

BERT JANSCH



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1965-2006</i>	<i>Folk</i>	<i>Smokey River (1965)</i>

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Bert Jansch*

Years: *1965*

George Starostin's Reviews

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BERT JANSCH

Album released:

April 16, 1965

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Tracks: 1) Strolling Down The Highway; 2) Smokey River; 3) Oh How Your Love Is Strong; 4) I Have No Time; 5) Finches; 6) Rambling's Going To Be The Death Of Me; 7) Veronica; 8) Needle Of Death; 9) Do You Hear Me Now?; 10) Alice's Wonderland; 11) Running, Running From Home; 12) Courting Blues; 13) Kasbah; 14) Dreams Of Love; 15) Angie.

REVIEW

Davey Graham may have been the first UK virtuoso folk guitarist to open up the world of folk to outside influences, but the honor of building a bridge from there to the world of pop culture and mass appeal belongs to Bert Jansch — even if, ironically, Bert himself stays as far removed from the very idea of «mass appeal» as possible. He was tremendously influential on everybody from Neil Young to Led Zeppelin, basically laying down the ground rules for experimental, technically dazzling, imaginative approaches to playing one's acoustic guitar (I think Neil said something along the lines of Jansch doing the same thing for the acoustic as Hendrix did for electric, and he might not be *totally* exaggerating). At the same time, he has always strictly remained «the musician's musician» — no hits, no chart success (other than a couple of well-selling albums with Pentangle), and no chance of you even hearing his name unless you begin to make concentrated digs, e.g., get interested in where Led Zeppelin's 'Black Mountain Side' comes from, or what drove Neil Young to write 'Ambulance Blues'.



That said, listening to Bert's self-titled debut, released in April '65, it is not that difficult to realize why that is, or even to come to a certain understanding with fate on the subject. Experimenting with and expanding upon the classic folk idiom is a difficult task — one might argue that the idiom has been so well-polished and perfected over centuries of evolution that any «tinkering» with it is liable to break down the immediacy of effect and prevent one from being emotionally moved by the melody. It is *particularly* difficult to do so in the minimalistic setting of one guy with one acoustic guitar; and even more difficult if the guy in question is only a passable singer, or does not sing at all.

Unlike Davey Graham, Bert Jansch actually wanted to be a singer-songwriter — more than half of the titles here have lyrics, and not *just* lyrics, but lyrics with clearly stated messages, including anti-war and anti-drug statements. The bad news is that, much like early Donovan, Bert never had a particularly interesting way to deliver these messages. He was not a very good lyricist ("If cherry trees bore fruit of gold / The birds would die, *their wings would fold*" is the kind of line that would probably make Bob Dylan puke), and his singing voice is that of a haughty, rather unpleasant, pretentious self-appointed prophet — perhaps unintentionally so, but that's more or less how it comes across. *Unlike* Donovan, let alone Paul Simon or Nick Drake, Jansch does not generate much empathy when delivering the vocal goods.

Thus, it's really all about the guitar playing, which was indeed unique for 1965 and, in some ways, continues to be unique even now. Essentially, Bert uses the synthesis of Western and Eastern, folk, blues, and jazz patterns created by Davey Graham and takes it to the next level, acting as a sort of Van Halen to Graham's Eric Clapton. No better way to demonstrate this than by comparing Graham's [original recording](#) of 'Anji' and comparing it to Bert's [re-imagining](#) on this album — the only official cover piece, by the way, almost symbolically «appended» to the record as its 15th track (remember that the most typical number of songs on a UK LP at the time was 14). Graham's original is shorter, follows a fairly conventional chorus-verse-chorus scheme, and favors repetition over variation. Jansch slightly speeds it up and not only introduces a few additional phrases, but inflates many lines with extra chords, while also playing the bass line much more loudly and prominently, so that the song almost «rocks» in his hands. (Paul Simon, expectedly, would make his version sound closer to Graham's original than Jansch's cover).

But even more instructive — though much less famous — are Bert's own compositions, which take established picking patterns and seduce them into becoming something completely different. 'Smokey River', for instance, begins as a dark folk-blues piece, something not unlike the pattern you hear on Bob Dylan's 'Ballad Of Hollis Brown', then gets sidetracked into a raga-like alley, with the initial blues melody «fighting» against the intruder, temporarily getting knocked down by it,

only to reappear unscathed several bars later. The less than one minute long 'Finches' indeed makes me remember the effect of Hendrix's «three-guitars-in-one», except that here it is all acoustic — with the bass finger doing some odd half-jazz, half-Entwistle shit, and the others sounding as if somebody wanted to incorporate some funky attitude into a British village folk dance. This kind of musical language must have been totally incomprehensible to the public in 1965 — heck, I'm not even sure it's all that comprehensible to me in 2022.

'Alice's Wonderland' is explicitly named after a Charles Mingus composition, though it is defined as "inspired by Mingus" rather than being an actual cover — I think that the actual jazz line that comes in around the forty seconds mark owes more to Brubeck's 'Take Five' than anything I've heard by Mingus. Most of the time, though, the composition sounds like a pensive, stuttering, slightly drunk love ballad, permanently confusing you with changes of rhythmic patterns as Bert wants to play more than one melody at the same time but does not quite have the necessary number of fingers for this. And on 'Casbah', as you could probably expect, we hear him incorporating Arabic motives, making his guitar grumble like some Moroccan sintir... before the melody plunges back into the same 'Hollis Brown' pattern.

