

Against Empire

Bill Laswell Interview (9/11/20) by David Kopacz (edited from a recorded phone call)



Bill Laswell, photo by Yoko Yamabe

Dave: How's it going, Bill?

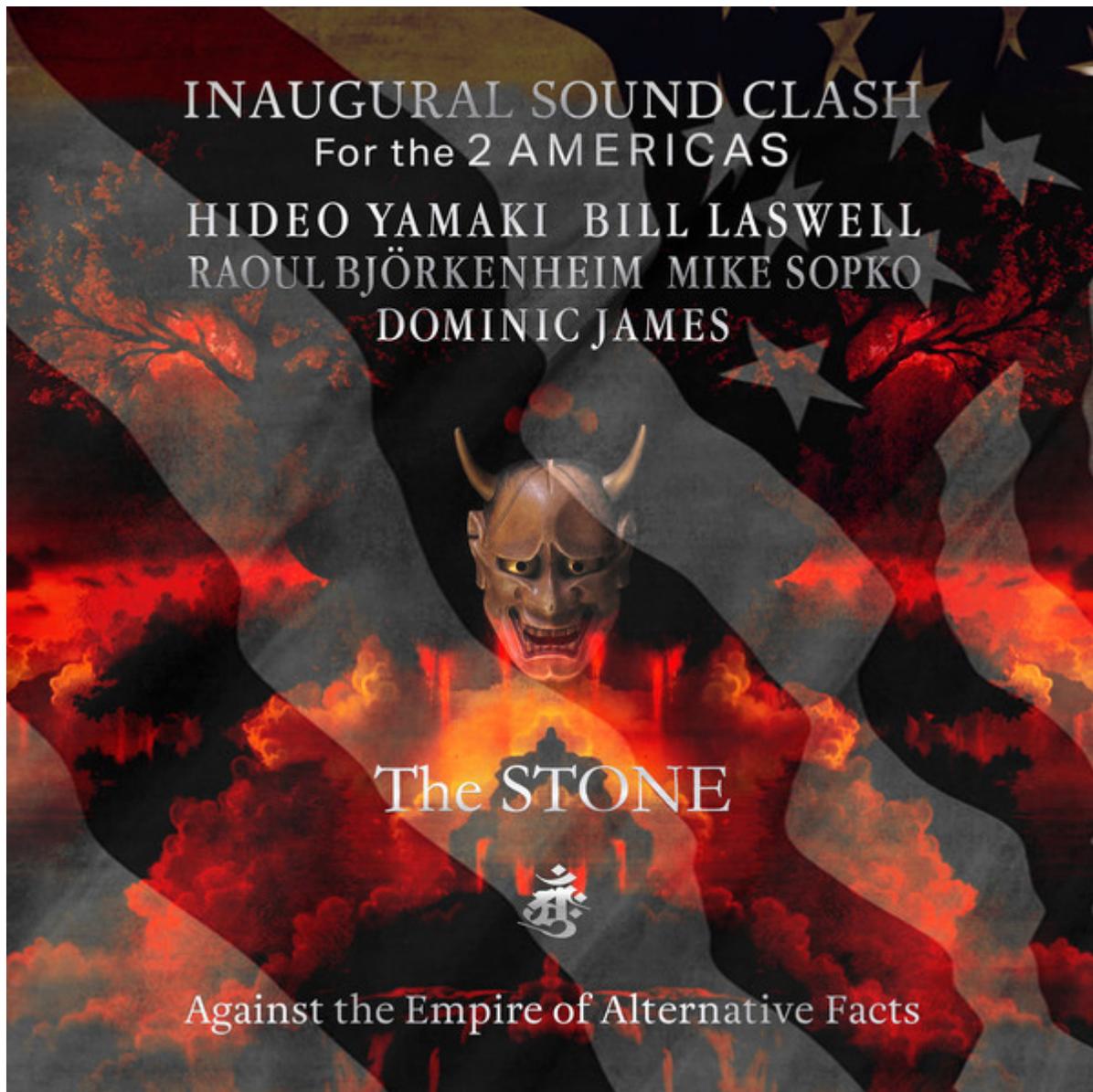
Bill: Nothing much is going. With this virus I had to cancel all of my European tour. Musicians rely on playing out and nothing is happening, nothing is going.

D: I hadn't planned this, but we're talking today on the anniversary of 9/11 – were you living in New York City then?

