

## All About Love

*O Sun O Moon*, Bruce Cockburn (True North)

There was talk a little while ago, of Bruce Cockburn's new album being like some (much) earlier work. For some that hopefully meant a resurrection of the Tom Verlaine-esque guitars on parts of 1978's *Further Adventures of*, or the acidic despair and social observation of divorce album *Humans* and its follow up, the even grittier *Inner City Front*. But actually what it turns out to be is a return to the kind of music Cockburn made even before those: *O Sun O Moon* is a laid back singer-songwriter album, exquisitely arranged and produced, with vocals and acoustic guitars to the fore.

Cockburn is 78 and still going strong. He's been making albums since 1970, I've been seeing him in concert since the late 70s; I even wrote my undergraduate dissertation on his work. Every time I think I might not worry about listening to new Cockburn albums any more he releases one that tries something different and re-energises my interest. At times that has been a renewed political engagement, at others a change in his band line-up, producer or just the fact he manages to succinctly capture the moment.

*O Sun O Moon* is a surprise turn away from political and social satire or commentary to a more personal, and also seemingly more straightforward, blues and folk based music, where texture and arrangement are the focus. It's subtle, enticing music that isn't afraid to remain stripped back but also welcomes clarinet, upright bass, accordion, glockenspiel, saxophones and marimba into the mix as and when required.

Cockburn sounds relaxed and slightly gruff vocally throughout, quiet and contemplative, whilst the album sounds as though it was recorded next door. It's warm and enticing, with love – be that romantic, spiritual or sexual – often posed as not only the answer but a command from above:

The pastor preaching shades of hate  
 The self-inflating head of state  
 The black and blue, the starved for bread  
 The dread, the red, the better dead  
 The sweet, the vile, the small, the tall  
 The one who rises to the call  
 The list is long — as I recall<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
 Our orders said to love them all  
 The one who lets his demons win  
 The one we think we're better than  
 A challenge great — as I recall  
 Our orders said to love them all  
 ('Orders')

There's also what reads as more zen acceptance than despairing resignation, as long as his lover is there:

What will go wrong will go wrong  
 What will go right will go right  
 Push come to shove<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
 It's all about love  
 The sight of your smile fills my heart with light  
 ('Push Come to Shove')

Overall there's sense of what-will-be-will-be and contentment. Wars and politics aren't bothering Cockburn much at the moment, he's not angry but more concerned with domestic routine (he has moved from Canada to San Francisco, and has a teenage daughter) and ageing gracefully. In fact dying gracefully. 'O Sun O Moon By Night' is a reflective song that looks backwards in time and forwards in hope:

Pain brings understanding  
 Your mistakes will set you free  
 To sink into the spirit<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
 To clear your eyes to see

O sun by day o moon by night<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
 Light my way so I get this right<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
 And if that sun and moon don't shine  
 Heaven guide these feet of mine<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
 To Glory

whilst the final song, 'When You Arrive' starts with the lovely lines 'Breakfast is Mahler and coffee<sup>[SEP]</sup> / Dinner's Lightnin' Hopkins and rye', but notes that

You're limping like a three-legged canine  
 Backbone creaking like a cheap shoe  
 Dragging the accretions of a lifetime<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
 But you ought to make another mile or two

before optimistically suggesting that the dead will welcome him in the end. (Yes, I know it says 'you're limping' but I read it as poetic license.):

And the dead shall sing<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
 To the living and the semi-alive  
 Bells will ring when you arrive

Cockburn is an astonishing musician, performer, songwriter and political activist. Over the course of 38 studio albums he's charted the ups and down of life, relationships and friendships, embraced the urban and rural, pointed out political lies and encouraged revolutionary fervour. He's visited and documented refugee camps, war zones and tropical paradises, turned nature into mystical visions and kept making great albums. This is one of them.

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