

MENU



A Great Lost Record, Found – The Bongos’ “Phantom Train”

The Bongos
Phantom Train
JEM Recordings

By **Dave Cantrell** (<http://caughtinthecarousel.com/author/dave-cantrell/>)

We keep getting back what we thought we'd lost. The whole East Coast contingent, just about, from Boston to Jersey and points in between. First came Mission of Burma, Roger Miller miraculously cured and back from the Mesozoic. On their heels the Feelies, Million and Mercer and rhythms as crazy as ever and then in 2012 none other than Stamey and Holsapple with the scrappy dB's fell into our lap, sneakers that they are. Aside from the Individuals (are you listening, Glenn Morrow?), all that remained was for Richard Barone and the Bongos to come in through the (automatic) door, set up, plug in and play. And though it took a sad bittersweet occasion to make that final domino fall – the closing of legendary Maxwell's in Hoboken – that's exactly what they did on July 31st of this year, closing out the storied club's run as they'd opened it (as a band called "a") in 1979. It wasn't the first instance – they've reunited a half dozen times for a handful of shows over the last six years – but certainly the most momentous, not least because of Barone's announcement from the stage that the band's long lost album, *Phantom Train*, recorded at famed Compass Point Studios in the Bahamas, would finally see the vinyl light of day on October 1st.

It may surprise some people to realize that, like the Burma boys, who in their initial run had a small flurry of releases but only one album proper (Vs.), the Bongos, until now, had just one true record to call their own, 1985's *Beat Hotel*. Their other RCA-backed effort, *Numbers With Wings*, was a mini-LP and of course the band's seminal debut on PVC, *Drums Along The Hudson*, despite sounding remarkably of a piece, was a compilation of singles and EPs issued on the British imprint Fetish. They were in the midst of recording their follow-up LP – this time for Island Records – when the band imploded.

Even if not familiar with the Bongos' history it's probable you read between the lines of that snapshot history and came away with the lamentably common story arc of a band storming into the zeitgeist with a blisteringly good first album, getting ~~snapped~~ swallowed up by a major, battling all the attendant complications then succumbing to the forces of self-destruction before their time. And, without deviling too deeply into the details (there's Barone's revealing [book \(http://www.amazon.com/Frontman-Surviving-Rock-Star-Myth/dp/0879309121\)](http://www.amazon.com/Frontman-Surviving-Rock-Star-Myth/dp/0879309121) "Frontman: Surviving The Rock Star Myth" for that), that *is* the story at its most skeletal but essential. What's different about the Bongos' version, however, is that they actually left behind an unreleased album that may well have vaulted them toward the glories first promised with their debut or, at the very least, would have rewritten their place in the record books from the sadder category of 'amazing debut then what happened?' to the slightly less sad category of 'broke up just after possibly their best record.' It certainly would have been one of the best rock albums of 1987, competing note for note with Hüsker Dü's *Warehouse: Songs and Stories*, the 'Mats *Pleased To Meet Me*, and That Petrol Emotion's *Babble*, but at least it, and the band, can be satisfied with its resurrected status as one of the best of 2013.



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Known from their earliest days for infectious beat structures that built delightfully zig-zaggy hallways between the punky intransigence of the garage and the slinky, strobe-lit dancefloor, the band on *Phantom Train*, in many ways, hops over the somewhat tamer, less-focused (or at least less-driven) material that marked their RCA years and takes up that invincible thread left dangling when the needle lifted off side two of *Drums*. And it does it straight off, no niceties, no hesitation, just *boom*.

Counted off by Barone, “My Wildest Dreams” launches the record with trademark Bongos verve, a hover of feedback, an insta-catchy rhythm guitar that marries, as usual for these guys, the abandoned to the tight, and a burst of jungle drums from Frank Giannini that includes little triplets of wooden percussion. Classic Bongos territory, then, we are indeed in the Congo, the wildness and punch, the energy both joyous and dangerous, teeth bared but not without a wide New Jersey smile. “*Days of innocence then,*” Barone sings, “*hang on to yourself now / time for confidence, yeah / to get off the shelf somehow*” and it seems uncannily – and, for us, gratifyingly – as if he’s addressing not only himself and the band in 1987 but *Phantom Train* itself in 2013. Besides marveling at the prescience inherent (more such interpretable lines crop up later in the song), besides being bouncingly happy to hear this band pounding it out along the Hudson again – wildest dreams, indeed – you’ll mostly wonder ‘How the *hell* could this record lay under wraps for well on twenty-six years?’ Then you’ll go back to the shaking dancefloor, as the album rarely lets up.

