

New Ocean from musician Jake Bellows

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New Ocean is a new album from musician Jake Bellows. The musician's former project, the band Neva Dinova (from Omaha, Nebraska), came out of the "indie" folk music scene.

The latter term loosely refers to musical projects that lack the assistance (and generally financial support) of major record labels. As a genre, indie folk attempted to meld the noise and post-punk tradition of the 1980s with the lyrical prowess of 1950s, 1960s and 1970s folk music.

In its infancy, post-punk traded the aggressive, disillusioned and often misguided political conceptions of the late 1970s and 1980s punk bands for a more reflective and emotion-laden lyrical turn. One thinks of such bands as Joy Division, the Smiths and the Cure.

Features of this musical approach included distorted guitars that replaced the prototypical three-chord repetition of punk with more thoughtful and developed musical progressions. Post-punk bands also used synthesizers and other electronic instruments, considered taboo in the punk scene. A final element of this innovation was its use of background fuzz or static, producing an uneasiness also on display in the lyrical content.

One would be hard pressed to argue that Neva Dinova was not heavily influenced by these trends. However, the band, and more so its driving force, Jake Bellows, made a conscious effort not to fall into any particular genre, by displaying an array of influences.

Bellows's haunting voice, often expressing the sentiments of a disheartened former lover, highlighted the band's rather morbid content. While Neva Dinova's eponymous debut album (2002) strongly emphasized the theme of misplaced and lost love, their second, *The Hate Yourself Change* (2005), had a somewhat broader scope. In one song, a dead soldier reflects on his experience. The album hints at the scourge of America's unending wars, as well as conveying self-deprecating feelings of deep isolation and loneliness.

The band's final release, *You May Already Be Dreaming* (2008), was their debut on Saddle Creek Records, the Omaha label known for indie acts such as Bright Eyes and Rilo Kiley. The album flirted with an important understanding of the world, but fell short of commercial success due to marketing and other factors.

Bellows' debut solo album, *New Ocean*, released in August, takes these flirtations and turns them into a love affair, producing a completed work after years of promising such a finished product.

Discussing the album's explorations, Bellows underscores his inability to stop writing music and his efforts to understand why. He explained in an interview with Ilana Kaplan (interviewmagazine.com) that "All of a sudden I didn't know why I was making music. I knew I was compelled to do it, but I didn't know why."

The first single off the album, "I Know You," suggests a bossa nova-influenced lounge track. After an ethereal guitar introduction, Bellows wistfully sings, "I know you had enough sunshine/And the sunlight still dripping off trees/I know you/I saw you/It won't do to ignore you/I know you/I know you." The song speaks to the connection between everyone and all physical phenomena.

Explaining the track, Bellows says, "'I Know You' attempts to illustrate the commonality of the human experience. When we look at someone who smiles, we know what it is to feel happy. When we see someone sad, we can instantly identify with that feeling. We have empathy for one another. We're on the same planet having the same experiences from different perspectives."

Opening the album is the title track "New Ocean." It begins with a simple two-chord progression softly strummed on electric guitar. Bellows intimately relates "I'm looking for the one/A path into the hills/Another setting sun/The power without the wind/And we can fall into a new ocean." He continues in the same vein, calmly singing "Make ready on the boat/The valley's filling up/Let's lower down the ropes/And let our brothers in/And we can fall into a new ocean." Bellows seems to understand the need for a change, although he admits that he may not know exactly what that is.

The follow-up track is "All Right Now," in which the songwriter attempts to validate or justify his apparent abandonment of his Nebraska roots for a new life in California. Over a driving drumbeat and screeching guitars, Bellows punches through the chorus with the lyrics "It's all right now that you reached out." This understanding that even he needs solace is a mature departure from the self-resentment and self-denigration expressed during his Neva Dinova days.

Bellows further explores these thoughts and feelings on the next track, "You and Me." He asks plaintively, "But who would you rather I was?/The kind that up and left or the kind that can't give up?/My heart's still beating and how could I forget/The sweetness of your love. Who knows how we're moving on?" The speaker recognizes his untimely departure in both a geographical as well as an emotional sense, but refuses to leave behind the feelings he once held, although he knows all too well that holding on to them is impossible. He begs to be reminded that the two once intimate lovers are still the same people. The blissful wrap-up of the song expresses that, indeed, they are.