B: I was, and I was supposed to be flying to Seattle. I had done a lot of recordings with William S. Burroughs and the Seattle Art Museum wanted to do some kind of project, I wasn't sure exactly what they wanted to do. The main reason I was going to Seattle was to meet Paul Allan at the Jimi Hendrix museum. We missed our flight and I was in a hotel in San Diego. I went downstairs around 6 AM to get ready and everyone was watching TV and the first plane had already hit the tower. While I was watching the second plane hit the second tower and

we knew something was going on. Needless to say, there were no more flights going that day.

We ended up renting a car and driving up to San Francisco and spending a week there. It was strange, nobody seemed that upset about it in San Francisco, I mean, they were talking about it, but I couldn't reach anyone in New York for a couple days and I didn't know what was happening. We never did get to Seattle and after a week, we went back to New York. There were about 3,000 people who died on 9/11 – now we are getting close to 200,000 dead from Covid! [as of 10/26/20 this is now over 225,000]



D: I wanted to do a follow-up interview with you around the great titles of your recent albums, *Against the Empire of Alternative Facts* and *Against Empire*. How do you see these titles and the role of music as a form of protest or revolution against what is happening?

B: I've always seen music that way – there is a kind of rebel music and there is conservative pop music. I've always seen that you can express a certain sound that represents a sensibility, where you stand. At certain times it is more relevant than other times. In these times you need revolutionary music, you need rebel music, you need to make your statement with sound. I think it is totally necessary. I think people are out there, they are trying the best they can.

D: You have these two related titles *Against the Empire of Alternative Facts* by Inaugural Sound Clash (for the Two Americas) with Hideo Yamaki, yourself, Raoul Björkenheim, Mike Sopko, and Dominic James. Then you also have your latest album *Against Empire* with Pharoah Sanders, Herbie Hancock, Peter Apfelbaum, Jerry Marotta, Chad Smith, Hideo Yamaki, Satoyasu Shomura, and Adam Rudolph.

B: Oh yeah, that Inaugural Sound Clash was with three guitars. I think it was the night of the inauguration (January 20, 2017) when we played at the Stone. That was all improv.



Bill Laswell at The Stone, photo by Yoko Yamabe

Philip K. Dick

D: This idea of *Against Empire* reminds me of the Philip K. Dick's *Radio Free Albemuth* – about an American fascist dictator, Ferris F. Fremont and the resistance to him through music. I know you had used some other Philip K. Dick titles for albums, *Valis I & Valis II*. Is he an influence on you?

B: I have a lot of his books. I like him. One I read was just the story of his life, which was pretty fascinating. He had a bizarre history and I always followed his writing. I think we had a couple of titles I got from him.

The Leader of American Empire

D: What are your thoughts on this leader of the American Empire? How does he get people to follow him? Is he hypnotizing them? If you listen to the meaning of his words they don't make any sense, but if you listen to the rhythm and repetition and the odd pauses – I just wonder about if people are getting hypnotized, like Hitler had odd speech patterns.

B: I think with Trump a lot of it is so random, it is in the moment and he just comes out blazing. He was raised that way, anything that appeared weak just wasn't tolerated. I think he is so random, I think they called it malignant narcissism that is a good description. There is definitely something going on that has the same effect as a spell or a curse or magic moment– but it is not that. He is not trying to be evil, it just comes out that way. He is not a smart guy, but he figured out how to make money. In some ways he is a bully, I think he is probably weak. I think he is probably a coward, but he intimidates people in a way they are not used to. He's an entertainer, those crowds don't have fun like that at a Joe Biden rally. He is going to entertain the crowds and talk bad about everyone and they just eat it up. He can honestly do anything and they'll back him up. They don't even know why.

There is a kind of paranormal something going on how of how he just does whatever he wants and he just keeps going. Imagine if he wins, he is going to be a nightmare, that's scary. In our lifetime, I don't know what is coming, but we certainly have never seen anything like this and then you throw in murders, and protests, and the pandemic, it's incredible.

D: The president does a lot of improv with just off the cuff random things. You use improv a lot in your work. You are comfortable going into the dark and coming out with something creative. Joseph Rael, who I work with says, "All the best ideas are in the dark." We've got Trump who is going into the dark and bringing out hatred instead of creativity. What are your thoughts on the difference between what he is doing and going into the dark and bringing back creativity into the world?

B: Its experience, its intuition, and its intense if you really want to keep a grip on things. I think the ability comes from intuition and a lot of experience. There are magical qualities throughout all that, but nothing to do with Trump. I think when he goes into the dark his eyes are closed – I don't think he knows he's going into the dark, he's blundering through everything and top it off with some nasty remarks and comedy and insults – that's entertainment and reality TV. He's always been this kind of show business character, like a clown of some kind, a dangerous clown. And the dangerous clown, if he wins, I foresee something being extremely different in this country. You have an enormous amount of people who have the wrong intentions and for the most part they are armed.

