



Dee Bell

RECORD COMPANY

Laser Records, LLC
5457 Monroe Road
Charlotte, North Carolina 28212
www.laserrecords.com

CONTACT INFORMATION

Deja Music
415.383.2402
dejamusic@earthlink.net

NATIONAL RADIO PROMOTION

Josh Ellman
Groov Marketing
josh@groovmarketing.com
<http://www.groovmarketing.com>
323.839.7972

NATIONAL PUBLICITY

Michael Bloom
Michael Bloom Media Relations
musicPR@earthlink.net
<http://www.michaelbloommediarelations.com>
310.779.1886

WEB

<http://www.deebell.net>
<http://home.earthlink.net/~dejamusic>

Silva • Bell • Elation Liner Notes

Jazz Author James Gavin

[James Gavin's books include *Deep in a Dream: The Long Night of Chet Baker* and *Stormy Weather: The Life of Lena Horne*.]

"Who's Dee Bell?" wondered many jazz fans in 1983, when that name appeared above those of Stan Getz and an esteemed veteran guitarist, Eddie Duran, on the cover of a Concord Jazz LP, *Let There Be Love*. Like a jazz Cinderella, this gifted unknown singer – a former hippie and waitress in northern California – had been discovered by Getz and Duran, both of whom volunteered to play on her debut LP. The critics raved about this "pretty, blue-eyed honey-blond with a husky-dusky voice," as Gerald Nachman called her in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. A second Concord disc followed. By all signs, Dee Bell was here to stay.

But jazz singing is usually a tough and financially punishing road, and cold reality forced her to take many detours. Where has Dee been since the '80s? Short answer: she's been living outside San Francisco in Mill Valley, where she raised a son and worked as a children's music teacher. Her third album, *Sagacious Grace*, went unreleased for two decades. Along the way her musical director, pianist Al Plank, died. Dee's gigs shrank to just a few.

Silva Bell Elation marks a happy new beginning for her. Much of it is due to her new maestro, Marcos Silva, the Rio-born, pianist, composer, Bay Area educator, and conductor, who has added Dee to a resume that includes Airto, Edu Lobo, and Toninho Horta. Her earthy sweet-and-sour voice, so mellow and rhythmically assured, sounds more alluring than ever. "I'm not a singer who takes things too far out," she says, "but what I do comes from the heart." Hope and renewal are themes of this project, and her band has upped the optimism with its ebullient playing. The charts incorporate Brazilian, fusion, and straight-ahead jazz influences; they are played, says Dee, "by Americans [Scott Thompson and Phil Thompson] trained in the Brazilian style by Marcos himself."

Born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Dee fell in love with jazz and jazz singers at the age of nine. Billie Holiday was her favorite, but Peggy Lee made a deeper impact: "She had a beautiful color to her voice; her phrasing was very elegant and not overstated; no clutter." But Dee had other interests, mostly related to nature and health. She studied pre-medicine at Indiana University, with an eye toward obstetrics, and worked for a time as a lay midwife. Later she and a boyfriend ran the Earth Kitchen, "a self-righteous vegetarian cafeteria," as she calls it. While studying nutrition and herbs, Dee lived in a shack near the Hoosier National Forest in Bloomington, Indiana; Lake Monroe would almost wash up to her front porch. "I used to sing to the stars," she says. "There is a calm and a freshness in living that simply."

But she longed to sing jazz professionally, and in 1978 she moved to Northern California to pursue a career. One night, while waitressing at the Trident, a Sausalito music club on the San Francisco Bay, Dee sang "Happy Birthday" to a friend. She was overheard by a Trident regular, Eddie Duran, who had played guitar for everyone from Charlie Parker to Tania Maria. Soon she began sitting in with his trio.

Dee found her next major champion at Keystone Korner, the San Francisco jazz club. Hanging out in the back room, she caught the eye and ear of Stan Getz, who struck up a conversation. "I think I greeted him with a sung 'I Remember You,'" says Dee. She told him she had ambitions of recording for his label, Concord Jazz, with Eddie Duran. He asked to hear a tape.

Getz lived nearby, and she dropped off a demo. Weeks later, he called to say he wanted to play on her album. "I have heard all the stories about how Stan could be," notes Dee. "I only ever experienced the nice version." With him and Duran set to accompany her, Dee won her deal with Concord. *Let There Be Love* earned instant attention. It spawned a follow-up, *One by One*, and helped give Dee several active years on the Bay Area jazz scene. It teemed with venues and opportunities, but lucrative it wasn't, and Dee had to maintain a full-time job in an ad agency.