Needless to say, all of this is extremely cool and must have sounded astonishing to young aspiring musicians in 1965, largely used to well-established blues and folk tunings. Besides, unlike Davey Graham, Bert Jansch *looked* cool — Dave had much too much of an «academic» look, whereas the guy looking at you from this here album cover gives out a clear sign that he truly comes from the Jean-Paul Belmondo generation... or, at least, the Bob Dylan one. It shines through in the music, too, which is loud, brusque, and flashy (and surprisingly beautifully recorded, even though it was allegedly all put down on a reel-to-reel tape recorder at the house of Bert's engineer). My problem with it, however, is that I constantly find myself admiring the creativity and virtuosity much more than the spirit of the whole thing. For all the formally amazing things Bert does with these instrumentals (and you should probably consult a professional musicologist rather than myself if you want them to be properly put in words), they evoke precious few emotions in me, for precisely those reasons I mentioned above: if you fuck too much with a good thing, there's always a probability that it will cease to be good.

The same feeling persists on Bert's vocal numbers. 'Strolling Down The Highway', which opens the album, is most likely a direct nod to Big Bill Broonzy's 'Key To The Highway' — its melody is clearly influenced by Big Bill's playing style (Bert was an openly acknowledged major fan), and lyrically, the highway metaphor is used by Bert in much the same way (compare "I got the key to the highway / Billed out and bound to go" to "Strolling down the highway / I'm gonna get there my way"), though, as usual, Bert has a generally poor way with words ("dusk 'til dawn I'm walking, can you hear my guitar rocking?" is

a line better fit for the likes of the Doobie Brothers than a brilliant guitar wizard). The main problem, however, are not the lyrics and not Bert's un-sympathetic vocal delivery, but that I am just not sure how all those extra ninths and other subtle embellishments add to the already well-established vibe of Big Bill Broonzy. For sure, this is more sophisticated, and I like how, for instance, at 0:23 into the song it breaks into the exact chord sequence that would later form part of the acoustic intro to George Harrison's 'For You Blue' on **Let It Be...** but I'm just not sure that in the future I'd ever actually prefer a bunch of songs like these to a best-of collection of the real Big Bill.

Equally questionable are Bert's «heavy message» songs. With 'I Have No Time' and 'Do You Hear Me Now?', Bert is trying to send out a couple of clear anti-war messages along the lines of Dylan's 'Masters Of War'. But although both songs are unquestionably more melodically tricky than the latter, their message is largely wasted. The genius of 'Masters Of War' is in its focused counter-attack on the listener's brain — Dylan's simple, repetitive, mantraic rhythm pattern is reminiscent of a lengthy, perfunctory string of machine-gun bursts, putting you inside a trench with the singer; Dylan's lyrics are masterful, and his delivery of them feels like an angry, realistic sermon. Bert's melodies, in contrast, feel like embellished folk ballads, and his own attempt to raise a little emotion on 'Do You Hear Me Now?' feels like an overwrought attempt from a bad actor. Honestly, it would have been better to simply leave both tunes without vocals altogether.

A similar thing concerns what is probably the best known song from the album — 'Needle Of Death', which, as you can guess, is an anti-drug song (inspired by the recent death of one of Bert's acquaintances), and chronologically the first song I know to openly depict the horrors of a drug-induced death. The lyrics, once again, are clumsy beyond belief (I can't help but imagine lines like "one grain of pure white snow / dissolved in blood spread quickly to your brain / in peace your mind withdraws / your death so near your soul can't feel no pain" delivered in a growling voice on some Slayer thrash metal track), and if you are no friend at all to the English language, it's even worse, because the song's light, breezy melody and Bert's soft, pensive, not particularly distinctive delivery feel more suitable for letting your mind wander as you relax in your back yard on a warm Sunday afternoon than for any terrifying mental imagery of death and decay. So give me Neil's 'Needle And The Damage Done' over this any day — no matter how much more complex Bert's picking pattern here is than Young's strumming on that classic from **Harvest**.

To conclude, I am not going to lie to you about how dreadfully this album, and this artist, are underrated. The truth is that there is not one, but *two* albums concealed within the sleeve of **Bert Jansch**: a singer-songwriter album, and an acoustic guitarist album. The singer-songwriter album is openly *bad* — way too derivative, way too poor with words and vocals, and

very thin in terms of atmosphere. The acoustic guitarist album is technically brilliant and imaginatively innovative, but written in a language that may be difficult to understand for a layman, and is clearly an acquired taste. Yet even so, the combination of these two results in an intriguing oddity, as if you're watching a TV show where half of the dialog is written by David Simon and the other half by the authors of *Cop Rock*. In fact, it took me several listens to properly disentangle the two and solve the puzzle — or, at least, solve it in my own way, as I'm sure quite a few people might disagree with me on this assessment.

In any case, one thing that cannot be denied is that **Bert Jansch** is an essential part of the Sixties' universe: listening to it makes it easier to understand the transition from «simple» folk music of the 1950s – early 1960s revival to the advanced folk and folk-influenced «auteur music» starting off in the mid-1960s. So start here and then think whether you are at all interested in following Jansch's career — he may have made better albums in the future, but arguably, he never made any that were more startling or influential than this debut.

