

Brainwashed - Cyclobe: Happy Hauntings

Written by Daniel McKernan

Sunday, 31 October 2010 16:52 - Last Updated Sunday, 31 October 2010 20:29



In the wake of three new releases this month (LP, 7", and book), Ossian Brown & Stephen Thrower of Cyclobe took time to chat with Daniel McKernan of Brainwashed about influences, techniques and upcoming projects. Special thanks to Micki Pellerano.



You have a brand new album, *Wounded Galaxies Tap at the Window*—how many years was this album in the making?

ST: It's taken us five years to pull this one together, which is a lot longer than we anticipated! Sometimes you get involved with projects that seem to take place in a giant wind tunnel and you're walking head-on into the blast. It's taken a lot of brute persistence to get this record to where it needed to be, but we're very happy with it now. The real reason it's taken so long is that with each release we've been drawn into greater and greater detail with multi-track recordings, and the subsequent mixing becomes quite a headache, a nightmare at times. Of course you have to be extra careful ensuring that all of this effort is not written large across the whole project! We try to finesse things so there's no feeling of strain for the listener, regardless of whether we're tying our faces in knots behind the scenes!

OB: It was a great relief for us to finish the album, as at times it did feel like it could stretch on

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for aeons. But aside our being drawn into working more and more detail into the pieces, the recording process is quite fragmentary, we have periods of working intensely in a very concentrated form in the studio, and then we move into periods where we need to digest the work we've done, considering in what new directions we might take it, and if the ones we've chosen were the right ones. Sometimes, if a track's grown very complicated, returning to it can feel like walking into a blizzard of locusts! So it can be quite a struggle re-orientating yourself.



How did you manage to coordinate/orchestrate the album with members in various locations?

ST: Luckily the other musicians come and stay with us from time to time, so the vast majority was recorded in our studio. Mike York and Cliff Stapleton recorded their contributions here with us. John Contreras lives in California but thankfully he travels to the UK a lot, and he very often stays with us. It's very fortunate that we were able to do most of the album physically in the same room. Some of Thighpaulsandra's contributions were done at his studio in Wales, but the

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rest was all done here. All of the musicians we work with are incredibly responsive and alert to the possibilities of what we do, so it's a great buzz to have them physically present, making suggestions and adapting to ours. It is possible to do things long distance, but the best results come from face to face interaction, I think. I'm really glad we managed to find the right place for our old friends the crows to appear too. When Ossian and myself lived in London we used to go up to Alexandra Palace every Sunday morning and feed the crows that lived in the woods there. The first week we went, there were maybe ten or fifteen crows, but by the fourth week we had at least a hundred swooping down from all directions. Super-intelligent birds, of course, and beautiful too, plus they make the most wonderful sounds—we just took a recorder down to the regular spot we fed them at and recorded them while threw food to them. They fit perfectly on "Sleeper," where they accompany Thighpaulsandra's beautiful piano.

OB: It got to the point that they'd be waiting for us at the foot of a long path we'd walk down. They'd hop along the path behind us, cawing, then fly from tree to tree as we walked along. In fact I was certain some of them had figured out where we lived, as we had a few that would hang out in the tree in our garden over a mile away. The noise they made when we were feeding them was incredible, and to be surrounded by them every week, they felt like our family. There's a composer called Kaikhosru Sorabji who I was very excited about around that time, I recall playing his piano pieces at home and hearing the crows out of the window in our garden, accompanying him almost. A beautiful combination to hear. His pieces are incredibly complex and difficult, but mesmeric, very dreamlike. I love his work. A piece he wrote for piano in 1923 called "Le Jardin Parfumé" is particularly lovely. The memory certainly travelled with me and the mood was something I thought it would be wonderful to try and convey on the record.

Were there any conscious shifts in your techniques for this album in comparison with the previous releases? What kind of evolutions/progressions do you feel you made with [Wounded Galaxies](#)?

