

Wijambu – *I Think I Know That Song*

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The Recording

The entire album was recorded into a Boss BR600 8-track digital recorder. This device only allows two tracks to be recorded simultaneously; consequently, the original plan was to mic both guitars separately, pan the keyboards to one side of the PA output and mic that speaker, and mic the other PA speaker to pick up the electronic drums but place it off center to also pick up the bass amp. These four mics would first run into a 4-track Behringer powered mixer with its stereo output running into the BR600. With this system, all vocals would be overdubbed (as they were on The Wet Bats’ *La Raza de la Playa*).

Unfortunately, while sound-checking this setup, an audible hum could be heard through the BR600. It was isolated to the mixer stage because it disappeared when mics were plugged directly into the recorder. We tried switching off electric devices, changing cables and sockets, but the hum remained present. We even swapped the Behringer for a 4-track cassette recorder to no avail. The hum was about the volume of a snare rattle when an unplayed snare drum is in a room with other instruments. It probably could have been eliminated in post-production, but after a couple of hours of frustration, we decided to switch to a simpler setup.

The album was recorded through two Shure SM57 mics. One was positioned to pick up both guitar amps and the keyboard through the PA. The other picked up vocals through the PA, electronic drums played through an amp, and bass. Unlike our original plan, the vocals (with exceptions noted below) were recorded live with the band. When recording in stereo, the BR600 automatically pans each track all the way to the left and right. I did not adjust this when mixing down because the ambient nature of the recording had enough bleed over to each mic.

There are a couple of recording glitches. The overall recording is a bit bassy. (I suppose this is a by-product of listening to playback through headphones and computer desktop speakers.) I adjusted the EQ when mixing down, but depending on taste and the system you listen to the CD through, you may want to further adjust. On a few tracks the sound seems to surge and fade a bit. I believe this was caused by overwhelming a built-in limiter in the BR600. As the recording volume swelled, the limiter kicked in and off when it faded. (Ironically, this made the louder swells softer.) Finally, when the AC in the residence kicked on, it caused a hiccup in the recording. The only way to correct this would have been to rerecord. Of course, we could have rerecorded for any mistake on any track; however, we were more interested in having fun than creating a perfect recording. ([Return to Table of Contents](#))

The Song Selection

Normally, I bring some new material to a Wijambu session. This time, however, the Agog *Swarm!* CD used all the material I had saved up, and The Wet Bats cleaned out the germs of new ideas. By default this turned into a mainly cover song session.

On the first morning prior to moving any equipment, Geoffrey and I created a list of possible songs. This list was heavily augmented by the other guys throughout the two days and supplemented by some jams. Most (about ten) of the songs from the list that we eventually recorded were ones the band had either never played or that the **full** band had never played due to sessions where members were absent.

Usually someone in the band knew the song. If everyone knew the song, we’d do a quick run-through of the changes and record. If only one or two of us knew the song (or kind of knew it), we’d teach it to the others at low volume, run through the whole song once (sometimes reviewing parts going into/out of choruses and bridges multiple times), and record. If no one had the lyrics, Art would look them up on his iPhone. For songs we didn’t know how to play, he’d buy the original from iTunes, and we’d listen to it in the outdoor conversation pit and figure it out.

Our original working title was *Four Chords or Less*, but some songs we played had five (*or even more!*) chords, so I changed it to reflect both the recording experience and the experience of the listener. ([Return to Table of Contents](#))

Equipment

I played my Godin LG P90 through my Egnater Rebel 20 amp with my BBE 362 sonic maximizer and Electro Harmonix Holy Grail reverb always on through the effects loop. Occasionally I used my Alesis MicroVerb 4 for delay, Digitech EX7 for Univibe and fuzz, Digitech Whammy 2 for a detuned harmonizer, and Ernie Ball volume pedal. I also played my

Rogue electric sitar on some tracks. Armand played his Les Paul Standard through a customized Fender Princeton or Fender Deluxe, both with an added custom 1x12 cabinet, and his normal pedalboard, including a Dunlap Cry Baby Wah, a ProCo Rat, and an old Electro Harmonix Electric Mistress. We both played our Carvin acoustic/electrics (mine a C980T Jumbo and his a C750T Dreadnaught) through the PA (a Carvin system).

