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Chats With Ivan Neville and The Berman Brothers, Plus Exclusives by Geneviève Bellemare, Home Video and Dream Alive

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"LIVE AND DIE" WITH GENEVIÈVE BELLEMARE



Photo credit: Jenny Affan

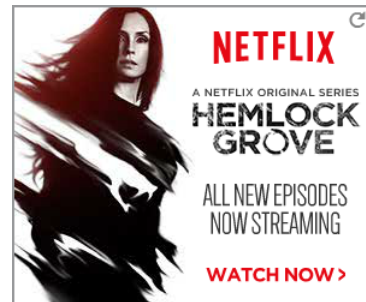
According to Geneviève Bellemare...

"This song was written with Mitchell Froom. He sent me the keyboard and drum intro you hear in the beginning. I remember him either saying something about radiohead or me thinking radiohead. Whatever it was it attracted me. I didn't know if i could do anything with the song because I had the whole radiohead thing in the back of my mind so it was intimidating. But I remember I was home and i was on my couch on the computer and I kept repeating it over and over and over. I finally started mumbling the melody you hear on the chorus 'I live and die, I live and die.' In the next session I had with Mitchell, we were trying to add new parts and new melodies to the song. Mitchell said, 'It sounds like you are saying I live and die, I live and die,' and he said that he really liked that. We both thought it was a cool concept for a song. At first, I thought this is way too dramatic for me to be singing, but then I recorded it actually singing those words, and then it felt perfect. After that, the rest of the lyrics came really easily. 'Live and Die,' I think, is a similar concept to hiding space. But more discrete lyrically."



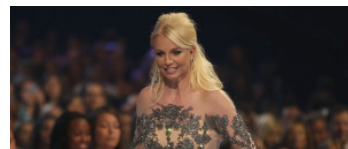
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Geneviève Bellemare - Live And Die

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A Conversation with The Berman Brothers

Mike Ragogna: Chris and Frank, where did the idea to transplant this group of artists into a Brazilian genre come from and what motivated you to put this project together?

Chris Berman: We were always huge fans of Brazilian music since a very long time, since the eighties. Frank and I were living in London and we were going to these really amazing rave parties at night and there were always Brazilian musicians playing along. Also on the other side, the really beautiful melodic structure of songs, that love of Brazilian music was there all the time. We also have this huge, huge love for those classic, iconic American songs from the sixties and seventies like those of Billie Holiday and Aretha Franklin or Sly & The Family Stone. One day, Frank and I were sitting in Berlin and Billie Holiday was running in the background somewhere from an apartment far away. We could only hear the voice for some reason. It was a beautiful summery day and the idea was born--how would it sound to put some easy-going bossa nova beats or some smash salsa beats behind it? Brazilian music is so tasteful, so elegant. It needs an elegant counterpart in the melody. That was when we thought, "What happens if we blend these two worlds together," the beauty of the classic American vocal performances of Billie Holiday or Aretha Franklin or Sly Stone with that sultry, really fantastic intelligent Brazilian backbone.

MR: To be honest, your new recording of "Sexual Healing" is my preferred version now because you've removed the dated electronics and given it this new sensuous world.

CB: For some reason a lot of these songs sound like they've been recorded in Brazil in the first place. It was an amazing experience to go down to Brazil with all these musicians. On the one side they started very naive because they thought, "We have to give the right sound to these songs," but on the other side they had this respect for all of the artists so they knew they had to do it right. "If we go to these classic songs, we have to give all we can in order to make them really sound as beautiful as possible."

MR: The Dave Brubeck and Carmen McRae track was a brilliant merging of three worlds. Can you give us an example of the production process?

CB: The problem was we only had a stereo track on this recording, so we really had to dig in, take the vocals out and take, for example, the saxophone solo out. Then we went into the studio and kind of did it as if they were part of the room. We let the vocal play and the saxophone play and the band was playing along in the recording room, very similar to how they did the original recording; all in one room. After we had the vocals isolated, it was very important to us to let the band play along in different rooms together like a real recording session and give the natural feel of recording. There are not really too many overdubs. These days, you start with one track and then go to another and another and musicians don't really play along. We really thought in order to give the original vocals that respect, we had to play along with the vocals. We had everybody in one room with a click track to keep the rhythm going and only the vocal. They played along with Carmen McRae singing and Paul Desmond playing the saxophone later on.