D: For the strengthening of the totalitarian base or project, you need: a paramilitary – a bunch of people with guns who show up wherever the president tells them to go; a federal police force that he threatens to send out to "liberal cities," "anarchist cities;" stacked courts; calling the press "the enemy of the people;" undermining trust in public institutions and democracy

– it just seems like more and more of the stage is being set to move from populism, to totalitarianism, and to fascism. Are we in a fascist crisis now?

B: We're not quite yet in a total fascist situation, but it is really moving in that direction. Some people might say we're there, but maybe not quite yet.

D: It seems like uncharted waters here, I've struggled with this – is it fascism yet? Is there a clear demarcation, if you are on the spectrum, where do you start to call it fascism? Is it when people start getting locked up, or when people get killed?

B: I think with the election, if he gets in then we'll be able to say we're officially fascist state. I think there is going to be a lot of death. Already the pandemic is killing people every day.

These are quite the times, but I feel actually really good about the music. I miss working with people, I miss the concerts in Europe and Japan, I don't miss the travel, the airports. The traveling almost killed me. It took me my whole life, but I finally figured out how important sleep is.

I've got a studio in West Orange, New Jersey. I haven't had much income. Fortunately, I still get royalties and lately a lot of remix stuff which I like to do. I'm just starting this label with 8-10 projects.

D: What is the label?

B: MOD Reloaded, the original label was called Method of Defiance Technologies. I'm optimistic. It is a miracle we are able to release records. I'm grateful for that.



D: The name there, Method of Defiance and you've got Against Empire – there is a lot of protest in those names.

B: Yes, there is, and it is meant to be, and I think it always was. I never bought into the whole success story or career. You talk to somebody like Santana, he's always telling me, "You need a hit song, like Light my Fire." I think, man Light my Fire, that was over 50 years ago. I know this guy who is 92 and he is doing new things all the time. It is possible to really feel like you are changing things and moving things, even if it is a small level. A small level for me can even be more fulfilling.

D: With the album, *Against Empire*, there was so much that sounded so familiar and archetypal and also was new, so it felt like it circled back and picked something up, like it picked up where Miles Davis' *In A Silent Way* left off.



B: I don't think you can really do anything new that is really great unless you maintain a certain amount of roots. Nothing runs with references, like where you say, that reminds me of Miles Davis, that reminds me of Ornette Coleman, Don Cherry. I know that the record has that, and it is in there, but I also feel the sounds and the recording, we can say production, has that other element that brings in something that is very fresh sounding, and at the same time I hear Ornette and all those references.

I'm in the middle of Miles Davis reconstruction, I would never call it a remix, it's a real production. I'm half-way there, but I think that is going to have that same kind of quality. The majority of recording from '74, but it sounds like something that would come out 10 years from now. I think that is going to continue that duality where you have the old and the new, and in the middle, all moving in the same language. I feel that is going to continue for me for awhile before something blocks it. We are getting blocked on all sides, so it could happen.

D: For me one of the formative things coming up, I was in the post-punk, new wave era, but punk rock was a formative part of shaping my politics, my world-view, and my sense of justice and righteousness. Punk gave me a place to put my outrage during the Regan/Bush years. I wondered what was punk rock to you? When you have these names like Against Empire and Method of Defiance, they sound very punk rock.

B: Punk rock didn't really explode until I moved to New York City. Where I was before that, you'd read about Sex Pistols or the Clash, but it hadn't really happened in America. I got lucky when I moved to New York I met the people at CBGBs and I got to see all these bands. It was a big influence, not so much music, but the attitude, a way of not agreeing with established music. It had a profound damage to disco and bad pop music. It was a kind of a hygiene for music. It helped me to see – I related it almost to free jazz. At the time that punk rock was really happening in New York, at exactly that same time there was a loft scene of free jazz where you would have Sam Rivers, or everybody – there was the *Environ* space. I always made the connection between the punk rock scene and free jazz. It never really connected musically. I believe it had more to do with what both movements were against – complacency, repetition, musicians copying other musicians, the whole pop scene, the fashion of it. It seems to me what they had in common was what they were both against.

D: Do we need a punk rock revival?