Geoffrey played his Danelectro bass through his Carvin BR515N amp. He occasionally used his standup acoustic/electric. I do not know his alto saxophone model.

Matt played his Roland electronic drums through his Peavey combo. He supplemented his kit with a couple of acoustic cymbals and floor tom. He played his beat-to-shit Ibanez through a Electro Harmonix Big Muff into Art's amp.

Art mostly sang into a Shure SM58. He played Lee Oskar harmonicas through a Shure Green Bullet into an Epiphone Valve Junior. He also played his Aspen acoustic/electric.

Thom played his Roland synthesizers (a Juno? and?) through the PA. I also do not know his alto saxophone model. ([Return to Table of Contents](#))

The Tracks

“After Midnight” (Cale)

We've covered this song a number of times, and we did it kind of as a break from learning new material. As in the past, the arrangement we used is based upon the one played by the ultra-cool Mr. Cale and Clapton at the latter's Crossroads Festival. I took the first solo and tried to emulate Cale's performance. Armand played the second solo and all the fills. ([Return to Table of Contents](#))

“She's about a Mover” (Sahm)

Another song the band has played before. Geoffrey apparently liked the sound Art got on The Wet Bats' "Exile on Manchester Blvd" where he did the vocals through his Green Bullet mic and amp. This was the second song he suggested that technique. It immediately seemed appropriate to the rest of us because the vocal and organ are the only focal points of the song, and the technique gives it an old-style affected tone. The backing vocals were through the PA. I sang "into the room" and was picked up by the SM57s on the PA. Armand and I encouraged Thom to keep turning up the organ; we felt it couldn't be too loud on the track. ([Return to Table of Contents](#))

“The Weight” (Robertson)

In the month prior to getting together, I happened to see *The Last Waltz* again and wanted to do this song. Through conversation with Geoffrey, I knew he had been listening to a live version by The New Riders of the Purple Sage. It was no surprise given our shared aesthetic that everyone else was quickly on board.

This was the first song we recorded, so we hadn't fully shifted to what would prove our method for most of the CD. After Armand straightened out some errors in the arrangement I had created from memory, we recorded the basic track with two acoustics, piano, bass, and drums, and we planned to overdub the vocals. It was immediately evident that timing out the vocal break at the end of each chorus while playing the basic track was going to be a problem; therefore, Art and Armand did a scratch vocal "into the room" to guide both the instrumental track and the later vocals. (You can hear that vocal occasionally surface during the verses.) We then divided up the five verses. It made sense for Art to take the Levon Helm role and sing verses one and five. I picked the "Crazy Chester" verse because my favorite voice in The Band is Rick Danko's. Geoffrey and Matt called dibs on the remaining two. After recording the vocals, Armand and Thom recorded an electric guitar and keyboard overdub. While not pronounced, it and the scratch vocal add a depth to the final track.

This recording method took more time than anticipated, and the band didn't enjoy sitting around idle while overdubs were recorded since we'd come to play. For the most part, we abandoned overdubs for the remainder of the session. ([Return to Table of Contents](#))

“Cuba Libre” (Wijambu)

During a break I asked Matt about a steel drum voice on his new Roland electronic drum kit. Thom quickly found a steel drum module on his synthesizer and started noodling. The rest of us joined in; I grabbed my electric sitar, and Armand channeled Ry Cooder. The finish ala "Mexico" was a big laugh. ([Return to Table of Contents](#))

“Perfectly Good Guitar” (Hiatt)

Armand suggested this one and evidently plays it in one of his bands. The song is composed of a few straightforward open voiced chords, but its apparent simplicity is deceptive because in almost every line the chords are played in a different order. Consequently, it took a good deal longer than expected for everyone to get comfortable enough to record.

Armand stressed we should play quietly for the final verse, and it was here that Geoffrey suggested Art sing through his harmonica mic and amp. While loud in the room, that vocal did not pick up well on the recording, so Art did an overdub of that verse. The chorus starts off a bit faded because Art was juggling the two mics live trying to avoid a squeal of take-ending unmusical feedback. After the intensity of learning those changes (perhaps accentuated by all the tequila) we played an easy one we all knew next: "She's about a Mover." Geoffrey suggested we should use the same technique for Art's entire vocal on that song. ([Return to Table of Contents](#))

“House of the Rising Sun 1 & 2” (traditional)

While Wijambu had played this song, we’d never played it together. The first time we played it was at the *Jam Jam Jam* sessions, and Thom was absent. The next time we got together Art had a debilitating back injury and couldn’t make it. So this was the first time we had both Art’s excellent vocal (how does he sing like that without damaging an internal organ?) and Thom’s organ (pun intended).

