

Through the Parking Lot of Silver Spangled Darkness

Venice Gas House Trolley: A review and crumpling-inwards of paper
by davyd h. BETCHKAL

Ladies and Gentlemen, may I introduce to you Venice Gas House Trolley:

Adam Gregory Pergament - (flowpoetry, effect loops)
Tim Peeters - (bass)
Benny Segers - (percussion, bongos, djembe)

We roll down South Park Street, past the crumbling concrete, tumbling on four wheels through the summer's smoldering sun. In the back of a building with a yellowed-out laundromat full of barefoot kids, we park by a grey cinderblock wall.

I get out and stretch my legs. I'm not sure what to expect, entirely—a recording studio. A space where magic happens. I follow the thump of Adam's cowboy boots up a set of steps and stop in front of a big sliding door.

"Should we open it?"

"They might be recording."

"Just open it slowly."

The room contains: four laughing people fresh off of a joke spun off the tongue (one of them with headphones around his neck); one drum kit adorned with an armory of microphones; several guitar amps; a multitude of paneling and sound surfaces, absorbing devices, and tricks; one stand-up bass and an old Rhodes piano with a sticky key.

Jamie Doering, the technician responsible for the recording, mixing and mastering of the album, welcomes Adam and me to his studio. Benny and Tim explain to us that they've already been recording for two hours, seasoning the album with a few finishing touches. We make ourselves comfortable in the control room as Tim lays down the final electric bass track on "Court Jester," a funky, wobbling tune that the band calls "hippy hop." We listen.

Venice Gas House Trolley's music has roots just as it

has wings. The roots come from the Venice Beach Gas House, a classic hangout for the poets and artists of the southern California beat scene. The band's sound resonates with the spoken word and music of the place, and in doing so, cultures a particularly exotic and sandy soil from which to grow. They dive deep into the solid bedrock of American storytelling, especially in songs like "Horseshoe Bend" and "Gabriella." These are no frail photocopy-folk tunes, but rather legends and tales drawn from a deep well of historical experience; stories that place the listener into the leather boots of the prospectors and drifters they depict.

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The wings? The music recalls far away places and times long ago. It coaxes the mind from its zone of comfort-fluid and improvisational in the blink of an eye, yet sparse, smooth, and ultimately relaxing. Space is the signature of this work, but it is not an idle, empty space. Instead, it is the substantial reverberating space that comes with the stillness of mind.

Tim has finished recording the track and now we're

laughing and smoking cigarettes—but away from the mixing room (and it's expensive equipment) so that the tiny antique air conditioner in the hallway will just blow it back in again, I guess, but we don't mind because the music is fresh-picked sweet and the band is already sinking their teeth into the mix.

The proper mixing of an album is a slow, steady and entirely conscious process. Changing one instrument's volume or tone will change how every other part sounds to the ear—you have to be sharp-minded and understand your instrument's sound three-dimensionally. Tim details to Jamie the frequencies that need to be adjusted for his acoustic bass.

"200kHz--that's the growl I want."

"Okay, then we'll put on just a touch of reverb, too."

"Pull back the high frequencies on that verb just a little..."

With the guidance of a calm and experienced ear, the warm wooden boom-creak of the double bass settles and slides into place with the rest of the instruments. Adam's voice is a soft yet swift current swept with eddies, and flashing in and out of the flow are the paddle strokes of Benny's bongos.

After five hours of cigarette smoke and magic mirror tricks, I got to thinking about how I'd even start to try to explain the directions Venice takes. I looked up at the ceiling. I looked down at the floor. I crossed and uncrossed my legs. And this is the lone thought that tin-can rattled out of my brain: *new American ghosts*.

Yeah, so you want to see heaven and hell?

Do you think you can tell: which one is which?

Or
lickety-split
black and white darting fish
one eye open blinking nod
water flash ripple breast-beat
tap dance rat-a-tat
machine gun blasting cap powder snowfall silver
arc flash tweet cold glass
clink.

- *Through the Parking Lot of Silver Spangled*

Darkness

Adam Gregory Pergament

There have been American ghosts for a long time. Haunting delta blues legend Skip James was one of them—Robert Johnson, too; human souls that float always, never fully coming to rest. Eternally lost, and so, always at home, many American ghosts feel a calling to the openness of the land—Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, or Moby Grape's Alexander Spence, to name a few. You see them at night, but look again—they've disappeared with the dew at morning light. Perhaps a storyteller weaving their audience into a trance and then, illuminated by stage lights, climbing into a battered blue van and driving directly into an apocalyptic thunderstorm and out of sight. (The new riding off into the sunset, *right?*)

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When you hear music created by an American ghost, it gets you to your bones. Right down to the fiber of that human part of you. It exists within—whether you've lived on this soil two weeks or your entire goddamned life—a whisper on the wind or coming off the ground or from the marrow inside of your leg-bones. A whisper of, "Do you hear me? ...Good."

It was dark when we left. One by one we trickled out of that back door, into moonlight, each one of us wearing a glow of satisfaction under our mask of fatigue. An album. A document of human-crazy-cricket hisssss-chirp in the dried grass growing in the cracks of the asphalt of a parking lot of silver spangled darkness. We got into our cars and closed the doors.