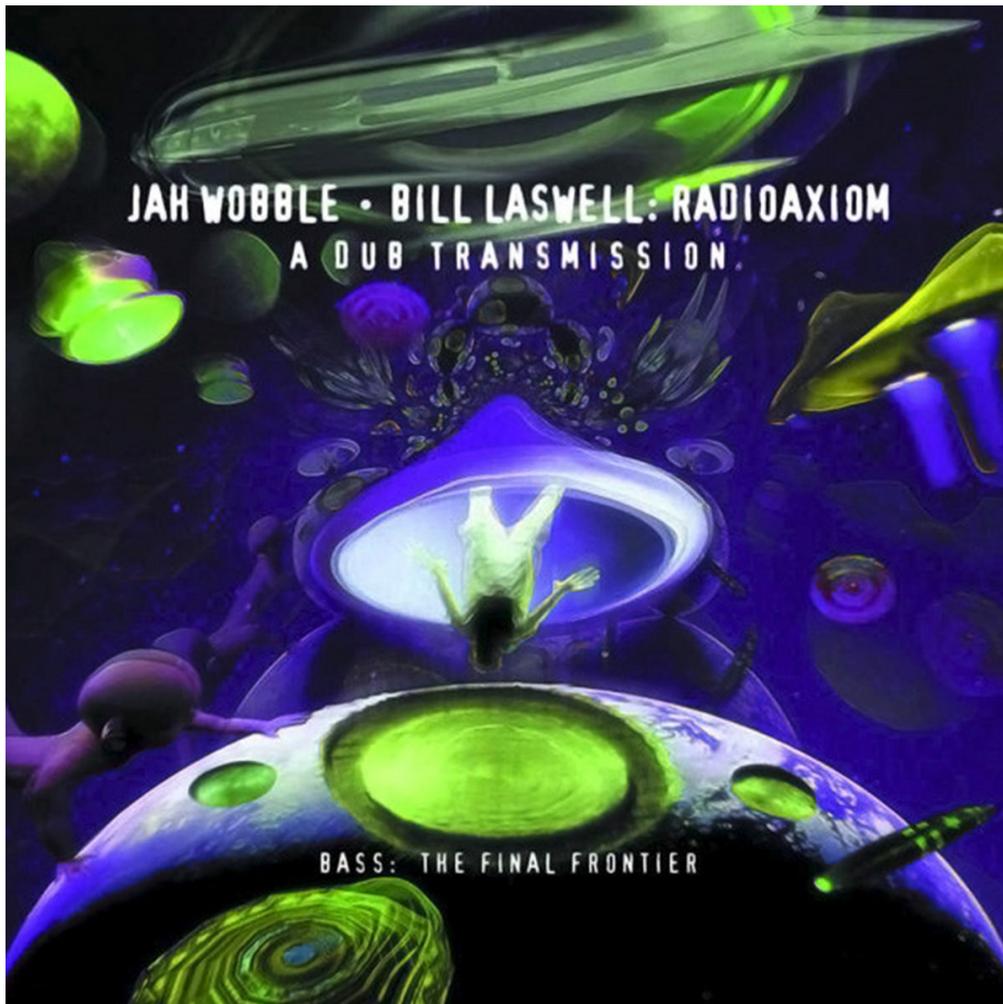
B: We need a revival of some kind, attitude for sure, musically, I'm not so sure.

If you look at John Lydon, he was Johnny Rotten then. he was at one time very important. I used to argue with him a lot. We did one record that was very significant [Public Image Limited's *Album*, 1986]. That was really a fusion of all kinds of things: Lee Scratch Perry, electric Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman, South African music, Metal, there were those connections. No one has ever really written a lot about that, those connections or how deep it goes. I could have made another record with him, but it is too late now.

D: And now Joe Strummer's dead.

B: He was actually for real. It's too bad about him. I knew a promoter in Japan who used to book him as a DJ and he was playing a lot of my stuff. I regret I never spoke to him. I saw the Clash and I think they were pretty good, everybody did their thing. I always thought that Strummer was the real thing.

D: Can you say something about your ideas around *transmission*? You've used that word in albums and songs. When we talked in 2017 you spoke about transmission. Is Trump on some kind of transmission?



B: I use that all the time. I used to use *transmutation*, also. Transmission just means channeling and delivering something by a slightly different method, not logical. It comes from the unknown. It is transferred from a place where you can see it, or feel it, or hear it more obviously. Transmission is what Castaneda calls the Nagual. It is not the known universe; it is the unknown. To make that passage you have to travel to make a transmission – it is hard to explain, probably it shouldn't be explained.

D: What do you think about cultural crisis and transmission – is it easier or harder to access transmission during crisis?

