

Nell & Jim Band *Western Sun*

Rich bloodlines intersect and musical currents run deep on *Western Sun* (Whippoorwill Arts, May 29, 2020), the third album from the Nell & Jim Band, fronted by singer-songwriter/flautist Nell Robinson and singer-songwriter/multi-instrumentalist Jim Nunally. *Western Sun*'s overarching theme is migration, and these two well-traveled artists are steeped in the subject.

Nunally—guitarist and vocalist with the David Grisman Bluegrass Experience for a decade and a half—is a third-generation roots musician. During the Dust Bowl era, his grandfather, a sharecrop farmer, emigrated from Arkansas to California, where he taught Jim's dad how to play guitar, and Jim has expertly and passionately carried on the family tradition from his father.

Robinson, born Hilary Perkins in rural Alabama, honored her own family tradition, taking her grandmother's name when she began performing in the Bay Area at the age of 46, belatedly but ecstatically embracing the musical strains that had beguiled her during her youth.

Robinson and Nunally's combined experiences and vast knowledge of a range of traditional idioms are further enriched and expanded by those of their virtuosic bandmates: string-bass player Jim Kerwin (Grisman, Jerry Garcia, Yo Yo Ma), drummer/percussionist Alex Aspinall (Chris O'Connell & the Smart Alecks, Silvestre Martinez) and accordionist/keyboard player Rob Reich (Gaucho, Circus Bella).

Nunally succinctly describes *Western Sun* as “an amalgamation of all these different cultural influences on American music.”

According to Robinson, “Some of the songs are very explicit, and some of them reflect our personal recognition of the different cultures that went into bringing that particular song into this country. Of course, a lot of what is considered bluegrass from Appalachia originated hundreds of years before that in Scotland and Ireland and was passed down from generation to generation.”

Album producer Lowell Levinger, who was known as Banana during his years as the bass player in the Youngbloods, elaborates.

“This album,” he offers, “is more than a collection of songs; it's a reflection of the root influences of folk-Americana music. Here are stories about early immigrants and their ancestors from the wave of Europeans in the early 19th century. And then on to settlers moving west, Gold Rush hopefuls and Dust Bowl migrants. And in more modern history, fire victims and the anguish of addiction. And for a bit of levity, you can dance to some imported East European polkas.”

There's a palpable sense of history coursing through these predominantly original songs, as the collaborators embed their personal histories and experiences into the vast American panorama.

“Jim and I are both fascinated by stories and by history,” Robinson says of their sources of inspiration. “And the most powerful way that that interest gets expressed is through our

songwriting. The songs are really stories, some of them historical, some from our families or we're reacting to what's happening in the world. The songs on *Western Sun* are tied together with a thread, our visceral response to the backlash about immigrants in this country; it's profoundly disturbing to us. Our families are immigrants, and particularly being West Coast people with roots in the South, we believe so strongly in the beauty of diversity and culture: language, food, music, people bringing things with them from other cultures and making our world more interesting."

"But what happens with us typically is that the things that we're thinking about at the time bubble up in the songs, even though they're not overtly political. So a number of the songs on the album—most of them, really—have some connection to our feelings and thoughts about immigrants and immigration."

Nunally picks up the thread. "'Traveling the Road West' is about people migrating from the South and Midwest during the Dust Bowl, looking for work. And in the lyric, there's a reference to 'Okies go home.' There's a lot of people in California who are from Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas, and they made their way here during that time period.

"My family came to California looking for any kind of work, agriculture in particular," he continues. "They settled in the Bay Area, and my grandfather, who'd been a sharecropper in Arkansas, became a laborer in California. He helped build Interstate 80 up here, right along the Bay shore. And after settling here, so many people helped build the state. And the music of that song is really a reflection of California country music—bluegrass, Bakersfield, an amalgam of different types of music. So that one deals with actual family history.

"There's a couple of Polish tunes, Scots-Irish, 'Sequoia Gold' is about a person who's coming from the East working his way West during the Gold Rush and not finding gold but finding the redwoods."

"The first track on the album, 'By Stars and Sunrise,' is about the Southern Emigrant Trail," Nell explains. "It's about somebody moving from the Southeast into the Territory of Texas when it was very much a wild place, marrying a *Tejana* (Mexican-Texan) and being driven out, then going west to make his fortune. But even with the songs not focused on this theme, we were so activated by the need to talk about how beautiful it is to welcome immigrants that our understanding of the songs got folded into their arrangements and introductions."

The collaborators tapped sources far and wide in their creative process. "Limonaia," taking its inspiration from an 1895 painting of a Serbian beauty that hangs in the Italian villa referenced in the song title, makes the point that "women feel like they have to look a certain way or they become invisible," as Nell puts it. "The Fire," co-written with the couple's friend Chris Wadsworth, who adds harmony vocals to several tracks, was sparked by Nell's reading of Denis Johnson's novel *Train Dreams* but took on increased relevance when wildfires ravaged California in 2018, bringing a topical dimension to this deeply rooted musical saga. Winnemucca used a melody line from Chris Wadsworth's instrumental about the 40-mile stretch in the Nevada desert that was so deadly for immigrants, but Nell gave it a modern setting from her time there performing with Ramblin' Jack Elliott.

Western Sun stands as the culmination of an organic, decade-long musical evolution that had its genesis when Nunally co-produced Robinson's first album, 2010's *Loango*.