The following track, "Drinking with Dad," continues the sparse exploration of bossa nova arrangements, while "Two Weeks" lingers over the songwriter's former days of self-loathing and regret. The album turns back to the theme of universal connection and the like with the aforementioned "I Know You."

Then come a quintet of musings about love once lost with a hint

that the narrator will either maintain the intimate relationship or take the former lover back. There are definite highlights among these five songs, one of which is “Running From Your Love.” The driving, thumping guitar reminds the listener there is hope of repairing a broken heart, though it may not seem so at the time. Bellows’ emphasis on the humanistic element drives home his desire to connect with the listener.

The final track, aptly entitled “Frequency,” is the most representative of the post-punk musical tradition. Obliging the listener to take him seriously, Bellows croons “I know now that a frequency can save us/A frequency can make us into something new.” He attempts to reflect on objective circumstances, although not in an immediate sense. One can regret his lack of comment on social conditions, but he certainly recognizes the need for a change in life. How and what that change might be remains a question.

A conversation with Jake Bellows

In a conversation with the WSWs, Bellows discussed his state of mind and the genesis of the new album:

“I looked back at the kind of music I’ve made and it’s sort of like leaving a dark touch. I lost a friend to suicide, she wanted a song played at her funeral that has this dark refrain, ‘The world’s a shitty place and I can’t wait to die.’ Obviously we don’t take full responsibility for something like a suicide, unless it’s our own, but it resonated with me in this way—if there’s any chance of your leaving that kind of a touch, does that work for you? It didn’t really work for me any more.

“I’ve always been compelled to make music, but I was never really sure why. So I just backed away from it until I could figure out what I was trying to do. To be fair to other artists, and my past self too, I think there’s a place for that type of art representing the commonality of the human experience—it makes us feel less alone.

“I wrote about 30 songs that I sent to five or six friends. I asked them to choose their ten favorites—and then there were three songs I wanted to record regardless, of whether or not they liked them. So the ones that overlapped is basically how the songs were chosen.”

Asked about the environment for young artists today, Bellows commented: “My experience is limited. But just think of a young band, what’s their dream? To succeed somehow. The definition of success is maybe to have a bunch of fans or adulation, or to feel like you are valuable. That initial push for value is maybe how a lot of people set the stage for their motivation for making their art. I don’t want to blame capitalism, although, I think that is a big reason why this continues to happen, but it’s something also about us as artists—maybe we don’t necessarily think about it enough what it is we’re doing.”

About Edward Snowden’s revelations of massive NSA spying, and the current political situation, the singer-songwriter observed, “Obviously, this [the spying] has been a problem for a long time. I’m glad that it has gotten this much publicity and that a flashlight has been put on the types of freedoms being taken away—and also

the fact that they’ve been deceiving people. I read a few of Thomas Jefferson’s letters. I understand that the government was supposed to be created so that people are represented by the government. There have been so many steps in a different direction.

“The parties will say anything to get in power, but they don’t have the power, the people have the power and that’s something the people have forgotten. I think that it was cool how this was represented in the Detroit rally at the DIA [Detroit Institute of Arts]—that illustrated that the people have the power. No matter how many soldiers there are, if we all took a match and marched down to city hall and decided to light that thing on fire, I guess that thing is going to go up on fire. Even if they mowed down thousands of us we’d still have the power, we are the people and there is no stopping the people.

“I’ve read some articles about policies put into place to give the government the ability to essentially assassinate American citizens. The US government has been involved in assassinations, isn’t that against the rules?! The situation with Osama Bin Laden—if it isn’t the most disgusting assassination—what else is that? These are travesties of justice, this is blanket suffocation of liberty. I’m not putting all the responsibility on Barack Obama because that’s not how the system works, but I am definitely in agreement that he has not done anything to change our tendency to be an imperialist nation. A lot of people got tricked into voting for Obama thinking that they were taking a move to the left, towards more social action.”



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