

Bill Gable: A Map of Life with No Straight Lines

Straight lines. They're a man-made conceit – highways, railroads, the quickest distance between two points. But nature likes to meander, to take a slower course. And *No Straight Lines* is a path that suits musician and singer-songwriter **Bill Gable**. His new record is inspired by those destinations never quite reached.

"Every record is a journey," Gable remarks. "I wanted to carry the listener with me. I often thought of these lines from a poem by Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa: 'To be great, be whole; exclude/Nothing, exaggerate nothing that is you. Be whole in everything. Put all you are/into the smallest thing you do. The whole moon gleams in every pool./It rides so high.' Through attention to detail in the storytelling and production, in my own small way I tried to do that."

Gable began writing *No Straight Lines* in 2004, a year after his second disc, *This Perfect Day*, was released. Much of it was composed in Morocco, Spain, and Portugal, in the hotel rooms where he lived, soaking in the countries, their culture and their music.

That travel resonates through the songs. The lyric of "I Threw Your Heart," for example, burrows deep into the pained flamenco tradition, while on "I Was Born To Love You" Gable's voice takes on the cracked patina of a flamenco singer, with *cajon* and footwork providing the rhythmic base.

"I read a lot of flamenco lyrics, a lot of Lorca, Pessoa and Sufi poets," Gable recalls. "I let them seep in and this is how they came out. But in everything I tried to include influences from where the songs were composed."

And that includes America, where the fragments of two songs came together to make "A Million Miles Away," the easy warmth in Gable's singing evoking '70s era Stevie Wonder. It's a disc of shades and moods, pop music in the same way that Brazilian MPB is popular music - sophisticated and intelligent, with heart and depth. Its music dives into the soul, rather than gliding over the surface.

But that's probably no surprise. Raised in the Midwest, Gable is a classically-trained pianist and cellist who played in symphony orchestras growing up before heading out to the West Coast with a literature degree in his pocket. He worked with jazz group the Yellowjackets on many albums, garnering three Grammy nominations, writing a number of compositions for them and other artists ranging from Chicago to the DeBarges.

In spite of that background on piano, the songs for *No Straight Lines* were all written on guitar.

"It's more intimate," Gable says. "It gives a more personal song."

And the tracks of *No Straight Lines* are studies in emotion and life. The characters in Gable's songs are people on the trail of certainty, but rarely finding it. "I realized I'll be on the very verge of beginning/every second the rest of my life" he sings on the album's title cut, a summation of the understanding that comes with age.

It's a document of a journey that can never end, but he has some strong companions along the way. Along with Gable's own voice, guitar, cello and Portuguese *guitarra*, Steve Rodby (Pat Metheny Group) and Jimmy Haslip (Yellowjackets, Bruce Hornsby) play bass, Larry Goldings (James Taylor, Norah Jones) contributes on piano, and Greg Ellis (Beck, Mickey Hart) adds percussion, along with several other guests, and the Eclipse Quartet delicately grace "Road Of Pain" and "End Of The Day" with strings. Not to mention a special appearance by Motown legend Leon Ware (I Want You) on background vocals.

Gable is a traveler with an open heart and open ears, and he pulls the listener along with him, conjuring up the sights and smells of Fes with the shadings of the oud or the *ney* flute, the crisp *palmas* of Granada, or the *cumbus* and clarinet of Istanbul.

Finding musicians to provide some of the more unusual instruments sometimes proved a challenge, even in cosmopolitan Los Angeles.

"I knew I wanted flamenco footwork on some of the songs," Gable says, "but there wasn't anyone here who really knew it. Finally a friend called me up and said 'There's this guy called Manuel Gutierrez who's just arrived from Spain. He's the real deal.' The minute he pulled those little wingtip dance shoes out of that bowling bag I knew he was."

For all the care in the details of the arrangements, Gable acknowledges that *No Straight Lines* is very lyric-driven, like all my albums." They're the picture and the music provides the frame. And powerful pictures they are, too, such as "Like a snake, my heart has split its skin/somewhere far away it blew" ("Came So Close To Loving You") or "The truth was never true enough/and you were never you enough" ("Sustenance").

It might have taken 12 years for the words and music to finally surface, but the wait is worthwhile. It's easy to understand why Steely Dan's Walter Becker called Bill Gable "a great songwriter [with a] marvelous ability to incorporate exotic musical elements and seemingly disparate influences." Not going in a straight line makes for a much richer journey.