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Graded on a Curve: The Bongos, *Phantom Train*

BY JOSEPH NEFF | OCTOBER 8, 2013



Along with The Feelies and The Individuals, **The Bongos** are the third point of the extremely hep triangle that was early-80s Hoboken Pop. They got off to an excellent start, but as their profile increased they hit some stumbling blocks, and by 1987 they were no more. But with the arrival of *Phantom Train* on the freshly revived **Jem Records** imprint, The Bongos offer up a lost album that serves as a surprisingly pleasurable end to their original run.

While Yo La Tengo's odds-defying perseverance has resulted in many younger folks crowning them as the kings and queen of Hoboken, they in fact formed a few years after their city rose to '80s rock prominence, with Ira and Georgia following the lead of a handful of outfits that established Hoboken as a major hub in

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rock's development after the fallout of punk.

Indeed, a lot of older heads will quickly cite The Feelies (who actually hailed from Haledon, NJ) as the undisputed champions of this geographical upsurge, partially due to their debut LP *Crazy Rhythms* having endured as stone classic, but also because they actually managed to survive the decade, completing four albums before splitting up in 1992. And for many, their reunion in 2008 for live shows and the subsequent release of a pretty nifty comeback effort *Here Before* has only reinforced their stature.

But one group does not a scene make, and The Individuals and The Bongos, along with North Carolina via New York transplants the dB's (who played the city's now sadly defunct Maxwell's club so often they became a huge component in the whole scenario) were equally important in giving a varied voice to Hoboken's upstart band action. Those looking for evidence should proceed directly to The Bongos LP *Drums Along the Hudson*.

It's a disc so strong that its reality as a compilation can become very easy to forget. In fact, this 1982 assembling by PVC Records of The Bongos' early work for the small UK label Fetish is considered by many to be their finest showing. This is an assessment that I happen to share, and it's one that until recently I've had little reason to rethink.

But others, especially those who discovered them after they expanded to a four piece and experienced a significant rise in profile, will very likely pick one of The Bongos two RCA slabs as the group's strongest statement. Those discs, the 1983 EP "Numbers Have Wings" and '85's full-length follow up *Beat Hotel*, found the band, led by guitarist, vocalist, and principal songwriter Richard Barone, undergoing a substantial adjustment, trading the edginess of their early work for a more pronounced and heavily polished pop orientation.

For lots of folks who dug them early, this was simply a bridge too far. Additionally, The Bongos' shift in focus helped to inspire a mid-'80s Hoboken backlash of sorts, though in truth the city's focus on melodicism and accessibility had left some observers cold, or at least openly antsy, from the start. The band's breakup in 1987 found scores of *Drums Along the Hudson* partisans considering The Bongos as another case of squandered potential. And fans of their later stuff either followed Barone into his solo career or in many more instances were left stumped over whatever became of them.

By the time I discovered The Bongos in the late '80s, picking up all three of the above records as trade-ins, the consensus on the RCA material was that "Numbers Have Wings" was the better of the two. I agreed then and continue to concur now, but going back for another dip into those discs reveals that the main problem with *Beat Hotel* was a deeper immersion into questionable production practices compounded by the band's ambitions being outpaced by the strength of their songwriting and weakened by delivery that was often tentative.

Altogether, it wasn't anything that couldn't be cured by simply continuing to play, refocusing on a stronger batch of tunes and then getting back into the studio to record. And that's just what The Bongos did, except the resulting LP sat in the can until just

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this very year. And as the first release on Marty Scott's revitalized Jem imprint, *Phantom Train* does a great job of tying up some of the loose ends that were left to dangle after that jump to RCA.

PVC Records was but one of a handful of highly prolific sub-labels owned by Scott that fell under the Jem umbrella. Staring in the early '70s and gaining momentum well into the following decade, Jem put a massive amount of music, much of it of little or no interest to major companies, into the racks with affordable price tags. So it was with *Drums Along the Hudson*, and that Jem is back to help clarify The Bongos' history adds a sweet twist to an album that far exceeds expectations.

Those hoping that *Phantom Train* completely dispenses with the '80s production values that compromised *Numbers Have Wings* and *Beat Hotel* will be in for a disappointment, at least initially. But what makes this record such a surprising kick in the ear is how Barone and his mates stepped back, took a deep breath and navigated the reality of their creative trajectory circa 1987, not by attempting a complete break with their RCA work, but by simply keeping those production trappings in check and letting the quality of the songs and the rediscovered energy of their playing shine through.

By 1987, fans of the Bongos had either came to terms with (or in many cases, openly favored) their development into a Big Time band or they'd long jumped ship. For the group to completely sever ties with the motions of their RCA-era (*Phantom Train* was slated to be part of a new deal with Island) would've been a miscalculation me thinks, and it's quickly obvious they felt the same way.

