



Vince Bell

The story of a brave man who fought back from near-death in a horrendous car crash to resume a respected songwriting career.

If you've been following the *Currents* series since the dawn of the 1990s, you should have concluded by now that the words Texan and musician are synonymous. Vince Bell qualifies on both counts. As we'll discover, he has been a professional musician for nearly three decades, yet he is far from being a household name.

Learning his trade at the feet of Guy Clark, Jerry Jeff Walker and Townes Van Zandt, Bell's life was almost terminated by a drunken driver in December, 1982. The road to recovery was long and tortuous and his will to survive is an inspiration. Considering the extent of his injuries, Vince's decision to continue his career as a musician smacks of a stubborn will and a brave heart.

Texas Plates, Bell's second album, has just been released. In a nutshell, let's say that Vince Bell's songs are as good as it gets in the annals of Texas music. Let's go back to the beginning . . .

Born in 1951 in Dallas, Vince Bell spent his early years in South America where his father worked for an oil company. The Bells returned to the States when it was time for him to begin his education.

Music played an important part in the Bell household as his mother played and taught piano. In Junior High, Vince was a cornet player in the school band: "The band leader would whack me on the shoulder with that damned baton every time I screwed up."

By the time he made 9th grade, he was learning guitar: "I had discovered The Beatles, The Rolling Stones. My favourite to this day is John Lennon. He was the first person to come along in music and not sing about those tired old rock'n'roll themes."

Bell's first band, The Tradewinds, lasted long enough to come third in the high school talent competition. (In truth, Vince's

high school years were dominated by sport but, despite a cabinet full of sporting trophies, he was not offered a scholarship by any major university.) Hanging out in the multi-cultural Montrose district of Houston, he scored his first opening slot at the Sand Mountain Coffee House, run by the legendary Ma Carrick, where Townes Van Zandt was a regular. Having established himself as a performer in Texas, in 1974 Vince visited Greenwich Village, New York for the annual National Coffee House circuit auditions. However, his dream of being booked for shows in Boston, Philadelphia and New York clubs was soon shattered: "They didn't require any solo acts."

Eternally hopeful, he left his name and telephone number. "I got a call two weeks later and was offered some gigs – in Idaho, New Mexico and Colorado – because they couldn't get anybody else to go. I did that for the next eighteen months."

While Sand Mountain is long gone, Houston gained a venue during the 1970s which exists to this day, Anderson Fair Retail Restaurant. Townes Van Zandt, Guy Clark, Nanci Griffith, Lyle Lovett, Eric Taylor and Vince Bell feature among the legion of songwriters who have appeared there. Bell's reputation as a performer and songwriter increased as he toured edge-to-edge in Texas through the latter half of the '70s and into the '80s, often supported by a band.

"I decided to move to Austin in the late '70s because that's where the music was happening. They had the Armadillo World Headquarters. Houston had Liberty Hall, but it was only a 500 seat venue. The Armadillo had 1500 seats."

In May 1980, the avant-garde dance troupe Space Dance Theatre appeared in a production of *The Bermuda Triangle* in Houston. The music was co-written by Bell, proving that he was more than a journeyman songwriter. For the production, Vince performed with the jazz-rock band Passenger. (In 1984, Joe Ely cut an album with the band, *Hi Res.*)

In the ballet, a traveller witnesses his own death, funeral and numerous trials in the spirit world. In his recently published book, *One Man's Music*, Vince recalls: "The macabre irony of the story's similarity to my own would be lost on me for a while to come."

With the onset of the 1980s, Bell's thoughts turned to making a commercial recording of his songs. In the early hours of December 21, 1982, within minutes of leaving Austin's Riverside Sound studio (where the supporting players included Eric Johnson and Stevie Ray Vaughan) Bell and his wife Melody were involved in a horrendous car crash with a drunken driver. "I was thrown fifty feet from the car I drove and left face down in a pool of gasoline on a feeder road to Interstate 35 on the south bank of the Colorado River in Austin. (I sustained) a significant head injury, broken ribs, a damaged liver and a mangled right arm."

Lying unconscious on an operating table, Vince describes in

his autobiography how "the anaesthesiologist recognised me as a music player around the Austin area. It sounds remotely flattering, but that recognition was to save my right arm."