One of the more remarkable aspects of *Phantom Train* is how staunchly, starkly – OK, strongly – the scrappy Hoboken soul of the band stands out in the midst of the production’s mid-80’s trappings. For you *will* hear some of that decade’s standard studio settings in place, the giant (over)enhanced drum sound (on “Diamond Guitar,” “One Bold Stroke”), the occasionally over-asserted presence of the synth, just the overall reverbed sheen that attends now and again. It’s possible, perhaps, that Barone, with the engineers, could have, to some degree, redressed these MTV-ish tics in the remastering process but I for one am glad it was left relatively intact (there wasn’t a lot needed doing, apparently) as it not only remains, as it should, a document of its time but as well underlines with some emphasis how hardy this band was/is at their core, how thumpingly abundant their self-belief.



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You can hear it on “River To River,” opening right off on that calling-card sear of a Bongos guitar lead that sounds like a violin crying with amplification before the song drops into a bass-led post-punk soul stomper that’s as mixtape-ready as anything they’ve done, a sentiment I found myself muttering often, by the way. “Saturn Eyes,” with its Frankie Lymoned intro, the mournful vocal, the repeated outbursts, manages, via the sincerity at its heart (never a problem with this band, frankly) and a rending-of-garments guitar break, to throw off the shackles of studio gloss and become the throwback pop classic – Jersey style – it sets out to be. “Runs To The Wild,” meanwhile, does precisely what it promises, chasing itself into the bush, up to and over the edge of pure Bongos beatmania territory, playfully manic but most assuredly *manic*. When the mix drops

down into just drums and Rob Norris' garage-funk bass for a scant few measures it may be brief but we know we've reached the heart of that propulsive jungle this band staked out as their own and it's magical, there's a pretty good chance you'll just plain lose it at that point.

