

**THE AUSTIN**

# CHRONICLE

Vince Bell's Long Rehabilitation

# Back From the Obit

by Joe Mitchell

*I got stitches all over my body....  
I try to walk straight and tall and narrow  
It's just a stagger with a beat  
They call me Frankenstein  
That's not even my name.*

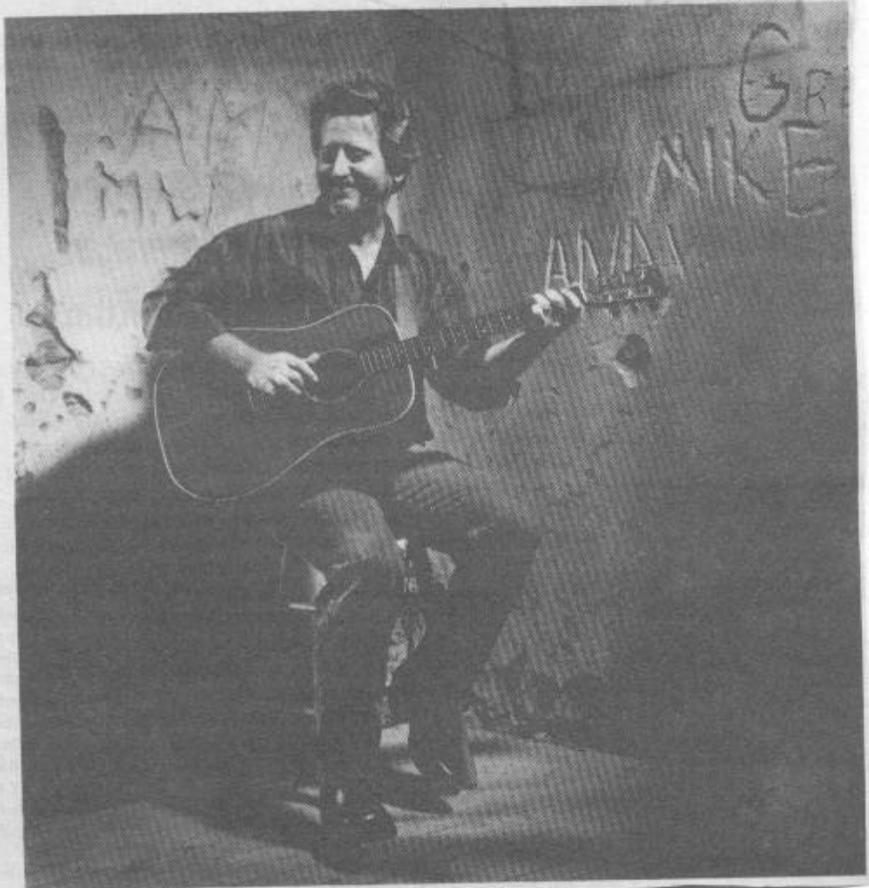
— From Gary Burgess' "Frankenstein," the opening track on Vince Bell's debut LP, *Phoenix*.

**D**ecember 22, 1982: It's 3am. Vince Bell has just wrapped up a long recording session with producer Christopher Cross on what is to be a three-song demo tape of his most recently written material. Cross and Bell have assembled an all-star cast of supporting musicians, most notably Stevie Ray Vaughan and Eric Johnson, in hopes of adding that extra little bit of sparkle that will help catch the attention of a label with the money and inclination to put out a full-length LP.

After listening to that day's recordings, Bell feels confident the strategy will pay off. He bids the stragglers at the studio farewell before walking out into the winter morning and departing alone in his car. At the intersection of Riverside and I-35, Bell pauses at the flashing red, four-way stop before cautiously rolling through to head east on Riverside. He sees a car moving rapidly southbound on the access road to his left, but he figures it will stop, just like he did.

But that car didn't stop. It didn't even slow down until it smashed into the driver's side of Bell's car, sending the promising 32-year-old musician hurtling through the passenger side door ("That door didn't open, either," recalls Bell) and more than 50 feet through the air. When emergency medical technicians arrived on the scene, Bell was unconscious, lying face down in a pool of gasoline that had flowed all the way from his crumpled automobile.

"I remember the lights," Bell says calmly after swallowing a bit of the cherry muffin he holds aloft in his right hand like Sir Isaac Newton pondering the weight of an apple. His left hand rests gently on the smooth plastic surface of one of the art deco tables inside Flipnotes Coffee Space. His eyes shift away from their direct gaze into mine as he meditates momentarily on the next traumatic memory he will recount for this stranger with a micro-cassette recorder. I begin to realize just who it is he looks like. He looks like Steven Spielberg.