In 1990 she recorded the expensively self-produced *Sagacious Grace*, which she hoped would lift her to the next level. It turned into a heartbreak: technical flaws in the master rendered it unreleasable, at least for the time being. Finances depleted and hopes dashed, Dee put her singing ambitions aside. By now a married woman with a son, she focused on her home life and on a job as music teacher for K-2 students. "I was singing all day long for the kids," she says. "It made me not miss it as much."



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WEB

<http://www.deebell.net>
<http://home.earthlink.net/~dejamusic>

ALBUM ART

Rohmana D'Arezzo
<http://www.goddessarts.com>

Cut to November 2011, when Dee participated in a tribute to the godmother of Bay Area jazz, Merrilee Trost, a longtime publicist for Concord and for Berkeley's Jazzschool. Dee sang a Brazilian song a capella, and fellow performer (and Jazzschool teacher) Marcos Silva rushed up to her with enthusiastic praise. "I realized that all this time I'd been doing bossas and sambas and finally here was the perfect person to do this music with," says Dee. She asked if he would consider doing a show and an album with "a laid-back white jazz singer floating over his Brazilian rhythms."

Thus began *Silva Bell Elation*. "It was like I had come home," says Dee. Marcos, she says, "handles a singer with velvet gloves. He finds the most beautiful colors to accent the sound of the person he's accompanying."

Her joy is contagious on the first track, Neil Young's **Harvest Moon**. Dee asked Marcos if he could devise something completely different than Young's casual rendition with strummed guitar. "I don't know why," she said, "but the sound of a train keeps coming into my mind." He wrote a fusion-tinged chart led by four saxes, all of them played by Chris Sullivan, a seventeen-year-old Jazzschool student. Judging by this track, he has a shining future ahead. "I was so impressed," says Dee. "I thought, there's my train!" She rides that train with the cool ease of a woman on cruise control.

The Brazilian songs she loves come authentically to life thanks to Silva's guiding hand. **Beijo Partido** [Broken Kiss] is by Toninho Horta, the master guitarist from the state of Minas Gerais in Brazil. The song appears on Horta's 1988 album *Diamond Land* – "my go-to music when I need an emotional lift," she says. Joyce, the sunny singer-songwriter from Rio, did the English translation. Antonio Carlos Jobim's **Dreamer** dates from 1963, when Jobim recorded it in his one-finger piano style. Backed by trio, Dee sings it in a voice full of sighs. Marcos Valle composed **The Face I Love** in the late '60s as an airy, spinning waltz; Silva reconceived it as a festive samba.

Dee's men found ways of refreshing some overdone chestnuts without distorting them. Andy Narell, a Manhattan-born steelpan player, took **I've Got the World on a String** and **Nature Boy** to the Caribbean; Silva remade [Eddie Duran's] **'S Wonderful** as another samba. Dee was a teenager in 1968, when two standard-worthy songs on this album came into being. **Night in the City** appears on Joni Mitchell's debut release, *Song to a Seagull*. The swinging chart here spotlights Barry Finnerty, the San Francisco-born guitarist who played with one of Mitchell's idols, Miles Davis. From the Beatles' *The White Album* comes **I Will**, a sweet, shy pledge of eternal love. Dee gives it a lullaby warmth.

The World Is Falling Down is the title song of Abbey Lincoln's 1989 comeback album on Verve, a disc that heralded a golden renaissance for a long-neglected singer and songwriter. Lincoln had moved beyond love songs in her search for universal truths about life. Dee agrees with this one, dour as it seems – "but I also see it as the opportunity for the world to recreate itself." She sings this song in tribute to all the great musicians who have moved on to the next world. To highlight the transcendental theme, her version features a rhythmic suggestion of Candomblé, the Afro-Brazilian religion whose repetitive drumming rituals help invoke the *orixás*, the gods of Brazilian folklore.

Tranquility is restored in the last track, **Midnight Mood**, written in the '60s by Joe Zawinul. Dee credits Marcos with "one of the most beautiful piano solos I've ever heard." She wrote a lyric, but couldn't obtain clearance in time for this recording; therefore she conveys her message wordlessly, in a caressing hum. After all, she says, "music for me is a meditation. When everything is the way it's supposed to be and the band is operating as one vehicle I ride the sound, and it becomes this healing process."

She shares it with us in this return to her strongest and most challenging calling. "I keep talking myself out of doubts and issues, and try to surf, and figure, ok, it's just another wave. Stuff keeps coming at you, and that's life."

-- James Gavin, New York City, 2013