MR: You must have had access to some of the multi-track, right?

MR: You must have had access to some of the multis, though, right?

CB: Yeah. Luckily, we got multi-tracks for a few, for example, we got Sly & The Family Stone's multi-track and Marvin Gaye's multi-track. We really only used the voices. One thing that's amazing to hear is how fantastically these vocals were recorded in the first place, especially with Marvin Gaye. In the eighties, everything was cluttered with delay and reverb and sometimes, I think you don't really hear what a fantastic singer he is in the first place. Having the chance to take his vocals without effects and purely let the musicians play along, I think it enhanced the feeling of them all being together in one room and jamming along in a studio in Rio.

MR: Beautiful. Hey Frank, how are you?

Frank Berman: I'm wonderful. I don't have the best position, that's why I'm quiet.

MR: How did you work together on the project? What were the assigned duties?

FB: We both love music, but I'm more the one trying to talk to the record companies and to find the right studios for the musicians. Christian is the music guy who loves sitting for twenty-four hours, spending night and day in the studio with the musicians, getting the best out of them, getting the best out of the taping. He's very hands-on in the studio and I'm more hands-on with the business. We do the creative part together, so it's more of getting the product out to the right people, finding the right parts, and getting the right song. Each of us have our separate roles but in general, we did everything together. The main decisions we did together and then we split up in separate parts.

MR: Have you worked this way on every other project?

FB: In the beginning, we wanted a band together and that was a disaster because we both were playing and doing the same work. Luckily, I stopped playing and then we started selling records.

MR: So Studio Rio is really the two of you and whatever Rio musicians could be assembled for these projects.

CB: Yes. They're very fantastic musicians, all together about twenty different musicians and four amazing arrangers, too, who really gave that Brazilian feel. Every note on this record is recorded in Brazil. There are no overdubs in New York or London or anywhere else. We really wanted to capture the Brazilian feel and spirit and the authentic vibe.

MR: And having the band play to the vocal kept the authenticity. Nice. Do you have any studio stories?

CB: One little story that I always have to tell because I love it is one of the drummers is named Paulo Braga. He used to be a drummer for all the big records. We called him and as you can hear, we sometimes talk a little fast and things get lost here and there. We invited him to come to the studio to play along with the track "You've Changed," but he, for some reason, misunderstood the fact that he's actually playing to Billie Holiday, so he comes into the studio, he sets up his recording gear, and then we press "record" and the music starts. Everybody plays along and all of a sudden he hears the voice. He thinks that some girl's singing like Billie Holiday, and then all of a sudden, he recognizes, "That is Billie Holiday I'm playing with!" You could see his eyes get really wet; he nearly had tears. For one little second, he skips the beat, and then he plays along all the way to the end and that's the take that we took for the record because it was so emotional. Then later, he was like, "You guys are so crazy, you didn't tell me it was really Billie Holiday." That was a nice moment.

MR: Were there any people who told you while you were putting this together that you were out of your mind?

CB: A lot of them.

MR: There are a couple of songs on the project that feel even more appropriately interpreted in this setting than their own original arrangements. I won't name them to

MR: There are a couple of songs on the project that feel even more appropriately interpreted in this setting than their own original arrangements. I won't name them to protect the innocent.

CB: [laughs] I know, but I think if you're in Rio or Ipanema at night and the sun is going down and you have a little drink in your hand, that big city urban feel at the beach, that combination is really the feel of the song. It's a Rio night song. It's that cool, drive around with the windows open at the water feel. It kind of had to be done that way down there, it's really funny.

MR: You took on a song that was originally recorded reggae, Johnny Nash's "I Can See Clearly Now," and the jazz-islandy Bill Withers hit, "Lovely Day." I was surprised to see how naturally they were prone to go further south than Jamaica and the Caribbean.