"All I remember after that," he continues, his eyes once again making direct contact, but this time with a wild spark in them, "is my right arm. It was nothing but this big red mush in this big pool of blood." Bell holds out his right forearm and shows me the underside. There's a scar about a quarter inch deep and three-eighths of an inch wide. It starts about three inches above the elbow crease and runs a perfectly straight line up the arm for approximately eight inches before stopping a couple of inches short of his wrist. It looks eerily like a scar from an errant suicide attempt. "See that," Bell declares forcefully, "that's where they stuck a metal rod, and all sorts of other

tendons in each one of these," he says, pointing to each individual digit. "But get this," he says, whispering as if he were about to tell a state secret. He holds up his thumb and gently moves the top part up and down a few times.

"After surgery, the doctor comes in and says, 'wiggle your fingers.' I did. Then he

metal stuff into my arm. This is my bionic arm."

He then holds his now empty right hand up near his face. The tips of the fingers aim for the ceiling as he wiggles all four simultaneously. They are stiff. Any motion within the upper joints above the bottom knuckles appears to be tinged with pain and difficulty. "The doctors had to sew up the muscles and

see

Next

Page

Please

Austin Chronicle 3-31-95

Vince Bell P. 2



# Back From the Obit... from p.39

Most importantly for Bell, he had to re-learn guitar playing. Because of nerve damage in his hand, Bell could no longer grip a flat pick, much less keep a steady rhythm with one. So he invented a whole new playing style he calls "the claw." It's inclusive of styles he's picked up from Guy Clark and Merle Travis, combining picking and strumming.

But through it all, Bell manages to be philosophical about having his life "rudely interrupted" and having to start all over again. "I used to think it was this big deal," he admits, starting the second phrase with a self-mocking tone and grandiose arm movements that make me laugh, "to be cut down in the *prime of life*. It was like this distinct and obvious tragedy, and all this crap. But something happens to everybody. This kid came up to me once while I was parking cars at the airport - a job I got through Goodwill Industries because of my head injury - and recognized me. He said, 'I couldn't do what you did.' I said, 'You won't have to. I did that. Something else will happen to you.' I'm beholden

to my head-injury for slowing my fist ass down. It made me slow down and think, and get things right."

Bell also has plans to divulge the details of his rehabilitation in printed form. "Sarah and I are writing a book called *One Man's Music*. I think it's important to write a book

## Bell spent 19 days after his accident in a coma. At one point, his heart stopped beating, prompting the *Austin American-Statesman* to print his premature obituary.

about this head injury that I sustained from this wreck. I'm head-injured for the rest of my life. I can look good and act real cute in front of you and sound good and play good, but I can tell you one thing - I can never wake up and not be head-injured."

*From all of us who were beating paths*

around Texas in the Seventies, *Lenny's* fell Vince was the best of us."

Nanci Griffith from a *Houston Post* interview in 1992.

"I'm a Houston, Texas, kid," Bell says. "I grew up in Memorial High. I was the high school quarterback my senior year there. Our record that year was not too terribly good. I think we were 4-5-1, but we beat some good teams. I'm so glad I played high

school ball. Playing sports kept me outta shite. I was a crazy and rambunctious kid. I would have done anything my body could've worn. Thank god it was on a damned football field and not in the street. The worst penalty there is 15 yards."

After he graduated from high school in the late Sixties, Bell started directing his

crazy youthful energy toward music. He started hanging around at Houston folk and coffeehouses like The Old Quarter, watching his idols Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt play. One night in the early Seventies, Bell finally got up the nerve to talk to one of his favorite folkies, and his career as a singer/songwriter made its first infantile steps.

"I just went down by the stage one night and said, 'Golly, Mr. Van Zandt, how do you play that A minor chord?' Bell recalls with an exaggerated hayseed vocal inflection. Bell then spent the next several years under the tutelage of his two heroes. Van Zandt helped him with songwriting technique while Clark helped him learn the guitar.

"They would teach. I would learn. They weren't really teachers. They were moody, any types. Teachers were down at the schools. But they were good-natured about it."

After his brief apprenticeship with the two Texas legends, on a whim, Bell flew up to New York to audition for the national coffeehouse circuit at the Bitter End in the Village. He succeeded. "I got crazy," says Bell. "One second I'm banging away on a guitar in a Monrose apartment, next thing I'm traveling around the country on the national coffee-

*continued on p.42*

says, 'now, move your thumb.' I did. He just gasped and went, 'my god Vince. We didn't sew up your thumb. I couldn't find those muscles.'" Bell lets loose with a long burst of wincing, horsey laughter that's really goofy, yet very gentle and endearing at the same time. It's a sound I won't soon forget.