After the initial run through of the song, I launched into the sped up version. Everyone agreed the most Wijambu thing to do would be to play it that way on the track, so we did. Armand went full blitzkrieg for the entire fast version, but between the BR600’s limiter and standing between the mic and his amp, he is only clear at times. (Note: The last thing you can hear on the fade-out is Thom apologizing for his clam in the second solo.) ([Return to Table of Contents](#))

“Tonight I’ll Be Staying Here With You” (Dylan)

Geoffrey had recently seen Dylan in concert, so we had a number of his songs on our original list. This was the only one we actually played, however. Like “House of the Rising Sun,” we had played this without Art and with Geoff, Armand, and I sharing the vocal duties. (It appears on the Wijambu EP *2 for the Road*.) ([Return to Table of Contents](#))

“Made My Throat Raw” (Greb)

This song is one of four improvisations (two of which appear on the CD) done after Armand and Thom called it a night, and Art, Geoffrey, Matt, and I continued to finish the tequila and chase it with Labatt’s Blue. We just turned the SM57s toward Art and I, and we played acoustically while Geoffrey played stand-up bass, and Matt turned down the volume on his kit. He was thrilled to be able to play hard but quiet, and to use a thunder and rain voice on two of his sensors. I just love a good one chord vamp. The title is from something Art said at the end. ([Return to Table of Contents](#))

“Rain” (Lennon & McCartney)

Like Dylan, a number of Beatles songs were on our original list, but this was the only one recorded. I played electric sitar and part of my job was to hit that suspended C chord in the chorus. Unfortunately, a hollow plastic instrument with 13 sympathetic strings doesn’t have the sustain to really ring out. Art was getting fatigued, so we tried to help his vocal on the chorus with some overdubs from him, Thom, Matt, and me. Unlike the vocals on “The Weight,” however, we sang into the SM57s not the SM58s. The more focused field of the former meant that the overdubs are only occasionally clearly audible. In spite of this, they do subtly thicken the vocal (especially Art doubling his own voice) and improved the track.

I was astounded to find out Matt didn’t know the drum part to this song. I always considered this and “Tomorrow Never Knows” to be my favorite things Ringo did (not that break on the *Abbey Road* suite). My favorite part of the track is Geoffrey doing the Paul bass part, which is heard clearest on the outro. ([Return to Table of Contents](#))

“Let’s Work Together” (Harrison)

A nice, straight-ahead three chord song done closer to the original Canned Heat than the current television commercial versions. Armand takes the lead vocal with Art helping on the choruses. ([Return to Table of Contents](#))

“Camel-Toe-Jam” (Wijambu)

During an extended break the first night, we sat in the outdoor conversation pit, which is the heart of the Thommy Momma’s compound, and listened to *Chunga’s Revenge*. While listening to the title track, we discussed other great sax solos on Zappa records. (The title of this track was a pun Art authored while we talked about “It Must Be a Camel.”) The next day the saxes were broken out. (Geoffrey’s son swiped his strap, so he had to prop his sax on a chair to play.) Matt really enjoyed playing guitar during the sessions for The Wet Bats’ *La Raza de la Playa*, and jumped at the opportunity to play here. Armand plugged in his bass, and so Matt wouldn’t get lost, he played the same riff throughout. I used my Ebow and Alesis MicroVerb delay setting in conjunction with my volume pedal to produce repeating swells. These were picked up by Thom and Geoff, and the saxes and my guitar began swirling around each other. I know the three of us were thinking Zappa, and Armand was definitely trying to emulate Tom Fowler on the bass. Matt doesn’t have the guitar chops to do anything Zappa-esque, so he stayed in Neil Young territory. I don’t know what Art was thinking on the drums, especially when he began wailing on the acoustic crash cymbal toward the end. ([Return to Table of Contents](#))

