

Jon Hassell - Vernal Equinox (1977)

Written by bluesever

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1. *Toucan Ocean* 2. *Viva Shona* 3. *Hex* 4. *Blues Nile* 5. *Vernal Equinox* 6. *Caracas Night*
September 11, 1975 Drone - Synthesizer Miguel Frasconi - Bells, Claves Jon Hassell - Fender Rhodes, Piano, Primary Artist, Producer, Trumpet David Rosenboom - Bells, Drums, Dumbek, Engineer, Maracas Mbira, Rattle, Rattles, Tabla Naná Vasconcelos - Bells, Congas, Shaker, Shakuhachi, Talking Drum William Winant - Kanjira, Rattle, Rattles

Recorded in 1976 at the York University Electronic Media Studios in Toronto, Ontario, *Vernal Equinox* is Jon Hassell's first recording as a solo artist and sets the stage for his then-emerging career as a trumpeter, composer and musical visionary. "Toucan Ocean" opens the album with two gently swaying chords and delicate layers of percussion that provide a cushion upon which Hassell unfurls long, winding melodic shapes. His trumpet is sent through echo and an envelope filter, producing a stereo auto-wah-wah effect. "Viva Shona" features accompaniment by mbira, subtle polyrhythmic layers of percussion, and the distant calling of birds. Again filtered through echo, Hassell's gliding trumpet lines sound remarkably vocal. "Hex" features a bubbling, filtered electric bass part with a denser web of percussion. From his horn, Hassell elicits moans and sighs that are at first unaffected and later filtered. "Blues Nile" is a long, blue moan. Hassell's breathy, multi-tracked trumpet lines call and respond to one another, weaving a web of deep calm over an ever-present drone. This track clearly points the way to his later work with Brian Eno, in particular, their "Charm Over Burundi Sky." On the title track, Hassell's "kirana" trumpet style is in full bloom as he dialogs with the percussion. Hassell's most elegant melodicism blossoms forth here, and his unaffected horn often sounds disarmingly flute-like. The influences of his study of raga with Pandit Pran Nath are clearly discernible in the curvaceous melodic lines and overall sense of meditative calm within harmonic stasis. Throughout the album, percussionists Naná Vasconcelos and David Rosenboom add subtle, supple grooves and colors. "Caracas Night September 11, 1975" is a beautiful field recording featuring Hassell's plaintive trumpet commentary, subtle percussion interjections, and the sound of caracas humming and buzzing in the background. The first several tracks of *Vernal Equinox* bear the imprint of '70s-period Miles Davis, in particular the quiet ambience of "He Loved Him Madly" and parallel passages from *Agharta*. The envelope filter on Hassell's horn similarly

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draws a reference to Davis' use of the wah-wah pedal from that time. Nonetheless, in 1976, Vernal Equinox was remarkably unique and ahead of its time, and sowed the seeds of Hassell's influential Fourth World aesthetic, which he would continue to develop and refine. Decades after its release, Vernal Equinox still provides an enchanting and entirely contemporary listening experience. ---Mark Kirschenmann, Rovi

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