CB: [laughs] We tried a lot of songs, so the ones you hear are the ones that really worked out, the ones the musicians and arrangers felt were fantastic. We felt, "Oh wow, this is the great combination between the authentic Brazilian sound and something the Western mentality can enjoy, too." We have both worlds going. The Brazilians are proud of it and we think, "Wow, this is a hit, it's fantastic." These songs really work perfectly to bring them even more south. They're already so positive lyrically and musically enchanting, so that really helped to find the right arrangement around them.

FB: Not every song did work in a Brazilian arrangement, so we also had a few where we decided they should not get on the record.

MR: Out of curiosity, what were a couple of those?

FB: I'd prefer not to name any, but definitely, a lot don't work because of rhythms or speeds. There's definitely a fine line between where it really sounds convincing and perfect or where it sounds more like a cover band. We only took the songs that really made a great impression.

MR: I'm surprised that "Don't Stop Believing" by Journey didn't make the cut. An oversight?

Both: [laughs]

FB: That was our number one choice!

MR: Another thing that was amazing was your taking the squarest possible recording of the project, Andy Williams' take on "Music To Watch Girls By," and you hipped it up.

FB: A big credit really goes to Rio because we had this place we called our local office there. It was a coffee shop one street away from the ocean. We had our laptops with us and tons of songs and we were sitting there in the right mood and the right atmosphere and we'd listen to the songs and decide, "This could work, this could work." That's why a lot of surprising songs are on the list that wouldn't have worked if we'd done the project in America. You need that Brazilian atmosphere, the cars driving by with the Brazilian music coming out of them. That's where you get these inspirations.

MR: And there are a couple of songs where the horns are playing straight through. When I heard that, I thought, "Boy, that's a lot of horns." Then I realized you guys were trying to capture the power of what was going on in the arrangement, so the horn attacks expressed it in a way that no other instrument would have been able to.

CB: Sometimes the backbeat in Brazil is subtle, it's sometimes hard to create really big excitement with a Brazilian beat. So we took the horns to give a little element of intensity and drama to that. But really the funny thing is that the Brazilian horn arrangers did even more arrangements, so we had to mute a lot of things.

MR: Are any of the artists you used aware of this project's final results yet?

FB: Yes, Bill Withers and his people are very, very happy. We had to get rights from all the artists and so far, no complaints at all.

MR: Where is this heading? Might Studio Rio put out volumes of reworks over the next ten years?

next ten years?

FB: We have a few great ideas for a second album. We have to do the second album because there's one or two great songs we couldn't finish in time. It will be an ongoing ten piece collection. The second part, I think, will be very nice.

MR: Will Studio Rio move from label to label to explore the potential of different catalogs in the future?

FB: No, I think we're very happy. The Sony catalog is ongoing and really beautiful, there is so much stuff. We can even move a little up in the age or a little back in the age. There are many different approaches if it comes to a second part, but we're very happy where we are.

MR: I made a joke about using Journey earlier, but there may really be some rock that may surprise you, for instance Bruce Springsteen or Bob Dylan or someone similar.

FB: We have already one totally crazy one. When people hear the combination, they think it's crazy, but it works great. We'll save it for next year.

MR: What advice do you have for new artists?

FB: Be very independent, be responsible for your own career, find a good team around you and persistence and talent is equal in these days.

CB: I think that's something. I have a friend here, she's so talented and maybe fifteen years ago, she would've been picked up by a major label and had a deal. But now, she's just lacking that last drive of intensity to go out and really go for yourself. I think she will not make it because of that. There's another friend I have and she's a singer-songwriter and maybe her talent is not as really wonderful, but she's so on her career. She does everything right to put herself as an artist out there and I think she will make it. I think in these days where independent artists have such a great opportunity, I think the industry is creating a lot of problems, but also creating a lot of opportunity for young artists. If they use the new world as their tool, they can really go far.

Want to check out the music? Here it is...

...and for the playlist featuring the album and commentary: