest thinker I know on any instrument.” The poet cautions, “A little poetry is dangerous” in the opening line, followed by a rolling through tumbleweed, leaving dreams behind and concluding with “Life itself is only a temporary solution/The enthusiasm that you summon is an aphrodisiac.” The rest of the way is just as seductive, with laments and renewals, tomcats and rattlesnakes, conversations and arguments, casinos and bandits. In the mysterious end piece, “Nothing at All,” with Robert Dick on contrabass flute and Satoshi Takeishi on drums, Bell recites, “Music changes the world. I’d like to change it a little bit my way.”

Indeed, Bell captivatingly succeeds.

The top jazz vocalist of the day, Kurt Elling agreed to be “blindfolded” for DownBeat magazine’s classic Blindfold Test of hearing music, trying to make an educated guess as to who the artist is, then reflecting on it. Last summer at the North Sea Jazz Festival, I took the stage with Kurt and played him several songs. After an overproduced number by Ivan Lins, I played him Bell’s “Where the Wind Sleeps,” with support by David Mansfield on banjo and Renaud-Gabriel Pion on bass clarinet. His reflection:

“That’s cool. I feel like I should know his voice from somewhere. Is he the writer? It’s got a great sound, and he’s killing it. But you can tell he’s the guy who wrote it because all the feeling is there. That’s what you want. If you’re going to tell a story on a recording, it has to have a vibe. It needs the vibe more than anything else. With Ivan Lins, all that vibe was taken out. It was just too perfect and clean and crispy. This guy delivers that emotional content along with the intellectual content of the story he’s telling. It sounds great. I love the bass clarinet. That’s always a good move. You don’t hear a lot of banjo these days, so that’s an interesting moment. Maybe this is more of a folk recording of some kind, but the bass clarinet puts it into any category.”

When told it was Vince Bell, Elling replied, “Don’t know him, but he sounds good. I like his voice, and he knows the sound he wants. He’s obviously listened to the great storytellers because he’s getting the emotional content across.”

Also on *Ojo*, there’s “The Snake,” the no-nonsense tale of the wide-open Western landscape colored by casino references where a roulette wheel cuts like a knife. Clocking in less than two minutes, the track

is easily a droll highlight with musical support by Dick on wind-sounding flute, Derivaz on shaker and Saturday Night Live percussionist Valerie Dee Naranjo. The don't-mess-with-me Bell reads:

The snake was nothing but bad medicine

Savage and invisible, a pitiless kind of predator

Venomous and hard

So when the snake unadvisedly took a bite out of me?

The snake died.

“Oja delivers what Vince is thinking in his writing, and we got the players to get into an uncontrollable space with the poetry,” says Neuwirth, who produced Bell’s long-awaited debut album *Phoenix* in 1994, twelve years after he was slammed down in literally a death-defying car crash. “People use computers to have some kind of control. But that doesn’t supplant the feeling in a jazz room. What we came up with is music that’s not categorizable. It’s improv in nature and even avant-garde in a sense. I don’t think an album like this has ever been done in this way. And it requires a listener to have a seamless experience from beginning to end. It’s like one act of a play. I think of the project as an art piece.”

Schwimmer says that the whole session was insanely but wonderfully weird. “I was shocked to find myself in the same lifeboat that we were all thrown into,” he says. “Nothing was determined at all, but everyone was so good at improvising that it all resonated. There were so many moments of cool bizarreness as we jumped into Vince’s poetry that was so vivid. Robert came in with his extended technique for flute from new and world music, and David just got me when he exploded with flavor on dobro, banjo and violin. There are a lot of albums that are mind-blowing, but *Ojo* is like an asteroid from outer space that doesn’t fit anywhere.”

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Ojo is a small miracle, given that Bell’s career almost folded in 1982 when he was recording his first album in Austin that guested friends Stevie Ray Vaughan and Eric Johnson. As he was driving home after a day in the studio, his car was struck by a speeding drunk driver. Bell was almost pronounced dead, but made it through in the hospital albeit with major brain damage, broken ribs and a severely damaged right arm. By some estimates, recovery time was six years, but today he figures it was more like a dozen years. He had to relearn how to play the guitar. He told one interviewer: “Learning the guitar the first time was a bitch. Learning the guitar the second time was cruel.” He adds, “I had to teach myself. I would see the D chord in my head, but I couldn’t tell my hand to do it. But I kept on, then I got to the E chord.”