ST: I'd say that it's a culmination of our approach so far, and ties in organically to the previous records. Some tracks were begun quite a while ago and others were created more recently, so there's a continuity of style implicit there. One piece was completed just hours before we mastered the record, another had been 90% completed for a several years but was 'turned to the wall' because we couldn't work out how to finish it until quite recently. It's always so much easier to start a piece than it is to finish one! There's even a sound on this album that was first generated during the sessions for *Luminous Darkness*, and which has taken this long to find its rightful place. With these older snippets, it becomes like finding ancient artefacts and then smelting them into new shapes. Probably the most unusual method of working, which we used on this album for the first time, was for "The Woods Are Alive With the Smell of His Coming," which we worked upon entirely along its time line, starting from a basic pattern and then building and shaping the overdubs minute by minute from beginning to end, never turning back. This

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was a new way of working for us. The piece has a strong 'narrative' thread, so to approach it in this chronological way increased the feeling that we had of going on an epic journey. It's our *Beowulf*

, or

Close to the Edge

! Technologically, we're in the stone age compared to some artists who prefer to keep abreast of every new tech development. But people who work that way keep telling us they can't figure out how we get certain sounds, so we must be doing something right! The main blessing of computer technology for us is simply that it gives us unlimited editing and multi-track options. We have most of what we need, and we bring in outside help if need it, but apart from the occasional new plug-in our studio set-up has remained fairly consistent for the last ten years.

OB: We haven't even started working with MIDI! Which horrifies some people. I have absolutely no desire to, either. The most exciting thing with computers is being able to create enormous amounts of layered tracks, to create very complex mixes and to edit with great precision. Most of the sounds we generate come from outside of the computer. I'm not interested in getting distracted by chasing new recording programs and gadgets. Some of our tracks, or elements of them, do date back many years, like Steve says. We could be working on a piece and find we just don't have the answers there and then about how to finish the work. Sometimes you just have to put a track to one side until the answer comes to you, even if it's five years later—you just have to wait as long as it takes, until the stars are in the correct alignment!



Were the tracks "The Eclipser"/"Moths of Pre-Sleep" recorded around the same time period or different sessions? Who comprised Cyclobe's "peripheral" members for these tracks & what instruments were played? (And how did you connect with Dot Dot Dot?)

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ST: No, they were recorded relatively swiftly after we finished the album. They took about three weeks each, incredibly for us! We should tell the *Guinness Book of Records*. The line-up on both pieces is just Ossian and myself. There was something very exciting about beginning these two songs, knowing that we'd managed to complete the album just a week or two before. I think they probably got a kick of elastic energy from the release of tension post-*Galaxies*

OB: We connected with Dot Dot Dot through Alex Rose, he invited us to do a single for the label. So yes, we thought it would be a good exercise to record something more swiftly for a change, we also really wanted to be make a record as a thank-you for the beautiful pictures Alex had contributed to *Wounded Galaxies*.

There's a track, "Arc," on your website which didn't make it onto the album. I remember it as the lovely finale of your live show in Krems also. Do you expect this to be on a future release (and why didn't it 'make the cut' for this album)?

SET: I'm glad you like it, it's shaping up to be quite a monster! "Arc" will be on the next album, which is already half finished. It's a very complex piece with vast amounts of multi-tracking, so we need to really keep a tight grip on it to make it work. We decided to put it aside for the follow-up to *Wounded Galaxies*, knowing that it would form a very strong basis for the next album. The snippet we released is a good taster, but I think people will be amazed to hear the full piece.

OB: It keeps growing, the last work we did on "Arc" was with Dave Smith from Guapo, and Miasma and the Carousel of Headless Horses, a very magnificent drummer... that's really taken it somewhere further. We've been mixing in sounds of foxes mating as well which Thighpaulsandra gave us. We'll be pleased once it's finished but it's still got a few more changes to go through yet!

Do you have any future live show plans for Cyclobe, who have only played live once? Did you enjoy playing in Krems for the Donau festival? (Any idea if the live footage of that show will ever surface?)

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ST: Now that we have new material to perform, we're going to get into it again, I'm sure. We wanted to finish this LP first, though. I really enjoyed playing the Donau show, but Ossian only enjoyed it when it was over! It's quite hard turning what we do into a live performance, because there's a lot of detail in there and we're not very excited by performing with too much backed up on disc beforehand. We will eventually rehearse an entire set with, I hope, the maximum amount of live playing and the minimum of pre-recorded sound. The balance just about worked at Krems, so hopefully we'll pull it off again some time next year. The live footage from Krems is going to be edited into a short film for the track "Remember Archangels Protect Us," which will be posted on our website early next year, I hope.

