

ALBUM REVIEW: The Bongos, "Phantom Train"

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BY ROB ROSS - SEPTEMBER, 17TH 2013

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It is nearly impossible for me to distinguish the reviewer from the fan; I will fail miserably in my job as the reviewer but succeed in saying, as a fan of The Bongos "THIS ALBUM WAS WORTH THE WAIT". It's simple. As much as I love The Bongos, I didn't think 1985's *Beat Hotel* was a great release. It had a few good songs but suffered from the same syndrome as many albums of that period – too much layering; too much stuff – too much '80's. *Phantom Train*, which was recorded during 1985 and 1986 (mostly) at Compass Point (in the Bahamas), has exactly the right balance: fantastic songs; strong arrangements – stripped down to basic 2 guitars/bass/drums with acoustic guitar for rhythm coloring and some keyboards for embellishment; Richard Barone's vocals are amongst the finest I've ever heard him do – passionate, convincing, emotional, confident. The harmonies weaved into the songs are rich and engulfing. The tighter-than-tight, totally in synch rhythm section of thunder-drummer Frank Giannini and bass-maestro Rob Norris **sound** better than ever – you can

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hear them, hear the power. *Phantom Train* [reads](#) – all the songs fit together seamlessly. So it leads me to ask aloud the question (of which I do know the answer to, but I'll ask anyway): why the fuck didn't this come out until now? Did The Bongos not realize that this album is, indeed, their finest hour? No matter – it's here; I couldn't be happier.

So on to some of the personal perspective: I'd often wondered what songs Richard Barone used from *Phantom Train* for his "Cool Blue Halo" performances. I once asked him and he said "Tangled In Your Web", which I tried to hear in my mind as a Bongos song. Well, it's on this album. BUT... so is a very personal favorite, "I Belong To Me" and "River To River", which was the first single from Barone's *Primal Dream* and has a killer bass line on the band's version. All of these band versions have a full sound; powerful (a recurring theme) and emotional and give the songs a perspective I hadn't seen before, since I only knew the stripped-down solo versions. As it stands, "I Belong To Me" is gorgeous and gripping; "Tangled In Your Web" is as close as to the version I'd imagined – maybe a little more colored in, but still hits the target. And it doesn't matter what version you prefer, these songs are still masterworks.

As for the unheard tracks, "My Wildest Dreams" (which had been aired previously by Richard for his "Cool Blue Halo 25th Anniversary" show and released as the leadoff track for the album in August) is an instant Bongos classic – hooky, driven, catchy – what you want and expect from The Bongos. But it's like that throughout the album. A joyously rocked-out version of "Sunshine Superman", the Donovan classic, is here; "Diamond Guitar" is, again, pure Bongos – crisp, lush [acoustic guitar](#) interplay, strident rhythm and soaring melodies abound. "Roman Circus" (another song that appeared on Barone's *Primal Dream*) is a powerhouse and determined-sounding, given the full Bongos treatment. A personal favorite, James Mastro's "Town Of One", which I remember hearing at a Bongos show in early '86, is beefy and rocking. For my money, however, the standout track (from those not previously heard and loved) is "Saturn Eyes" – a Beach Boys-like epic with time signature shifts and an urgent guitar strum leading to the kick-ass chorus; it's here that Barone's voice reaches a height that I can't properly describe.








It's one thing to wax poetic about "lost" albums – *Smile*, etc. – and often is the case where you're inevitably let down once you hear it/it's been released. That is far from the reaction I've had in listening to *Phantom Train*. It's everything I could have hoped for and more. And you should want it now as much I did. It's also fitting that this album is released by the New Jersey-based, newly resuscitated Jem label, who first graced the United States with The Bongos' debut *Drums Along The Hudson*. It all comes full circle now. The Bongos can be proud that this album is theirs – it is their finest work without hesitation or question.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

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