"She caught me at an interesting time in my music," Jim recalls. "I'd been running a recording studio for 15 or 20 years when she approached me about doing work with her as a producer, and I basically auditioned her, because when you're the recording studio, you spend so much time with people that you want to make sure you can work with them." Needless to say, Nell passed the audition.

The connection went both ways. "Some sounds just really make your brain happy," Nell says of her first impression of her soon-to-be-partner's considerable gifts, "and the sound of Jim's voice and his guitar just made my brain light up."

Loango was followed in 2011 by Robinson's *On the Brooklyn Road*, produced by Robinson and Nunally and featuring John Reischman & the Jaybirds. Two years later, they released the duets album *House & Garden*, featuring their original songwriting, Everly Brothers-inspired two-part harmonies and Nunally's guitar.

They partnered and toured on the album *The Rose of No-Man's Land* (2014), produced by Joe Henry (Rhiannon Giddens, Rosanne Cash, Bonnie Raitt) and featuring Kris Kristofferson, Ramblin' Jack Elliott and John Doe. Since then, the two have become a couple, and they've expanded from a duo to the Nell & Jim Band's five-piece lineup, as their shared ambition grew exponentially.

"Around the time when we were cutting *House & Garden*," Nell recalls, "I had started putting together a show called *The Rose of No-Man's Land*, which was in response to the Iraq War, and the fact that my family has very deep and broad involvement in the military. My dad was career military, and my brother-in-law served three tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. I'm a peace marcher and protester, so I come from a different place—but my family loves me anyway," she says with a laugh. My dad told me he joined the military because he wanted to serve his country, and that he left Alabama because he couldn't stand George Wallace and the racism there. So our Southern roots are really complex. We had family on different sides of the American Revolution and on both sides of the Civil War."

As she was trying to process the war in the context of her family's longstanding involvement in the military, Nell decided to express her thoughts and feelings through music and stories. She asked her nephew to interview family members back in Alabama, and she wanted Jim to be an integral part of it. He accepted the invitation and, drawing on his widespread connections across the roots-music community, enlisted a crew of simpatico players to help them bring the concept to fruition.

"After traveling with that band for about a year or two, we realized that the shows were very intense and emotional, so we decided to do a lighthearted opening set. We said, 'Let's mix it up and play some country music.' So we did some George Jones, Tammy Wynette, Loretta Lynn, Hank Williams and other things that we all loved—and we were having a lot of fun together.

And so that led to, ‘Hey, let’s do our own album of stuff.’ One thing led to another, and here we are on our third album with our band.”

The quintet made its recording debut with 2017’s *Baby Let’s Take the Long Way Home* and followed it up two years later with *Steel*. On top of their studio work, Robinson and Nunally wrangled crews of all-star musicians for live performances based on *The Rose of No-Man’s Land* in 2015 and *Baby Let’s Take the Long Way Home* two year later, both filmed for the PBS concert series *Music Gone Public*.

Touring extensively, the band performed at the Kennedy Center, the Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival, the Kate Wolf Music Festival, the Strawberry Music Festival and on Garrison Keillor’s *Prairie Home Companion*. When they’re on the road, their merch table is extremely well-stocked. Apart from the requisite swag and CDs, their offerings include Banjo Boy Coffee, which Nunally created in collaboration with the Deering Banjo Co., and Nell’s Chai, Robinson’s line of Indian-spiced vegan drinks. It goes without saying that entrepreneurial endeavors come in mighty handy as supplements to the incomes of DIY musicians.

The Nell & Jim Band added an intriguing new element when Robinson resumed her long-dormant love affair with the flute.

“I hadn’t played in decades,” Robinson acknowledges. “But Jim was like, ‘You should bring out the flute.’ I told him, ‘I can’t keep up with you guys,’ because everybody in the band is great at improvising. ‘You should do it.’ He nagged me until I brought it back out and then I did it. And the truth is I love playing the flute. And I decided to shift from playing the flute to playing a new instrument called the mini flute. It arrived on *Steel*, and now that it’s really been integrated, it’s been great. Honestly, I still feel intimidated. And when we went into the recording studio with Lowell Levinger, he was so encouraging, and all the guys are super-encouraging, so I’m still at it. I just play melody lines, keep it simple and try to make the tone nice.”

“I heard Nell playing around the house,” says Jim, “and when you put music in front of her, she can just plow right through it faster than anybody in the band. When I heard her play, I kept thinking, Man, this would be a great sound in the band. I had listened to a lot of Irish music, and accordion, flute and fiddle are combinations that are really common. And David Grisman has had a flute in his Grisman Sextet for years. I thought, Man, this is just awesome. So now we have accordion and flute and they go together perfectly. On ‘Winnemucca,’ she’s actually getting a Native American flute sound. She really gets a great tone out of that flute. And having a great tone is a huge part of being an exceptional musician.”

For her part, Nell finds it mind-blowing that the seed she planted 10 years ago has blossomed so dazzlingly. “We have diverse tastes in music, and the band members are all amazing jazz players,” she marvels. “So they bring jazz to the table as well, and some swing—it’s really an eclectic band.”

“The thing that’s most important to me about this record,” Jim asserts, “is that I don’t think we sound like anybody else. On *Baby Let’s Take the Long Way Home*, we had pedal steel guitar and sounded like a California country-folk band, which kind of made sense for that record. But now,

I think we've turned a corner with the flute, the accordion, the acoustic bass, banjo, guitar and percussion. We're definitely not copying anybody. This is a band that's developing its own sound. And I think that comes across on this record."