

**Ethnic Stew At Lulu's Café - A Review of Big Blue Ball**  
**(Real World USLPRW150)**

They say a week is a long time in Politics. Well, it's a good job Peter Gabriel chose music and not the political arena to base his career around. His latest project, *Big Blue Ball*, which sprung from an idea of Gabriel's to stage what he termed a Recording Week back in August 1991 has taken him a few months under 17 years to see off.

For most people a 17 year old gestation period would have rendered the project over-cooked, dated, or simply just not that interesting after the passage of so long a time – the World and its six billion or so inhabitants having moved on quite a bit since 1991. However, such is the interest that still surrounds everything that the ex-Genesis star involves himself in, *Big Blue Ball* is unlikely to simply vanish from view. Indeed, fans have followed its slow, almost imperceptible progress with interest since Gabriel himself first announced his intention to make an album from his contributions to what turned out to be three Recording Weeks - three weeks is an *eternity* in politics by the way - held in 1991, 1992 and 1995.

Albums from the first two Recording Weeks have already appeared (in 1992 and 1994 respectively) although frustratingly, for those Gabriel supporters not that enamoured by the World Music scene, neither record included any of his input. Songs such as 'Taste of Lime' and 'Burn You Up Burn You Down' recorded at the 1991 event appeared to have been over-looked in favour of the largely excellent content of those two Real World collections. However, all appeared well when in 1995, after the third Recording Week was in the can, Gabriel announced his intention to make an album comprising those collaborations that he had been directly involved with, culled from all three weeks.

For the uninformed, a typical Recording Week involved Real World Studios giving over its entire recording capacity to WOMAD and/or Real World artists who, while recording their own discrete albums, were encouraged to cross-pollinate with other artists who happened to be present that week. Gabriel also invited some choice guest producers (most notably Karl Wallinger from World Party), arrangers, or lyricists to help keep the focus on making songs, not simply generating grooves. It had the potential to be a most inspired recording project but at the same time it risked being a total disaster.

To continue the history lesson for a while, let me add that at some point after 1995, Gabriel's interest in the project waned as he became distracted by new projects - his album *Up* was commenced in 1995 and was released some seven years later, itself half hindered by an invitation to write the music for the Millennium Dome Show in 1998-99 that produced the *OVO* album the following year. By 2000, the tapes for *Big Blue Ball* just sat there, apparently in a mess, which is about where producer Stephen Hague entered the picture with a brief to sort out the recordings into something worth releasing. That process alone has taken longer than the original four year period book-ended by the first and last Recording Weeks.

The original concept of *Big Blue Ball* as a Peter Gabriel solo record has not quite been realised here, the album simply being credited to "Big Blue Ball", with a line up that

varies from track to track. Having said that, Gabriel does feature on five of the eleven tracks, giving him a more significant presence than I had once assumed. Gabriel is also given co-producer credit along with Hague and Wallinger for his work on the original material, and in all honesty, anyone who has ventured off with Gabriel into his World Music off-shoots won't find this a difficult album to appreciate across its full sixty minutes playing time. Others though might find some of it a bit of a challenge – but, as with a lot of his work in the genre, perseverance and patience pays dividends.

The album opens with 'Whole Thing', a track that most Gabriel fans will know from its use at the end of 2007 in the *Long Way Down* travelogue. The song had already been used (with additional lyrics) by one of its co-writers Andy White, in a stripped down acoustic arrangement (see his *Teenage* CD on Cooking Vinyl, but please avoid his own re-working as a dance track on the *andywhite.compilation*, also on Cooking Vinyl).

The *BBB* version of 'Whole Thing' is eminently more fully realised and yet is no less instantly digestible, it featuring enough recognisable Gabriel traits to satisfy even the most casual fan – a great melody laid on top of an infectious rhythm track over which he delivers his customary vocal, swooping and diving between the lead melody and its accompanying harmony lines with consummate ease. The brief to stick to making songs was never so well maintained as on this, the crucial opening song, despite it having a strong groove.

