

Vince Bell - A Songwriter's Sojourn

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Tuesday, 29 December 2009 13:24

**A good song can take a lot of beating, doggone it ...
It can take what anybody can lay into it.
It's hard to whip a good tune.**

– *Vince Bell*



When Lyle Lovett was touring in support of his new CD, “Natural Forces,” he opened the show with “Sun and Moon and Stars,” a song written early in the career of Texan Vince Bell. Lovett said he recorded the song as a tribute to Bell, one of his mentors. For audience members familiar with Bell’s story, it was a particularly touching moment.

In December of 1982, Bell’s life was moving forward on greased grooves. Living in the Montrose area of Houston, he was a popular fixture on the coffee house circuit, playing his own tunes during gigs at Anderson Fair, the Old Quarter, Sand Mountain, and at the Cactus Café in Austin with the likes of Willis Alan Ramsey, Wrecks Bell, Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt.

“When I was 19 years old, I moved lock, stock and bicycle into a filthy little flat and the rest of the world dissolved into irrelevance,” he said during a phone interview from his home in Santa Fe, New Mexico. “It was Montrose. It was a hip world-within-the-world – it was an attitude as much as it was a place to live – an anything-goes lifestyle.”

In addition to playing, writing and living the lifestyle of a modern-day beat poet, Bell was working with some of Texas’ finest musicians on a three-song demo he planned to use to get a record contract.

“We brought in the best musicians we could get,” Bell explained. “We had Richard Hardy from Carole King’s band. We had three people from the band named Christopher Cross. We had Stevie Ray Vaughan.”

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On December 21, 1982, after a successful evening in the recording studio, Bell's life came to a sudden, horrific halt.

"Doggone it," he said, "we almost pulled it off before I was so rudely interrupted."

The interruption came in the form of a life-shattering car wreck that left Bell's body busted up and his brain so scrambled that it took nearly a decade to recover. He was in a coma for nearly a month. His wife was also severely injured.

"Something ran into me on the feeder road on I-35 in Austin, and knocked me into the 1990s," he said with a husky laugh. "I came around in the '90s, looking for trouble."

Bell has chronicled his journey in a book, play and CD called "One Man's Music," released in April. (University of North Texas. \$14.95. 253 pp. CD - \$15)

"My right arm was not recognizable and my liver had been forced out of my mid-section onto the pavement," he writes. "I had scar tissue in my eyeballs as a result of lying [face first] in gasoline. My lungs were collapsed. My skin was punctured in various places. Bones in my right arm were destroyed up to the elbow. I would have to be sculpted over again by armies of doctors and years of therapy to come."

In addition to the extensive injuries, his vocal chords were paralyzed and he lost his sense of taste.

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Another man might not have survived, but Bell had an ace up his sleeve.

When he was in high school, Bell wanted an athletic scholarship to the University of Texas, but when that didn't happen, he picked up the guitar and decided to make a living writing songs. However, he credits his days as a quarterback with helping him find the courage to face his lengthy rehabilitation – and the confidence to make some tough decisions.

“Those lessons of getting my bell rung on the football field helped,” he explained. “I was mean enough that I could get back up and bust the other guy in the chin. I was presumptuous enough to start off my rehabilitation by firing the hospital and every d**n body in it ... because they knew nothing. They didn't know what to do with me and I had to do it myself.”

Most of what Bell did happened outside the hospitals and without a doctor's help. He started writing down his zig-zagging thoughts in notebooks. He did his own physical therapy. He lived alone. His wife, Melody, left him, as she faced a lengthy rehabilitation and her own set of demons. He made it through because of that tenacious personality forged years before on the gridiron.

One of the most moving stories in Bell's book is about digging a ditch. Because he was homebound and broke, he decided to build a greenhouse where he could grow vegetables. In order for the greenhouse to have water, a ditch needed to be dug between the back side of his house out to the site where the greenhouse was going up.

“I could not get the shovel in the ground,” Bell said. “I wasn't coordinated enough.”

According to a friend who was there, “Vince grabbed the shovel. He wasn't coordinated enough to even walk a straight line, much less dig this trench – but he did it. [M]ore than once [he'd] just fall to the ground. But, he'd get back up and pick that shovel back up and start digging again. I tell you, it was a mark of determination that was a sign of things to come.”