Plus, Bell had to overcome the cerebral trauma. “It takes a long time to come back from a brain injury,” he says. “After all these years, I still walk around the problem. I’m a high-functioning, brain-injured son of a bitch. Hey, everyone has this problem. We’re just all in different phases. We’re all border collies.”

The album reunited Bell with Neuwirth who has been called by Patti Smith “a catalyst for action” and by others an instigator. Burnett cites Bell as an artist who works with autonomy, then notes, “Same goes for Bob, who by remaining autonomous, knows how to encourage that sort of thing.”

The first connect came when Neuwirth got a call in 1993 from radio deejay Hobart Taylor (who today is on the air at KUCI in Irvine, California, with his show *The Crystal Egg*). He hipped him to Bell who had become a go-to songwriter for the likes of Nanci Griffith and Lyle Lovett, among others. Neuwirth said he’d be happy to do a two-song demo, but Bell arrived with more than 50 songs to choose from. In *Ojo*’s liners, Neuwirth writes, “The lyrics got my attention...Vince Bell is a writer, and he makes a lot of songs.” So he expanded the project into a full-blown album that featured washtub bass player Fritz Richmond, Geoff Muldaur, Steve Bruton, John Cale, Victoria Williams and Lovett. Released on Watermelon Records (now available on New West Records), *Phoenix* opened ears to Bell’s unique songs.

It was a small hit with critics. During the session, Neuwirth envisioned working with Bell on a spoken-word concept album. Twenty years and three Bell albums later (Texas Plates on Paladin and two self-released recordings Live in Texas and Recado), *Ojo* was set into motion.

For the lyrical content, Bell scoured through 40 years of journal entries, scribbles on stray pieces of paper and words on lists. Pencil notes, ball point pen notes. He says Neuwirth was the muse to get him to create poetry from all the random emotions and images he had collected. He said that Bob asked him: "Y'don't wanna just write three verses and a refrain forever, do you?"

"*Ojo* allowed me to realize my words," Bell says. "The themes in my journals were lost to time. I'm paraphrasing Hemingway, who said, 'Anyone can write a book, but it's hard to get a line of truth.' With Bob egging me on through emails, I finally came to my senses and put the words all together." (As a side note, Bell's reams of notes and lyrics are housed at Rice University. "If you don't start stuffing it into an archive, you're an idiot," he says. "It's somewhere. It's all in one place.")

While most of the songs on the album are spoken-word, Bell does offer a couple of singer-songwriter beauties on acoustic guitar with harmonizing vocal support from Laura Cantrell. They both lighten the proceedings. The sober "If You Walk Away" is Bell's tribute to his friend and songwriting colleague Steve Bruton, and the catchy "Give Chance a Chance" about casinos and romance ("play the odds, bet to win") would be a perfect must-play on a hip radio show. Another personal poem is the beat-driven "Gypsy," featuring Pedro Cortes' speedy flamenco guitar lines and handclaps, that pays homage to one of Bell's best friends, Townes Van Zandt.

The title track of the album is a beautifully spellbinding tune in Spanish and English about the underground fountains of his Santa Fe home captured in pools of water and rainbows. "*Ojo* refers to the springs of water in New Mexico," Bell says. "There are ancient maps that show where all the *Ojos* are. There are hundreds. They are the wellsprings. This is as cool as it can be. The orientation is presented in Spanish and explained in English with unwritten Indian language. The influence was the magic. No rhythms, the music not appearing. It sent on its own through the images. It was fun to have such a consequence of creativity."

Bell's poetic line "The hardest thing to do is nothing at all" appears twice on *Ojo*. It first appears in the probing and conversation poem, "Oh Yeah," which Bell comments on as "a new generation of tune....simple, but impactful. Message oriented but suggestive." In the coda, "the hardest thing" follows the lines, "No politics? No problem." The line reappears in the final song, "Nothing at All," again as a coda. It was a mixing decision made by Neuwirth. Why? "We started with the musicians jamming and Vince reading," Neuwirth says. "It ended up being art. We could not have done that if we did nothing. So this line is what the album is all about. It's true and timeless."

Media Contact

Jim Eigo

Jazz Promo Services

272 State Route 94 South #1

Warwick, NY 10990-3363

Ph: 845-986-1677

Cell / text: 917-755-8960

Skype: jazzpromo

E Mail: jim@jazzpromoservices.com

www.jazzpromoservices.com

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