



Photo by Melodie McDaniel

Van Hunt: Make No Small Plans

by Dan Marek

Shaking the foundations of classic soul with a fresh feel that's been compared to everyone from Prince to Curtis Mayfield, Van Hunt's self-titled debut has the shimmer of an album recorded over 30 years ago with love songs that could be taken as bitter and sardonic — or flattering with sexual overtones — that will make you melt.

With tracks like "Down Here in Hell (With You)" jetting lyrics like, "What would I do if we were perfect / Where would I go for disappointment / Love without pain / Would leave me wondering why I stay," and beautiful odes like "What Can I Say," Hunt has taken the narrow-minded genre of neo-soul and exploded the concept to match the whole-house environment that inspired him as a child.

Gaining critical acclaim right out of the gates for the album he self-produced, self-wrote and played most of the instruments on (which was released by Capitol Records in February), Hunt has begun a path he hopes will keep him busy on a daily basis for 30-plus years to come.

Chicago Innerview recently talked to Hunt about his intentions, the similarities that he sees between punk and soul, music's connection to seedy memories of his past and grand visions for his future.

CI: Your first memory of music making sense actually came pret-

ty early on, but had a not-so average connection with an underground or seedy side that your father was into, right?

VH: Well you know how those cats get together playin' cards, doin' drinks, whatever, but there was always music in the background and that was just the first time I made the connection from the music to the things that they were doing. I don't know, the two things always just seemed to go together. Those are still things that inspire me. Basically I like making songs for people on the street. Something for them to smoke to, listen to, have sex to or whatever.

CI: So it was your intention to make the album bleed sexual overtones then?

VH: Well, not...not like in a Prince kind away, like naughty, but just something that was definitely sensuous.

CI: So what does [your father] think now? I mean like the bio and every single article I've seen on you starts out "his father was a pimp and a painter." Is he cool with that?

VH: (*Laughs*) Well you know, he is, but he also wants people to know that he raised two kids on his own [and that] he's been married for like 20 years now. He taught me how to be a gentleman. My mother actually raised me, so the things I got from him were definitely during a specific time period of my childhood.

(Continued on Page 9)

HUNT'S INNER VIEW
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CI: Was it always your intention to write, produce and play as many of the instruments as you could?

VH: I just didn't think that a band was possible, 'cause at the time, '99 and 2000, there weren't any bands in the R&B, soul, even on the pop side, nobody black in bands — except for Lenny Kravitz and he had already been doing it for 10, 11 years. I just didn't think there would be anybody else. And trying to get musicians to come and play for free, trying to play music that no one had really heard in 20 to 30 years — it was just easier to play the stuff myself, to be honest.

CI: I heard that "Anything to Get Your Attention" started out as a punk song. Was it like a Sex Pistols punk or was it like a soul punk?

VH: No, it was more like a Stooges or even a glam punk, like early Prince. I mean, we are probably as much of an early punk band as we are a soul band. To me they are very similar. I listen to Iggy Pop and the Stooges like I listen to the Isley Brothers — they both move me equally. I never even noticed the difference until other people started lookin' at my record collection and were like, 'man this is kinda eclectic.' But to me Stooges, Bowie, Curtis Mayfield, Isley Brothers, it was all kind of soulful to me. We go back and forth, especially live.

CI: I know you're not the biggest fan of the 'neo-soul' classification. Do you think your next project will steer away from that?

VH: No, I won't steer away from anything man. I will certainly do what I'm feeling and allowing that to come out. Having it go through the whole analysis that major labels go through, rightfully so, I mean they're spending a lot of money. So I knew that my first project would have some compromises on it, but to be honest I really liked it. It's not like somebody had a gun up to my head, but the next project I think I will have the final say so, at least I hope if we're successful enough with this. It will still be what it is, it will still be me — there will still be a whole lot of funk in there, a whole lot of blues.

CI: Speaking of blues and the whole Chicago tip, you said you were a big fan of the Chess recordings?

VH: Yeah, well particularly Willie Dixon. He was someone who I loved. Howling Wolf, Muddy Waters, those happened to be two of my favorite singers and when I found out they were all on Chess, I was like, 'wow.' The Willie Dixon song, the Koko Taylor version of 'Wang Dang Doodle,' it don't get much funkier than that. The recording of that is just sick. Woo...that tears me up man.

CI: Do you think that you are going to keep playing all the instruments and producing for your entire career?

VH: Well after I finished the first record I was like, 'hell no'. It's way too much work. But now that I'm getting back into the writing process again, I mean, it's actually just something you can't help. I'm way too impatient. Once I'm at the point where I'm ready to lay it down, I have to lay it down

right then and there. Once I'm laying down chords and I hear a low frequency and I'll start laying down bass and then it's pretty much done. But I'm open. That's why I enjoy having bold people around me who will tell me the truth, because I'm open to suggestion all the way. So if you come in and you don't like something, man, play something better. It doesn't matter to me whose idea it is, just as long as the track gets better. I just want everybody to have a smile on their face when we walk out of the studio and we're on our way to the bar. I wanna feel good.

CI: What have you thought about this whole thing with the press coming after you, playing shows all over the place, you're [being] on 'Conan O'Brien'...?

VH: Well I want there to be tons of press. Right now, there are like hundreds of pounds of press, like tons, but I want tons of press and want to play a show somewhere everyday, maybe two shows, that's where I wanna be. I'm still not busy enough. Man, I was made for this. Look at somebody like Prince who's still doing two or three shows a day and rehearsing five days a week. That cat is 45-46 years old and he's already given 25 years to the business and some incredible albums. I got a lot of work ahead of me.

CI: So is Prince one of your biggest influences?

VH: Oh yeah. The people I consider the ones who are closest to me in terms of what I want from my career, you could go right down the line [are] Prince, Sly Stone, and Ray Charles. And all three of them are about equal distance in terms of years and also, they just rode the fence — they did a little bit of everything. You can definitely tell an indelible print in black music before them and after them. There was definitely an impact they had on the scene, and I want to be that next person.

Van Hunt will play at the Double Door April 6.

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