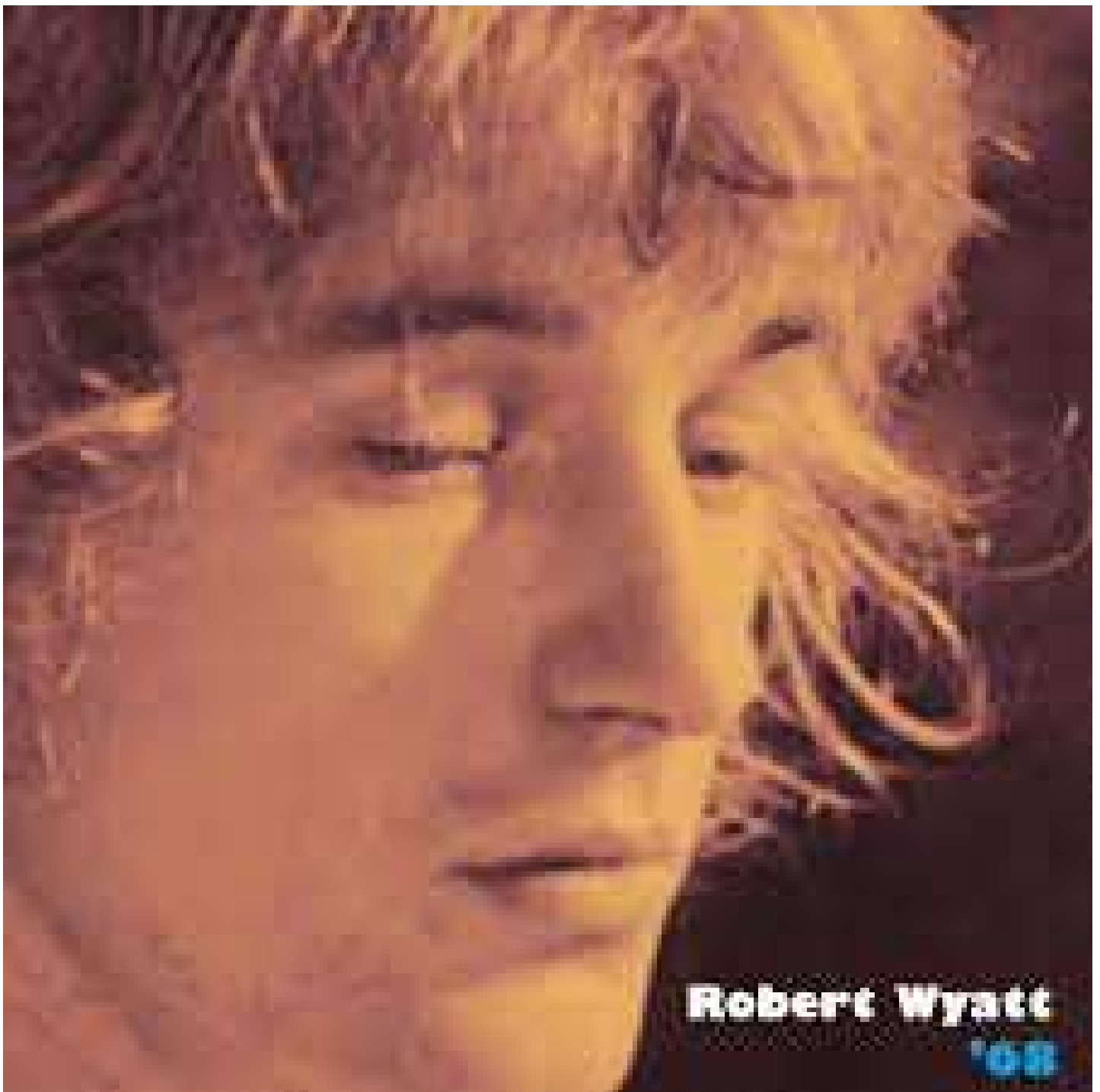
By Barone's account the band were white hot when they walked into Compass Point and it wasn't just from the Bahamian sun. They'd just wrapped up one of their typically marathon tours and instead of showing fatigue they burst into the studio revved and ready and frightfully gelled. Thus they're more than able to pick up the (violently strummed) sonic gauntlet thrown down by the Violent Femmes, inject it with a mad tropical frisson and come out with "Under Someone's Spell," a bewitching, twitching, adroitly constructed speed-pop-a-rama that seems impatient to get itself under you skin and so does so from the frantic off. They're crazy confident enough to dabble in unsettling discord at the start of "One Bold Stroke" – before, it should be said, the song bolts into a shimmering rocker that keeps its furious focus inside a flurry of dizzying effects; to flaunt, at the outset of "Town Of One," those Ornette mentions from early in their career; *and* to take on the hippy dippy Donovan monster "Sunshine Superman" and heavy it out with a gutsier, more guttural splatter and squall, thereby transforming the vibe from flowery to visceral without stripping its trippiness one bit. It still sounds happy hypnotic in that naifish way, it just happens to simultaneously sound a tad more..lurid. And, perhaps most notably, the band were fearlessly hubristic enough to challenge themselves to go big and hearty enough, shirty even, on the title track's tale of romantic failure and fatalism, stuffing it with a big fat bass, even bigger, John Henry's hammer drums, a sharp chopping locomotive guitar effect then wrapping it all up in epic swaths of organic and synthesized backing vox during the chorus that might've had the Clash looking over their shoulder had this thing been released. And get this: that chorus? It's got Barone singing what, as an American songwriter, has to be the ultimate anti-hero sentiment, his voice at its testifyin'est as he belts out the line "*This train ain't bound for glory*" as if it's both recrimination and redemption and I tell ya what, maybe that train ain't ever gonna make it but the song itself shows no hesitation barreling into glory full stop, the band at full throttle.

Though a couple tracks here – the warm, contagious "I Belong To Me" and the brittle beauty "Tangled In Your Web" – would appear on Barone's forthcoming live-at-the-Bottom Line album *Cool Blue Halo*, the former providing its title, neither they nor any other facet of this record points to any sense of impending fracture. Humming like a 357 Chevy tuned to the hilt, audacious and a-brim with a clapping energy, this record is the sound of a band in the throes of utter vivacity, pouring forward, the notion of the brake pedal faint at best. *Phantom Train*, it has to be argued, is indeed the great lost album of its era, found. It might be strongly suggested that you get it before it gets away from us again.

- Dave Cantrell



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