'Habibe' features Natasha Atlas and Hossam Ramzy in an Asia meets North Africa combination of cultures that doesn't so much clash as fuse together. The song is dominated by the Egyptians' ensemble playing as they produce the same sort of magic that made the Page and Plant *No Quarter* project from the same era such a success.

If this album has only one defining feature, it's the presence of so many top notch musicians whose technical brilliance is evident from what's on show. Spanish flamenco guitarist Juan Canizares was a name brought to prominence on the first *A Week in the Real World* release (Real World CDRW25) in his collaborations with The Grid ('On the Wing') and his solo performance ('Hibrido'), and he ranks as one of the best among the brilliant. Canizares' finger work is featured to great effect on the track 'Shadow' alongside Papa Wemba whose voice jolts you to attention with its 400 volt lightning bolt shock. Wemba's profile has been understandably low since his imprisonment for illegally conveying the passage of foreign nationals into French territory some five years ago, but on this track there's no denying his presence. Ear defenders are recommended for the uninitiated though!

Next up is the first of two compositions that feature American singer-songwriter Joseph Arthur from the 1995 Recording Week. At this point Arthur was practically unknown and was making his first appearance in a professional studio. Apparently the young Akron born singer was expecting to simply play bass guitar on the sessions but at Gabriel's suggestion Joseph busied himself in the lyric room and came up with song ideas. It's a good job the inexperienced Arthur didn't shrink out of view at the thought of the challenge this presented to him, for the two songs he helped create are among the album's real highlights.

First of these is called 'altus silva', which also features another of that year's great vocal discoveries, Irishman Iarla O Lionaird, and together they produce a song of such magnificence, it beggars belief as to how it has remained unwrapped for so long. 'Altus silva' is a prototype for what later became standard material from the Afro Celt Sound System, it featuring James McNally on Irish whistle and flute. It has a steady plodding rhythm and a great chorus that simply lifts the song 10 feet above the ground before being sent on a journey that will hopefully resonate in the ears and hearts of an appreciative audience. Put simply, it's a beautiful song.

This is followed by the album's most anticipated moment for yours truly, it being a collaboration between Peter Gabriel and Joseph Arthur called 'Exit Through You', two people that just happen to be among my favourite musicians. So there's quite a bit at stake then with this track.

Knocked together in about an hour (according to Gabriel) the song was described to me very recently by Joseph as "funny – as in funny peculiar" following its release after lying dormant for so long. On hearing this track for the first time I marvelled at the picture in my mind of these two great writers – one a seasoned pro, the other a complete novice – as they worked together to come up with something for this project. I can only imagine how the young American managed to avoid collapsing under the weight of expectation bearing down on him. But avoid it he did, and 'Exit Through You' with its funky rhythm and Arthur's falsetto vocal (in stark contrast to his work on 'altus silva') is an absolute gem of a song, made even greater by the second lead vocal provided by an on-form Gabriel. The sad thing is of course that the two of them haven't made the most of this collective talent and it seems unlikely that this combination will ever repeat the experiment that worked so well some 13 years ago. But at least we have this song as evidence that these two artists are highly compatible when the occasion requires them to be.

'Everything Comes From You' is the only track present where the bringing together of Western and Eastern musicians feels slightly unnatural. From the West comes Irish singer Sinéad O'Conner who courted controversy more times than she did men through her time at the top, is joined by some exhilarating flute from China's Guo Yue. Although known at the time for her angry and passionate delivery, here we get a quiet Sinéad – counting us through to 11 – adding the colours of the rainbow as she goes, in a song clearly inspired by the first Gulf War, which has finally found its voice as the blood from the second Gulf War continues to flow. Perhaps the World isn't so different to the one we knew in 1991 after all.

It's typically weird for the woman who ran her career on the weirdest of terms for a while and while it's not a disaster, its repetitiveness does make it my least favourite track. The song also has the distinction of being worked on for the longest time – the final session having been held with Sevara (who must have been in primary school when the song was first created) in 2007.

