



Vincent “Vinnie” Bell, 1932-2019

The Passing of a Recording Session Legend, Electric Guitar Inventor and Effects Innovator.

Dana Countryman
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An electric guitar legend has passed away. Vincent “Vinnie” Bell died in his sleep, just after midnight on October 3rd, 2019, in Utica, NY, according to his wife, Bonnie. He had been suffering from the effects of Alzheimer’s Disease for several years.

If you aren’t familiar with the name, “Vinnie Bell”, you certainly have heard his guitar on hit records from the ‘60s and ‘70s. He played guitar on recordings for artists as diverse such as The Four Seasons, Frank Sinatra, Dionne Warwick, Herman’s Hermits, Bing Crosby, The Cowsills, Perry Como, The Drifters, Bob Dylan, The Shangri-Las, Rupert Holmes, Jean-Jacques Perrey, and Quincy Jones.

As a “first-call” session guitarist, Vincent “Vinnie” Bell played on hundreds of commercials, and on scores of film soundtracks. His filmscore work ranged from “The Godfather”, to “The Devil in Miss Jones”, and even “The Muppet’s Christmas Carol”. In the very early 60’s, he started out as a member of the bands, The Ramrods, and The Gallahads. Shortly after that, he was briefly a member of the highly successful The Three Suns. After starting a family, he decided to only do session work, mostly working out of New York City, but also sometimes flying to Los Angeles for sessions, when producers there specifically requested him. It was not uncommon for Bell to play on 3-5 recording sessions a day, at the height of his success.

In 1965, Bell played electric guitar on Simon and Garfunkle's "The Sounds of Silence", a recording that actually helped launch their remarkable musical career. Throughout the years, Bell occasionally did live club and stage work with artists such as Peggy Lee, Sinatra, Barbra Streisand and others.

Besides being known for being a guitarist, Bell also helped re-invent the instrument. Working with Danelectro Guitars, Bell is credited in inventing the first electric 12-string guitar for them, as well as the Coral Electric Sitar (a cross between an Indian sitar, and the electric guitar). His electric sitar sound, (usually played by Bell himself, but sometimes by others) can be heard on hits by The Lemon Pipers' ("Green Tambourine"), B.J. Thomas' ("Hooked on a Feeling"), Freda Payne's ("Band of Gold"), and The Box Tops' ("Cry Like a Baby").

When he wasn't in the studio, he was in his home workshop, experimenting with electronics, and inventing his own unique guitar pedals. This was at a time when guitar pedals were not for sale, commercially. He pioneered the Wah-Wah pedal, and invented his own fuzztone pedals. By using these unique effects on recording sessions, Bell became in high demand by '60s record producers who were constantly looking for new sounds to feature on their records.

Again, working with with Nat Daniel, a most unique sound effect was devised by the team of the two men -- the strange "Watery" guitar sound. That particular sound (which is hard to describe, but sounds most similar to musical drops of water) was Vinnie's most jealously-guarded professional secret. The effect was only played in recording sessions by Bell himself, and can be heard on records by the Four Seasons ("Can't Take My Eyes Off You"), the Shangri-Las ("I Can Never Go Home Anymore"), to name just two hits. He played this "water" guitar sound in the early 70's on the song "Midnight Cowboy", which became a Top 40 hit for pianists Ferrante and Teicher. For that hit, he was awarded a Gold Record. It also won a Grammy Award for Best Instrumental Composition in 1971, while Bell was nominated for Best Instrumental Performance.

In addition to recording albums of his own, Bell's guitar work was admired by artists as diverse as Jimi Hendrix and Frank Zappa. Hendrix once called Bell at home to ask how he achieved his many unusual guitar effects. Hendrix told Bell that he loved his electric sitar sound and soon after, Bell personally supervised a custom left-handed electric sitar, made especially for Hendrix. In the '70s, Bell was personally requested to play on recording sessions for Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention, and in the 80's, for the band Anthrax.

In 2007, Vinnie Bell earned another Gold Record for his guitar work on the theme to David Lynch's "Twin Peaks". Bell worked on many filmscore sessions for Woody Allen's favorite film composer, Dick Hyman, and also for "Twin Peaks" composer Angelo Badalamenti.

Badalamenti says, "Vinnie and I were born and raised, a few blocks from each other in an Italian section of Bensonhurst- Brooklyn, and we went to the same Jr. High School. Vinnie played on my very first recording session, as well as just about every session I ever had. His unique contribution on Twin Peaks series, is beyond words. I loved Vinnie dearly."

Bell was voted Most Valuable Player on Electric Guitar seven times by the New York chapter of National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS), and was given their Emeritus award in the late 80's. By the '90s, he had played guitar or banjo in the Macy's annual New Year's Day Parade, for over 20 years.

On a personal note, I can tell you that Vinnie was one of the sweetest and most humble musicians I have ever met. We became fast friends after I interviewed him for a book I was researching on the life of French electronic music pioneer, Jean-Jacques Perrey. During that interview, we quickly hit it off as friends, and later would chat about music on the phone, regularly for hours, many, many times.

In 2004, Vinnie invited me to come visit him and his wife in New Jersey, and I spent a week as a guest in their house. During my visit there, I volunteered to create a web site for him, and he was actively involved in helping create the site. (<http://www.vinniebell.com>). A musician myself, Vinnie did me the great honor of playing guitar for me in a New Jersey recording studio. We recorded a song I had written especially for Vinnie, "Vinnie's Theme", (<https://youtu.be/aQ5OGZDO7T8>). It is probably the final time that Vinnie played both his "water" guitar and electric sitar in a recording session.

Vinnie had great stories about his musical adventures, which he shared with me. Unfortunately, for his own personal reasons, he would never agree to have his life story put into a biography, although I repeatedly begged him to do so. A few of these stories, however, are archived on his web site, and also in a fine book by Doug Tulloch, "Neptune Bound - The Ultimate Danelectro Guitar Guide".

I will miss Vinnie's stories and his sense of humor. He was a very loving guy, and during our conversations, he never failed to ask about my family. He always ended his phone conversations to me with a sincere, "*I love you guys!*"

Vinnie was truly one-of-a-kind, not only as a musician and inventor, but also as a dear friend.

Getting back to that "Water" guitar sound of Vinnie's, musicians have been in awe of that unique sound for many decades. As Vinnie's webmaster, I have been contacted many times, with people inquiring how he achieved that special sound. It was a proprietary secret that Vinnie kept from even his closest friends, even me. He was hounded time after time by guitar pedal manufacturers to sell them the secret, but he always steadfastly refused. Vinnie once recalled to me how Les Paul went to his grave, asking Vinnie what the secret to the water sound was.

Well, Vinnie kept the musical secret to himself to the very end, and it shall remain Vinnie's trademark secret.

Thank you, Vinnie for your friendship over the last 15 years, and for leaving behind such a treasure trove of great, unforgettable music.

I will really miss you, my friend.

And by the way, Vinnie, I love you, too.

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