“Werewolves of London” (Zevon)

Whenever fishing with Geoffrey and he takes out his iPod to play some tunes, I always hear some Warren Zevon, so I knew he’d get a kick out of doing this song. In addition, I’m always looking for ways to take full advantage of Thom’s piano. The difficult thing about this song is that it is just three chords over and over without any variation. I was worried about the take right after the initial run through because Art’s werewolf howls were not cutting it. However, once the record button was lit, howl he did. Great slide throughout by Armand. ([Return to Table of Contents](#))

“Picnic at Grover’s Mill” (Johnson)

Coming back from dinner break, Art, Geoff, and I could hear the others farting around, and we decided to come back in and just pick up percussion stuff and play. That is what we did. Thom got writing credit because we were all following his lead. (What is the significance of Grover’s Mill, by the way? Sound familiar?) ([Return to Table of Contents](#))

“Spirit in the Sky” (Greenbaum)

When recording Norman Greenbaum’s one hit wonder fuzzed freak out, Armand’s and my roles were dictated by equipment. I didn’t bring a guitar with separate volume controls for each pickup while Armand had his Les Paul;

therefore, he had to do the pickup selector flipping trick, and I had to play the fuzz part. I tried using my amp's gain, but I couldn't get it to sound right. Then I remembered a fuzz was one of the distortion settings on my Digitech EX7 pedal. (I forgot Matt had a Big Muff.) I added a touch of the detune setting on my Whammy to give it a hint of chorus and had a reasonable tone. We were going to add a high vocal later, in addition to Armand's live backing vocal, but none of us could sing that high without sounding like an Edith Bunker imitation, so we left it as is. I love Matt's electronic drum hand claps. ([Return to Table of Contents](#))

“Glendale Train” (Dawson)

When discussing the arrangement for “The Weight,” Geoffrey brought up the NRPS version. This triggered Armand to begin urging us to do “Glendale Train.” Every break he'd bring it up, and he and Geoff would sing the chorus. Eventually, we all agreed and were glad we did. Not only does the song provide a nice change from our usual overall genre, but it gave both Art and Matt a chance to do their train things on their respective instruments. ([Return to Table of Contents](#))

“Salt of the Earth” (Jagger & Richards)

We knew we wanted to do some Stones and to go with a less obvious choice. I pushed for this song from the start, and Armand, also a big Keef fan, agreed. On an earlier song (Dylan, I believe) Armand asked if I had a heavy pick, and I gave him a .88 I had out and played with a .71. Later, while playing this song at full volume, I realized I forgot to take out another .88; consequently, I couldn't make my low E boom like I wanted it to on my jumbo. (I believe Jerry Garcia once pointed out that changing picks is the quickest way to change the EQ of your guitar.) Art and Armand shared the vocal. ([Return to Table of Contents](#))

“Pretty Far” (Meneses)

“Salt of the Earth” would have been a logical place to end the CD (hey: it worked for *Beggar's Banquet!*); I chose another track. This song (variously known as “The Chicken Song” or “Art's Chicken Thing”) has been around for decades, and after Art played and sang it in the conversation pit during a break, he, Geoff, Matt, and I recorded it during our late night less than sober finish to day one. The song gave Matt a chance to play drums like a tractor, which he loves to do. I think it makes a more Wijambu ending to the CD. ([Return to Table of Contents](#))

I believe this CD is of higher fidelity than most earlier Wijambu recordings, but not because I was at the helm this time out rather than Matt. Since the diaspora of Wijambu, we play together so seldom that when we do get together we care more about simply playing and having a good time than recording quality. (We're pretty much recording for ourselves, anyway.) The recordings have only been a vehicle to document the occasion. Rather, what improved the quality of this CD is that this time we just paid a little more attention to detail in the recording process which had a big pay-off in the result.

Lastly, although we've always done some covers, Wijambu is not and never will be a cover band. If we were actively seeking gigs (instead of being strung out over more than 500 linear miles of territory), we might emphasize covers more to get hired. We have always been interested in creating music – nothing more or less – and this dictates creation on every level. This CD, like the others, documents a point in time, a point when we chose to mostly play music other than our own for the fun of it.

Jeffery Greb, 2011