OB: It takes a lot of preparation to find a way of converting our studio recordings into something simpler that could be played live. I think if we did a small tour then we might play live again with Cliff, Thighpaulsandra and Michael. But to do a one-off show again wouldn't be worth it.

Geoff Cox's prose piece included in the insert appears to document some manner of initiation or evocation. The most prominent themes that stuck out are references to masonry, hieroglyphs, and the pelican. The emblem of the pelican mutilated to nourish its young is ubiquitous in Masonic-Hermetic iconography as well as some Christian iconography. References to stone, tar, and mortar also invoke Masonic themes. The traditional interpretation of the pelican is one of the redeemer sacrificing itself for the benefit of its brood, but it taunts a much more arcane significance. Can you elaborate on the nature of the experience of the young protagonist and perhaps on how the intriguing figure of the pelican can be perceived?

ST: What I like about Geoff's piece is the emphasis it places on transformation, and the melding of human into animal, living into non-living, and the sense of a dream journey with clusters of events that erupt around a central figure. Transformation is very much what we aim for musically—a lot of our efforts are geared towards blurring the line between the organic and the inorganic, the spittle of reed and the buzz of electrical connections. Added to which, we're always looking to create a sense of a journey undertaken, into shadows and light, into dream interiors or out into other-dimensional space. I don't really want to pick apart Geoff's imagery or analyze it because I think it works on a more intuitive and emotional level than a symbolic-referential one. Ossian gave Geoff a few pointers but the piece is very much Geoff's response to the album, and functions as a sort of alternate worldview for the record, rather than a glass through which the music should be 'viewed'.

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As far as previous Cyclobe work, do you suppose that there will ever be a reissue or compilation of obscure tracks such as "Pathfinder" or the "Deathbed" tracks?

ST: Yes, we'll gather all the loose ends together some time next year, possibly just after the follow up to *Wounded Galaxies*. We have a lot of unfinished material too that would suit a looser collection, so eventually some of our orphans and stragglers and aborted fetuses will have their day!

Stephen, are you recording more material with David Knight as UnicaZürn? And anything new upcoming for the Amal Gamal Ensemble?

ST: We're recording a new UnicaZürn CD album for the Klanggalerie label for release next year.

What made you choose the Fred Tomaselli (whose work I'd first seen at Prospect.1 in New Orleans, then at the MOMA & Whitney here in NYC) image for the cover?

OB: We're huge fans of Fred Tomaselli's work so it was a great honor to be able to use his picture for the album cover. It's a magnificent piece and we're thrilled to be in touch with him. We knew very early on that we wanted to use this artwork, it was always our hope it would be the cover for *Wounded Galaxies Tap at The Window*. It makes complete sense to me instinctually, and I'd say to a degree it largely shaped our decisions about which pieces of music we'd use, and how we've threaded them together to form this record. The atmosphere really blends perfectly, I feel, with the dream warrens we've been exploring. There's a very strong resurgent atavistic quality to Fred's pictures—shamanic, deeply psychedelic and engulfing. I don't doubt for a moment the spaces and environments he generates, I just find myself stepping straight into them. It's something I really hope we're able to generate with our music as well; a completely believable new environment, something transportive, transcendental.

The first track is "How Acla Disappeared from Earth." Who is Acla? Is it a concept or entity derived from an existing tradition or philosophy or culled from your own experience?

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OB: Acla is the dream key to *Wounded Galaxies Tap at The Window*.

"The Woods are Alive with the Smell of His Coming." Is there any specific personality implied by the pronoun "his?" Particularly since the track has such a cinematic quality or a theatricality perhaps redolent of Wagner or Strauss?

OB: PAN

How did the title come about? It was at one point to be a Coil release with Burroughs; were either of you involved in the idea for that project? And is it referential to something prior to that concept for an album (such as "The Woods Are Alive..." is gifted from Russ Oronie)?