And let's be clear here. The original three Bongos—Barone, bassist Rob Norris, and drummer Frank Giannini have been infrequently back at it on live stages since around 2006, and in fact recently played as headliners on the closing night of Maxwell's. Like *Phantom Train's* appearance on Jem, this is highly fitting, since the three, along with Glenn Morrow of The Individuals (and Bar/None Records honcho) fame, were also part of that storied club's opening night. Way back then "a" was the name of the band and minus Morrow this performing unit eventually became The Bongos.

All this recent live activity makes it plain that if the three were somehow dissatisfied with *Phantom Train*, they could've easily elected to rerecord the songs as (yet another) reunion effort. Listening to the results, I'm glad they chose the "lost album" route, giving full credit to the contributions of guitarist James Mastro on these sessions as they bring The Bongos' '80s reign a sense of happier, if long-delayed, closure.

It only takes brief exposure to opener "My Wildest Dreams," particularly next to anything from *Beat Hotel*, for the ears to absorb how this they largely succeeded in righting their musical ship. Yes, that '80's production sensibility is still there, but since the instrumental delivery is so lively, especially in the rhythm section, this never really becomes a problem.

Just as importantly, Barone's knack for nicely-evolved pop-rock songwriting steps to the fore, with any period touches serving as flavoring rather than attempts to fill a void of substance. No, the

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key to *Phantom Train* is that the tunes have the goods, even those displaying a boldly pop direction. "I Belong to Me" for instance, allows Barone his moments of (slyly eclectic) crooning, but there's also built-in drive to the composition that inspires some likeable rhythmic motions (with a surplus of rattling maracas, a definite plus) and also a gritty showing from the guitars.

Next is a cover of Donovan's "Sunshine Superman" that takes a little getting used to, but after a little time for acclimation it goes down very well as an unexpected late entry into its decade's extensive appropriation of '60s source material. Rather than replicate the flower-power attitudes of the original, The Bongos turn it into a near stomp, and while the drum sound will certainly bring back memories (for those old enough to remember) of countless MTV video-blocks, drummer Giannini pounds the skins with enough force to eclipse this ambiance.

And "Diamond Guitar" might initially connect like a mere uptempo rocker thrown in for spice, but the fact that they were even making the effort at this point in their existence is pretty admirable. In fact the song is real grower, a quality that's applicable the record as a whole. With this said, "Run to the Wild" is one of the disc's most immediately attractive cuts, loaded up with waves of garage-derived keyboard, some tasty bits of guitar wrangling and uncommonly large bass playing from Norris.

"River to River" continues this streak, combining strumming stings and little flashes of amp burn to a lively mid-tempo structure as Barone gets reliably extroverted. And if "One Bold Stroke" dips a little too strongly into a bath of 80's tech-sheen (the only thing missing is a synthetic cowbell), the tune has more than enough verve to assist it in surviving as something much greater than a mere period piece.

The title track might start out in this zone as well, but the sheer chutzpah of the song's structure and the fact that Barone really goes for broke on the chorus results in another keeper. From there "Tangled in Your Web" manages to come off like a more musically assertive Squeeze, but it's with "Saturn Eyes" that *Phantom Train* picks up a real head of steam.

Alternating between a '60s-ish jangle zone and rock injections that come to a near throttle, it shows that these guys were far from running out of creative gas. The idea of this album coming out directly after completion, with "Saturn Eyes" as a possible single, entertains the hypothetical possibility of fresh new phase for The Bongos. Backing up this prospect is the maximum guitar punch of "Roman Circus," easily one of the record's best tracks, mainly because everything from the writing to Barone's vocal delivery to the punch of the playing and yes even the production works together to create a winning whole.

Phantom Train ends with a trio of appealing selections, two of which are superb as they're more stripped down than the previous eleven. "Under Someone's Spell" is another dose of spirited pop-rock with a sense of maturity and restraint that manages to beat first-LP Violent Femmes at their own game, and as such is a total treat. "Town of One" gets the full polish, but the reemergence of saxophone wailing from the group's early days is a welcome addition, and as is the case across the board here, the song and the band's vigorous engagement with it stand tall.

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Closing with an excellent demo version of "My Wildest Dreams" does emphasize how this release could've been even better if a bare-bones approach had been utilized for the whole, but in no way did they screw the pooch with these finished mixes. Altogether this disc serves as an unearthed time capsule of striking resonance.

Drums Across the Hudson will continue to reign as this listener's personal best, but no longer are The Bongos just another in a countless jumble of names that peaked early and then faded away. *Phantom Train* puts a fine exclamation point onto the end of their discography. It was a long time coming, but after hearing it was well worth the wait.

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rogerwf

Oct 26, 2013

Nice article, but one small correction: it's "Numbers WITH Wings". I'm not gonna admit how long I've been a Bongos/Barone fan, other than to say that you can do the math. Still have all their old vinyl...

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