Bell spent the 19 days after his accident in a coma. At one point, his heart actually stopped beating. It was that instance which prompted the *Austin American-Statesman* to print his premature obituary. "I still haven't seen that," Bell says. "We went looking for it once and there was no record. What I think happened was that it was in an early edition. Some poor kid was in the obit section and said, 'Okay, this cat's dead' and wrote an obit. Then 20 minutes later, my heart starts pumpin' again and he has to rip it out of the next edition. I don't care if it's true or not. It's an interesting story."

But rebuilt arm, severely damaged liver, and broken ribs aside, the most serious injury Bell sustained in the accident was to his head, leaving him with partial brain damage. It took years of intensive rehabilitation for Bell to be able to do just small, average, everyday things that most people can do without thinking.

"I had to completely relearn how to talk. I couldn't say "thousandth" for the longest time. I have to work to talk clearly to the operator. It's something you have to stay with every second. My memory is often very tenuous. This is my memory," he says pointing to his wife, publishing assistant, and constant companion Sarah Wrightson, who is shuffling papers in a briefcase on a couch just a few feet away. She turns her bespectacled face and gives a quick smile before returning to her task. "I had to learn to walk again," he continues. "For years I was a champion faller. I could just be walking down the street and just outta nowhere fall down. People'd go 'Vince! Vince! are you okay?' I'd just go, 'Ho-ho' [Bell lets out a burst of that trademark goofy laughter again] and say, 'That's nothing compared to last week. Last week I fell down a flight of stairs.'"

*continued on p.40*



Vince Bell P. 3

## Back From the Obit...

from p.40

house circuit. Those were some days."

After a few years on the national scene, Bell joined with the Boothill booking agency back in Texas and started touring every city "From Shreveport to El Paso and Wichita Falls to Laredo." It was at this time that he met the likes of Nanci Griffith and Lyle Lovett, and several other singer-songwriters from the burgeoning Texas folk scene. Griffith eventually recorded Bell's "Sun, Moon & Stars" and "Woman of Phoenix." Lovett has been known to perform Bell's "I've Had Enough" in his live shows. It was also during this period of "edge-to-edge" Texas touring that Bell performed a live, 15-song score at Houston's Space Dance Theatre for James Clouser's *Bermuda Triangle*, which was based on the Bell song of the same name.

*You play like you practice  
It's not how long, it's how often  
One song teaches another  
So it's not when you get it  
It's that you get it  
Get it?*

—Vince Bell's "The Songwriter" in its entirety.

Twelve and a half years after being pronounced dead by the local daily, Bell released his debut album, the appropriately named *Phoenix*, on Watermelon records. Again, just like the ill-fated demo, there's a stellar cast in supporting roles. Bob Neuwirth, best known for his work with Bob Dylan and T-Bone Burnett, produced the LP. John Cale plays piano. Stephen Bruton adds guitar and mandolin tracks. Guest vocalists include Lyle Lovett and swamp fairy Victoria Williams. But for all the

big names, the songs sit in the front seat.

"Neuwirth picked the songs for lyrical content. He wasn't into pop hooks or anything. We based everything around the lyrics," Bell recalls. The production on *Phoenix* is sparse and dry, like the edge of the desert on which Bell's present home of Fredricksburg sits. "There's not a drum within a city block," Bell says twice about the LP in the course of our conversation. Like the instrumentation, Bell's voice is no frills. It's gruff and nervous, with a delivery faintly reminiscent of Daniel Johnston's, with its strained, sometimes swirling urgency. It has a texture not unlike that of Eric Clapton, but not too similar as to cause confusion. It's not pretty, but Neuwirth allows it to dominate the landscape of *Phoenix* with remarkable results. It's like a cool breeze blowing across the desert prior to a storm. It's ominous, yet feels really good.

All of Bell's songs on the LP were written after the accident save one, "Sun, Moon & Stars." With the strength of the album as a whole, especially on pieces like "Hard Road" and "Girl Who Never Saw a Mountain," there's no doubt that Bell's songwriting faculties are at full capacity. Every single word on every single song carries a weight and wisdom that can only be conveyed by a man who has stared death in the face and lived to tell about it.

Bell is already planning to do his next LP with Neuwirth and company. "It's only in the talking stages," Bell says wearily. "I'm going to go very slow. It took me 20 years to get my first album out. I'll take my time, and I'll get the second one right, just like I got the first one right. Number two will be cool."