As he told me in 1996, "After the accident I was a child. I had to relearn everything you take for granted, from how to use a fork, to how to write your name on a cheque – or what to even put on a cheque." Visitors to his hospital bedside included Tom Pacheco, Mandy Mercier and David Rodriguez. In January, 1983 Stevie Ray Vaughan organised a concert to help meet Bell's medical expenses.

However, the physical and mental scars were such that, once released from hospital, the Bells drifted apart and were eventually divorced.

Months of intense mental and physical exercise followed. Routine movements such as running without falling over had to be learned and perfected. Day after day, he stuck doggedly to the task, often to the point of total physical exhaustion.



The first song he managed to play following the accident was Bob Dylan's *I Shall Be Released*. Equally ironic, the title of his first post-crash composition was *Pair Of Dice*. As he simply recalls in his book, with each passing day "The concept of the quiet victory was born."

Sufficiently recovered, walking with a cane and stuttering when he spoke, between 1984 and 1987 Vince successfully studied for a graphic design degree at Austin's Community College. Apart from the social therapy, it gave him a second string to his bow should the pursuit of an active music career prove physically impossible. And there were times when such doubts clouded his days. His arm would swell as his body sought to reject the metalwork that had replaced the bone in the lower part of his right arm. To alleviate the numbing pain, course after course of antibiotics was required.

During his college years, he promoted shows at State Theater in partnership with an old Houston acquaintance, Cindy Soo. He also reformed the Vince Bell Band. *The Sun And Moon And Stars*, a two-act play featuring 18 of Bell's songs and a plot that focused on the events surrounding his accident, was presented at Austin's Dougherty Theater in the late Eighties. In 1989, an album of the same title featuring nine songs from the show was released on the local Analog label.

Nevertheless, soon after recording the album, Vince, having struck out in finding work as a graphics artist, moved back to Houston where he went to work for his father.

Despite the foregoing small victories following his accident, Vince struggled in Texas to have his music acknowledged. As he recalls in his book, "Music was once more becoming my reason

for living, but no one would hire me to perform."

It was time for new horizons. As 1989 drew to a close, he drove non-stop to Los Angeles where he re-established contact with Sarah Wrightson, an old acquaintance. They were to marry in 1992.

In 1991, Nanci Griffith included *The Sun And Moon And Stars* on her album, *Late Night Grande Hotel*. Two years later, her Grammy award winning *Other Voices, Other Rooms* featured Vince's *Woman Of The Phoenix*.

A few years later, Vince and Sarah moved back to Texas when the Watermelon label picked up his album, *Phoenix*. Produced by Bob Neuwirth, 10 of the 11 tracks were Bell originals.

"*Phoenix* is a brave little album and a basic notice that said, 'You saw me before and I'm coming around again'," was Vince's synopsis of the recording during our 1996 conversation.

During March 1995, Vince toured Europe with The Jayhawks. In November that year, he joined David Olney, Iain Matthews and Eric Taylor on the American Songwriters Tour of Europe. Last year, Lyle Lovett included Bell's song, *I've Had Enough*, on his double CD Texas songwriter tribute, *Step Inside This House*.

Bell's latest recording, the 11-song *Texas Plates*, originally an independent release that first appeared last December, has been picked up by the Paladin label, a subsidiary of Giant Records.

Although he's been based in Tennessee for a few years now, Bell shamelessly casts his eyes southward to the Lone Star State for much of his lyrical inspiration. The opening *Poetry, Texas* attests to his restless wandering spirit with the couplet, "Collar to the wind, future in the breeze." *All Through My Days*, a song that Vince was recording on that fateful night back in 1982, is presented here as a gentle shuffle while, lyrically, it is a paen to love.

Vince opens *All The Way To The Moon* with Neil Armstrong's famous 1969 quote and then contends that there's a whole other point of view by listing late 20th century ills, inventions and events – all earthbound problems that, maybe, should be our first priority. The closing *Last Dance At The Last Chance* is a fine addition to that Texas tradition, the waltz. The secret is that *Texas Plates* succeeds in treading a fine line between winsome pop hooks and intelligent contemporary country/folk lyrics.

Vince Bell, as we have seen, is a gritty character. A born fighter. A tenacious survivor. The six-million dollar man. His autobiography, *One Man's Music*, captures the battle he engaged in with his body, mind and the firmament. It is an uplifting tale of our times. A signed copy of this 200-page, limited edition work can be obtained from 8809 Highway 100, Nashville, Tennessee 37221, USA at a cost of \$20 plus postage. ■

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