Opening with a guitar chord that brings to mind Status Quo's 'Down Down' (I'm sorry but it does!) comes 'Burn You Up Burn You Down', the third and final major contribution from Mr. Gabriel. Of course it's a song that he has already released (on his *Hit* compilation and countless (ok - 29 if you *need* to count them) *Encore Series* recordings since its inaugural performance at The Big Room concert back in

November 2003. So, you might think, what's the big deal over another version of this fairly well travelled song? Well the big deal is that ever since the BBC *Rhythms of the World* documentary about the first recording week gave us a glimpse of the original version with The Holmes Brothers backing Gabriel, it has demanded to be heard in full. Overall I prefer the looser arrangement of this original version to the fully developed Gabriel-band version and the producers could have so easily overlooked it due to its widespread use elsewhere, so a pat on the back to Messrs Hague, Gabriel and Wallinger for sticking it on here. The only sad news to report is that they didn't feel the same about 'Taste of Lime', another song featured in snippet form on *Rhythms of the World*, but perhaps it may yet appear on a follow up volume in 2025 give or take 6 months.

'Forest' holds the distinction of being the very first track recorded for *BBB*, although naturally it has been worked on in subsequent sessions. Featuring the highly distinctive vocal work of the late Hukwe Zawose, 'Forest' is a nice testament to his memory. With sensitive backing on Doudouk from Levon Minassian, this blending of music from Armenia and Tanzania, overlaid on top of a highly charged dance track, works remarkably well. Don't be surprised to hear this one blasting out of the dance tent at this year's WOMAD festival.

'Rivers' is a slow, atmospheric piece featuring the haunting vocals of Hungarian singer Marta Sebestyan – again perfect for a late night slot at WOMAD's Siam tent, an antidote for the weary body that is not quite ready for a night under canvas (or perhaps a hotel room at the end of that long walk from the Site that I've often heard about). Gabriel is one of two musicians who contribute drones to the piece and I'll leave it other listeners to try and distinguish his drones from those of Chuck Norman but regardless of any drone related lack of clarity, this is a great track, a complete contrast to anything else on the record.

Speaking of contrasts – if you've ever had an urge to hear some Madagaskan Rap, then fulfil that that urge now by listening to the super charged energy of 'Jijy' courtesy of Rossy (composer of the sorely missed Valiha infused 'Taste of Lime') and Jah Wobble. Don't be put off by the Rap connotations – there's no commonality here to the American style of Rap, or at least none I can detect, and the music is eminently more interesting and vibrant, making this another unlikely winning combination of styles and cultures.

Wrapping the whole thing up (puns most definitely not intended, but even I am impressed), is 'Big Blue Ball', a track that in an instrumental form, recently leaked out by accident onto a rare sampler from Real World (courtesy of their new partners Ryko) at this years SXSW Festival in Austin, Texas.

The finished version, with lyrics and vocals by Karl Wallinger sounds like a sort of homage to Dylan's 'Lay Lady Lay' whether intentional or otherwise. Either way, it's a lovely, lilting track to end with and it does Karl Wallinger proud as he provides a nice falsetto on top of his main vocal, aided by a catchy accordion riff from Stephen Hague. Gabriel's final contribution to the album is certainly strong, comprising as it does piano, organ and keyboards, and the track comes to a blissful conclusion with a nice echo effect.

Overall then, *Big Blue Ball* is an album with enough diversity to satisfy even the most eclectic tastes and, providing you're not completely new to Peter Gabriel's love for and promotion of World Music, there's enough familiarity on show to keep Peter's fans content. Producer Hague is to be congratulated for salvaging this project which was clearly in danger of remaining incomplete and abandoned, and whilst I personally bemoan the absence of 'Taste of Lime', I have to accept that what we do have here is an excellent and highly stimulating collection of some of the best that World Music has to offer when its basic ingredients are tipped into a pan, given a vigorous stir and left to simmer for, oh, a decade and a half. Give my compliments to the Chef.

Mic Smith (June 2008)

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