

T Bone Burnett

The Invisible Light: Spells

On “realities.com,” the first song on his new album, *The Invisible Light: Spells*, T Bone Burnett sells the corrosive promises of the internet with the flair of a carnival barker, a huckster, a car salesman. “We will teach you how to win, so fast it’ll make your head spin,” he announces, as Keefus Ciancia’s rubbery bassline and Jay Bellerose’s loose snare rattle coalesce into what might be a parody of a military march. “And if by chance you face defeat, we’ll teach you new ways to cheat.” The music is loose and gangly, yet weirdly funky and hypnotic, simultaneously exposing the dangers of the digital life in America and reminding us how it so easily obscures the spiritual world. “Human beings have undergone more than a century of electronic programming,” says Burnett. “It ties into everything that’s happening today in every aspect of our lives. We need to fight it, because those machines are siloing us into groups of people who all think alike and act alike. We’re becoming and have become a world of cults now.”

Thanks to his work on the *O Brother Where Art Thou?* soundtrack as well as his collaborations with Bob Dylan, Rhiannon Giddens, the Punch



album artwork

Brothers, Adia Victoria, Alison Krauss, and Robert Plant, Burnett has become one of the primary visionaries of twenty-first-century roots music. But *The Invisible Light* series, which launched with 2019’s *Acoustic Space* and continues with *Spells*, represents “the stuff that means the most to me right now.” In fact, it shines a new light on his previous work, which deployed analog recording and a strong understanding of

American traditional music as a form of resistance against the dehumanizing effects of technology. “I’m not for a return to the past. I’m for keeping alive the things in the past that are valuable. The world that I’m interested in is the analog world of trees and sky and grass. Love is analog. So is kindness. You can’t digitize those things.”

With their complex ideas and even more complex

grooves, these new songs explore “the way spells are cast electronically. You could call it automated magic. Or automated hypnosis.” While the album has been in the works for a few years, Burnett has been thinking about these issues for more than half a century. In the early 1960s he discovered books by writers like Marshall McLuhan; later, Jaques Ellul, Neil Postman’s *Technopoly*, and more recently Soshana Zuboff’s *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* had a similarly profound impact on his thinking. “Everything that’s happening now they saw back then, but the ramifications are so much more dire than even their worst predictions.”

In translating these urgent ideas into music that is imaginative, immersive, and immediate, Bellerose and Ciancia proved indispensable. The trio have worked together for more than a decade, playing on records by Elton John and Leon Russell, Gregg Allman, BB King, and Sara Bareilles, among others. “When I was mixing some of those projects, I would always cue up Jay and Keefus’s parts because they were always so interesting. And I always regretted having to put all the other instruments on top of them. I kept thinking, One of these days I’m going to do something with just the two of them playing. They should have free rein to run wild.”

Spells began as a series of lengthy, improvisational jams,

each sparked by a music or lyrical idea, shapeless riffing mutating into something with shape, direction, and purpose. But the musical elements, much like the ideas that animate them, are never quite settled, whether it’s the infinity-loop drumbeat of “A Better Day” or the inscrutable mantra of “Itopia Chant.” They remain open-ended and all the more haunting for being unresolved. “Mother Cross” in particular proved so slippery that the trio ended up including two very different versions on the album. The first is a delicate tune, perhaps the most traditional sounding on *Spells*, with Burnett’s gentle vocals accompanied by a strummed electric guitar. When he sings the lines, “*The next sentence I say is false. The last sentence I said is true,*” it doesn’t sound merely clever, but disheartening, as though such a contradiction pointed to a great tragedy.

The second version of “Mother Cross” is even more spectral, opening with a distant violin straining against a harsh wind. It sounds like a murky memory of an old Appalachian ballad, disrupted by a slow, pummeling beat. When Burnett sings that same couplet, the effect is menacing rather than melancholy. “I wanted to show how that idea developed,” he says. “The song revealed itself with two different meanings and two different musical

approaches, and we wanted to honor that. It was the last thing we did, and I think it will define how we approach the next installment. I think I know how the series resolves.”

In the *Invisible Light* series Burnett sees the culmination of his long-held concern over the fate of humanity, but also a comment on the music he has made throughout his long career. “This is probably a wrap-up of everything I’ve thought about and worked on for so many years. I’m 74 now, and I’ve got 10, maybe 20 years left. I want to wrap it up in a significant way, because it’s been an amazing ride and I want to do justice to the ride.”

That’s what makes *Spells* so effective: As both a philosophical inquiry and as innovative musical work, its generosity reveals a boundless love of humanity, even that part that craves the things that destroy us. “I’m a deep believer in the idea of America. I believe we’re all brothers and sisters in the United States, no matter our religion, whether we’re rich or poor, or any other designation you could come up with. So there’s an optimism underneath these songs, which are meant to be a clear-eyed examination of the challenges and threats we all face together.” ■

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