Bell says, “If you just stick with it, you might not be able to get everything right now, but sooner or later you'll get everything right.”

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Bell did not dawdle during his rehabilitation. Since he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to sing or play the guitar again, he decided to go to college and got an associate's degree in graphic design so he could earn a living.

He had to learn how to play a guitar again.

"The first time I had to learn to play the guitar, it was a b****. The second time it was cruel," he said with a dry laugh.

After conquering the guitar and taking voice lessons to loosen his vocal chords, Bell began to perform again. Spending time in coffee houses and doing other gigs gave him the confidence to go back into the recording studio.

He released "Phoenix" in 1994, "Texas Plates" in 1999, "Live in Texas" in 2001 and "Recado" in 2007.

Even though he's performing and recording again, Bell acknowledges that his struggles are not completely over.

"There was a lot of stuff that is gone now," Bell says. "Maybe some of the hardest things are happening now. This is the last part of my rehabilitation – stepping out of the brain injured suit and back into the dumb musician suit."

While Bell writes songs mostly for himself, he's happy when other artists cover them.

When told about Lovett's opening with "Sun and Moon and Stars," Bell said, "That was about the 15th song I wrote – in about 1971 or 1972. That's the thing about a good song. A good song can take a lot of beating, doggone it. It can take a lot of what anybody can lay into it if it's really

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good. It's hard to whip a good tune." Bell is currently touring in support of the book, CD and his one-man play. He'll be at the FronteraFest in Austin Jan. 19-31.

He's extraordinarily upbeat, considering the raw hand life dealt him in 1982. His attitude is reminiscent of Andrew Stanton, who did the voice of the sea turtle in "Finding Nemo." Everything is "way kewl" and "no problem."

His voice is deep and husky and his laugh is quite contagious. He hasn't allowed the accident and its aftermath to rule his life. It happened and he's dealt with it. With a new wife and new home in New Mexico, he has moved on – he's a working musician again, and that's good enough for him.

"I'm doing extremely well," Bell said at the end of the interview. "I'm what you call a high functioning brain-injured son of a b***h. I don't have much in common with my brain-injured buddies anymore because nobody can even tell."

This is the fourth part in "A Songwriter's Sojourn," a series featuring songwriters from Texas – or with close ties to Texas – who stayed true to their craft, lived up to their gifts

and left their mark on the world of music.

Watch future editions for features on Marcia Ball, Nanci Griffith, James McMurtry, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Terri Hendrix, Jerry Jeff Walker, Django Walker, Rex "Wrecks" Bell, Willis Alan Ramsey, Steve Earle and Townes Van Zandt.

To order "One Man's Music," visit www.vincebell.com ***** **The Pawless V-2: A new way to make great music** One of the major changes Vince Bell made after his decade-long rehabilitation from a 1982 car wreck was to change guitars. He began his career with a D-18 Martin.

"The Martin is cool," he said during a telephone interview from his home in Santa Fe, New Mexico. "The low end was like chopping wood – pow, pow, pow – but the high end of my Martin was kinda transparent. It was every sound man's nightmare for 35 years."

Bell began dreaming about a new guitar. He even had ideas about the new instrument's design. He hooked up with Vince Pawless, a Texas guitar maker.

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Pawless told his new friend that he would build a guitar for him, but he needed to know what Bell wanted.



“I said, ‘Well, let’s make it out of hard wood – out of mesquite wood,’” Bell said. “And he took the bait and made the guitar from the butt end to the tuning pegs. I gave him my Martin. I’ll play the Vince Bell – called the V-2 because it’s made by Vince and played by Vince – model from now on.”

Pawless, who works out of a studio in Gainesville, began making guitars in 1995. Everything on his guitars is handmade, and filling an order can take up to two years.

“It was Vince’s idea to put a hard top on it,” Lawless said during a telephone interview. “Usually, the top is made out of a soft wood, like spruce. It was a pleasant surprise. We did it for grins and it turned out to be a nice-sounding guitar.”

For Bell, it was a good trade.

“For all that Martin was to me for 35 or more years, it’s not what the Pawless is,” he said. “The Pawless is an excellent instrument. I’ll show you when I see you.”