

# Bill Orcutt: Bill Orcutt

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Daniel Bromfield

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Bill Orcutt's surely spent long hours digging for blues and folk obscurities, but it's when he tackles a beloved standard that his gnarled genius shines. Take his version of "The Star-Spangled Banner," from his new, self-titled album for solo electric guitar. The first three notes bring a pang of instant familiarity, but inevitably his mind goes down its own dark, spidery path, and within seconds the song is barely recognizable. It's great fun to hear him navigate a melody everyone knows and see what he can milk out of it, and we can practically hear the gears in his head turning.

Of course, the first solo guitar version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" most people will think of won't be Orcutt's. Hendrix's performance of the anthem at Woodstock has become a perfect encapsulation of hippie irreverence, and it's easy to forget how powerful it must have seemed at the time. "Bombs screaming and people running," one YouTube commenter simply described it. It was an interpretation that had eluded me but that seemed so perfect—a synecdoche of patriotism that took us into the heart of the horrors done in its name.

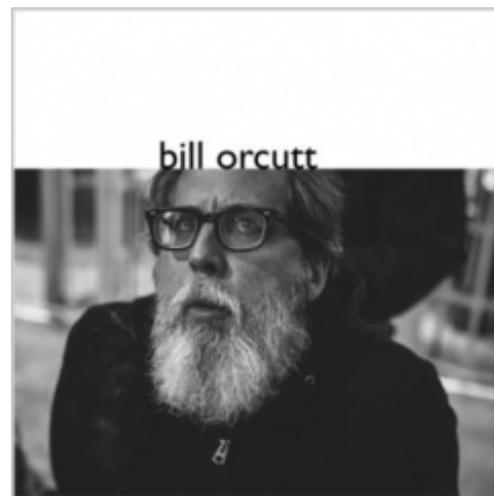
Orcutt desires "The Star-Spangled Banner" for its melody—and that's true of the often loaded material he covers, like "Zip-A-Dee-Doo Dah" or the minstrel song "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground," sung by slaves mourning the death of their master. There's nothing here of such fraught origin, except perhaps "Ol' Man River," the standard that contrasts the suffering of black Americans with the cold neutrality of nature. This is one of Orcutt's favorites, and on *How The Thing Sings*, one of the best solo guitar albums I've ever heard, he spun "A Line From Ol' Man River" into a multi-part odyssey. *A line from it*. He sees the song as an exercise, nothing more.

This is not necessarily a problem, but I'd forgive a listener's frustration at Orcutt's appropriation of these songs or at his refusal to use them to take a stand. Some may argue the punk fury with which he attacks them represents some sort of subversion, but I'd reckon it's an extension of the many years he clocked in the noise rock and free improvisation scene as part of the infamously abrasive Harry Pussy. As the 50th anniversary of Woodstock approaches and the horrors of the Trump administration deepen, Hendrix's "Banner" will take on new life, and Orcutt's will look anemic next to it.

Still, Orcutt remains one of the wildest and most ingenious improvisers to pick up a guitar in the last quarter-century, and this is a fine addition to his catalog. He's switched from acoustic to electric, but he more or less does the same thing with both, only with less fury. Instead of threatening to tear the strings from the body of his instrument as he did on his often hellish acoustic records, he simply plucks and pops them funkily, returning to the root note as a baseline. He's graceful in the album's more subdued moments—"Ol' Man River" is gorgeous—but he's also capable of blasts of controlled chaos, as on "O Platitudes!"

It's a treat to hear him take songs everyone loves and make mutants of them. If you thought countless Disney title screens had numbed you to the cosmic melancholy of "When You Wish Upon A Star," wait till you hear what he does with it. Bill Orcutt is one of the most radical instrumentalists of his generation, but he can also seem awfully conservative at times.

- Label:  
Palilalia



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