B: I think it is just opening the door and receiving it, whether it is sound, or art, or information, or culture. It is not a jam session. Transmission carries a real mystery to it, some kind of secret brought in. It is the secret information broadcast, the emergency network.

D: Is Trump on some kind of transmission or is it something different?

B No, I don't think so. He's a mystery, definitely fascinating. He is a terrible person, no one could be more selfish, no one could be more about himself. I'm sure the racism runs deep in his family. There are only a few families that control the world, that's what the so-called conspiracy theorists call the New World Order and even goes back to the Illuminati. All these things are very in the dark, talk about being in the dark – that is for real dark, but it connects, it doesn't connect to Trump, but there is some magic there, the mysticism, there is the Nagual – Trump isn't like any of that, he is right out in plain sight. He has a lot in common with someone like Kanye West – you can't tell him anything. They just talk through everything and it's all done with ego, not with compassion – never that. Trump is just *barely* smart enough to know when to move on after he says a bunch of stupid stuff, there is certainly going to be more stupid stuff, but it is going to be different stupid stuff. He has a way of wearing you down. He seems to have an incredible amount of energy for someone who is not in good shape, he eats junk food, but somehow he manages to muster this energy. I've never seen him tired, I guess he is 74, or 73, people usually slow down, but he's not. He is starting to walk a little strange, I know he is not healthy.

D: He is like a boulder rolling down a hill, it seems like he just picks up speed.

B He is actually like a boulder rolling up the hill! It is on that level.

D: I read something that said he is both the president who has lied the most, but he paradoxically the president who tells truth the most because he says exactly what he is going to try to do, but he is lying all the time.

B: But remember, he does tell you what he is going to do, but majority of time doesn't do it, you know, like right in the beginning, "We're going to build a wall and Mexico is going to pay for it." Now he is saying, "America is being great, we are rounding the curve on the virus." We haven't even peaked! We haven't even peaked on the first wave! I mean 192,000 people dead – no other country is even close to that! It is not going anywhere. He is really jealous of doctors, scientists – because they have a method, a way that they work, they do something, there is a method to what they do.

D: How do you, personally, collectively – what is your advice for musicians and creative people and just people in general? Where do you find hope in all this? What is *Against Empire*, what does it mean to be *Against Empire*?

B: Well, there is so much out there that I consider to be empire: people who give up, people who give in, people who are money driven.

As far as musicians a lot of people are dependent on playing live and they are not going to be playing live, so what do they do? My advice to people who make records is that you have to be more autonomous, you have to create your own system, your own space, your own environment, your own theory of how you develop languages with people, especially with improvisation. It can be exciting in a way. I feel really good about all the things I'm doing and

I feel good about all the things I've done. I certainly see hope in everything. You have to be stronger, and as you get older, that is a challenge. You have to hold on to the idea that you have to get through something, you have to be able to get around the big problems. I have to say I've been really lucky, it is not just luck, of course, there is a lot of work.

I'm not sure the schools are teaching so much about music. They are teaching how to use the systems and instruments as important tools, but I'm not sure they are teaching the mystery. Without the mystery you cannot be original.



Bill Laswell, photo by Toshiya Suzuki

D: I think that is a problem in a lot of fields, in medicine there is this huge pressure to just be a technician, to have things regimented and protocolled and not to use your innate intelligence or compassionate humanity. I hear you saying that the schools are teaching how to be musical technicians but not really a creative human being.

B: I don't think you can teach that. If you are exposed to certain things early on or certain people or witness certain events, you learn it. For me I always thought, when you are younger, you really start to notice, start to get influenced, or even overwhelmed by certain statements that artists make. Most of all, you have to be *available*. You don't decide. I believe you just stand up a little taller when the hook comes down or whatever it is that moves us and carries us to the next level, into that other space. You have to be available to let that happen to you. It is from that space that you have to expand it. The transmission is coming from another space. You have to be brought to that space either out of necessity or a random error that

makes an entire movement. And that is where my hope is in those mysteries. You can experience that all the time, the unknown, the Nagual. If you can hold on to that, there is always some kind of hope – you can generate, create something, it feels good.

D: Well, any other thoughts on looping this together with 9/11, Method of Defiance, Against Empire, the pandemic, and Trump – the whole catastrophe?

B: That is a universe of negativity, all that. I'm not saying we are going to get through it, but I do believe there is hope, no matter how difficult it is to manifest.



Bill Laswell, photo by Hiroshi Ohnuma

Bill Laswell Website: <http://www.silent-watcher.net/billlaswell/>

Buy Albums at: <https://billlaswell.bandcamp.com/>