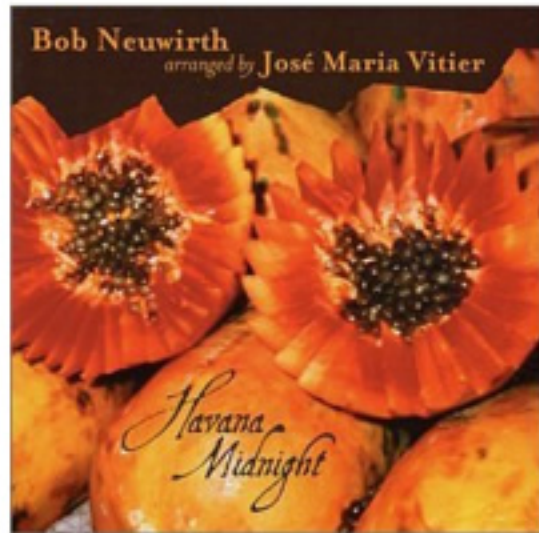


Rediscover: Bob Neuwirth Havana Midnight

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Bob Neuwirth

Havana Midnight

2001

Rediscover is a series of reviews highlighting past releases that have flown under the radar and now deserve a second look.

Let's get something straight: Bob Neuwirth is not a sidekick. Sidekicks are, by definition, helpless dependents. Without the mighty superhero by their side to save the day, sidekicks are no different than the rest of us, except that chance or camaraderie has granted them a close physical proximity to the guy who really matters. Dr. Watson, Robin, Jughead and Samwise Gamgee - those are sidekicks. Sure, Neuwirth may still be best known as the acolyte who looked a bit, and sounded a bit more, like Dylan in D.A. Pennebaker's classic documentary *Don't Look Back*. But to dismiss Neuwirth as a one-and-done Dylan hanger-on is to disregard one of the most storied artists in modern rock history. *Havana Midnight*, Neuwirth's critically overlooked 2001 foray into the world of Jose Maria Vitier-produced Cuban music, proves that Neuwirth is equally talented as both a lyricist and collaborator, even if casual fans might only consider him just another acerbic Dylanite who disappeared into anonymity not long after the 1960s folkie craze lost its relevance.

Perhaps one reason Neuwirth's output remains overlooked is that the singer, painter, photographer and poet has often been the musical equivalent of a seven-year cicada. Though he emerged from the early 1960s Cambridge folk scene and went on to play the role of friend, mentor and co-conspirator to Dylan, Patti Smith and Janis Joplin, he didn't release his own album until 1974. A raucous country-rock collection that featured guest vocalists Kris Kristofferson, Rita Coolidge and Cass Elliott, among a slew of others, Neuwirth's self-titled debut sounded like a hell of a blast to record, even if his own pipes were frequently lost in the mix. In the next 30-plus years, Neuwirth would release just four more records, in addition to 1994's *Last Day on Earth* collaboration with John Cale.

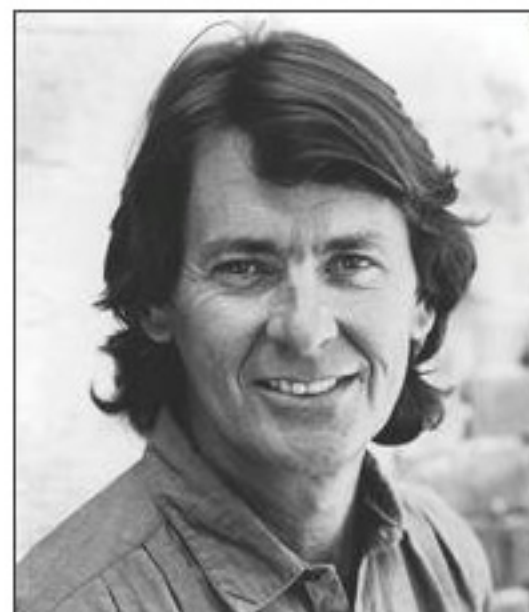
Neuwirth may never escape the "professional sidekick" label that's been so carelessly assigned to him, but the mostly unheralded *Havana Midnight* has aged remarkably well and suggests that "professional collaborator" may be a more accurate description for the musician. Alongside celebrated arranger and pianist Vitier, Neuwirth masterfully mixes his folksy, blues and country leanings with Vitier's Cuban folk flair, as the duo incorporates congas, bongos, violins, saxophones, pianos and various other strings and percussion, creating one of the most unique records of the past 10 years that listeners may have not even been aware of. Starkly but elegantly arranged and not confined by any particular genre, *Havana Midnight* showcases a bare-bones beauty that reveals an artist and a producer seemingly deeply appreciative of, and immediately at ease with, each others' divergent styles; simply put, a folk-blues-country-jazz-American-Cuban hybrid record shouldn't sound as natural as it does here.

The record opens with the gritty and oddly gorgeous title track, in which Neuwirth nearly whispers about Cuban midnights and velvet winds, transporting the listener to the heart of Havana, where old men argue baseball, music charms sailors and troubled old ladies crowd the street. "The First Time" pairs rugged American country crooning with key-tickling piano jazz and elegiac, Siren-like Caribbean backing vocals; "Miracles/Milagros" again obliterates that line between country and jazz, aided by German Velazco's tantalizing saxophone work; "Havana Farewell" offers a stripped-down, but equally memorable reinvention of the title track; and instrumental closer "Aracely's Natias" plays out like a well-crafted jam session and a celebration of the cross-cultural musical influences that define the album as a whole.

More than anything, though, this record is notable for its lyrical radiance. Tender but not sappy and displaying a reflective wisdom that doesn't deteriorate into preachy pontification, Neuwirth mixes the strangeness, beauty and mysterious charm of Havana life with the wistful recollections of a creative nomad, troubadour and agitator who's been at the epicenter, albeit quietly, of artistic culture for the past four decades. In a voice that sounds an awful lot like Willie Nelson (no shame in that) mixed with a touch of Townes Van Zandt, the singer wrings a world of emotions out of the simplest ("Remember those sisters/ With the shining black hair/ One fell in love/ One didn't dare") and most cryptic ("Why would a man chase a dragon/ Then sing songs in a dead man's clothes?") of lyrics. The album's centerpiece track is the seemingly autobiographical "The Call," nostalgic and heartbreaking, it's impossible not to view lines like "Well I guess that you've noticed/ I'm still on the road/ Singing those songs/ Bringing it on home/ So I'll give you a shout/ The next time we're near/ Maybe you'll come out/ If you can get there from here/ You might come out/ Hell you might even play/ One more time/ Just for old time's sake" in light of the singer's legendary friendships. Listening to Neuwirth sing is like peeking into the memories of one of the most traversed voices in modern Americana.

On the short list of musical personalities whose behind-the-scenes contributions will forever dwarf their own accomplishments, few artists - T Bone Burnett comes to mind - remain as undervalued as Neuwirth. "Every modern motor town hellhole in the world/ Claims a living legend as its own," Neuwirth sings on "Dead Man's Clothes," and Neuwirth ought to know. After all, he's not a sidekick. He's a legend in his own right.

by Marcus David



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