OB: The title originates from a William Burroughs novel. Many years ago it was going to be used for a Coil album, but the project never progressed much further than a few sketches. I'd done a bit of work for it on a number of occasions when Jhon had been staying with us in London, but like many planned Coil projects it didn't happen and instead it was eclipsed by other ideas which did come to fruition. I recall that shortly after my recordings, the *Musick to Play In the Dark* albums were being worked on, so there were lots of ideas flying around, bursting for attention. Jhon and Steve and I shared a lot of titles and we often went hunting for them together, scouring through old books and enjoying word play together. Both me and Jhon were extremely excited and inspired by the title "The Woods Are Alive with The Smell of His Coming" which came from a piece of music by a group called The Oronies. I'd seen them play in the late 1980s at Chislehurst caves as part of a private gathering there. They invoked an overwhelming lunatic energy when they played live, it was wonderful. Frantic and really pagan, but not at all clichéd. It felt urgent and from the heart—a goat's heart! I was told recently that they were burning datura as incense that night, so as you can imagine the experience was very much intensified! I found the title so evocative, it hugely inspired the piece it became. Springboarding from that magical and charged phrase, the music developed and grew from there. The piece has very strong invocational qualities, through the tensions it's playing with. There's a pressure it places on you and a sense of something breaking through, an emergence, a hymn to Pan. These feelings and themes continued throughout the course of the recording and magnified as we took it further and let it grow. So we of course wanted to thank Russ for that gift. Finishing "The Woods Are Alive" has been our most challenging work together—it has gone through so many different permutations.

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Who is singing on the track "Sleeper"? The sung words are a bit inscrutable. I was able to make out "Enoch" (the apocryphal patriarch and prophet linked with angelic hierarchies and Enochian Magic) and also divine names such as "Agla" or "Acla." Can you clarify any meaning behind the incantations?

OB: Many years ago, on a compilation piece we did called "Silent Key," I recorded a very short vocal segment which looking back we've always been very happy about. It's something we regretted not taking further at the time. It was intended to be sung in a dream language—in my sleep around that time, I often spoke, but in an unrecognizable language. Steve could never fathom out what I was saying, what language I was speaking. He could ask me questions and I'd respond in a very articulate tone, but in this unknown language. Whilst recording "Sleeper," which was the final piece we recorded for the album, Steve suggested I experiment more with vocals, and as he was traveling away from home for a week, writing, I decided to set myself the task of trying some new ideas to play for him when he returned.



Ossian, you have a new book out, *Haunted Air*. How long were you collecting these photographs & when did you make the decision to turn the collection into a book? How did David Lynch & Geoff Cox come about being involved in the intro/afterword? (Hopefully we'll see a US release of the book in the near future also!)

OB: I began collecting early Hallowe'en photography many years ago. I've been collecting these pictures for ten years or more now. My initial intention wasn't to make a book, I just kept finding

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the pictures, one after another—like tapping a phantom vein! Each one completely bewitching and unique. Some of them are just bizarre in ways I could never have foreseen. The excitement of discovering some new mutant ghost portrait was just wonderful. Many of them were taken in the early 1900s in southern America, with costumes crafted out of torn old sackcloth, stitched together with dirty string, dragged up in torn rags and fur, in old ladies frocks. It seemed to me something really magical and unearthly was being conjured. I was no longer experiencing the pictures as just portraits of people in masks dressing up for fun—they had become their masks. They have this ghostly conviction that I find myself completely drawn to, and lost within. I was amazed that it hadn't been documented before. Incredible in times like these when there's so little space left undiscovered. I'd often show my pictures to Geoff Cox, which was great fun, presenting each one to him. He's a very dear friend who I've known for many years, through Coil, Nurse With Wound, Current 93. Being able to enjoy his excitement and fascination with these pictures was very motivating. We have a shared love of this kind of photography, among many other things so it made complete sense to me that he should write a piece for my book. He's a great writer and his piece echoes my feelings for the pictures as well. The way his words react with the pictures magnifies the whole experience for me—the poetry of his piece is very beautiful and the perfect accompaniment to the pictures. As well as doing calligraphy for the new Cyclobe album he also wrote a short piece for the limited edition of our album... a short tale which he wrote while listening to the recordings. He's extremely talented. We were able to show David Lynch the pictures initially through David's close friend Pierre Edelman. Pierre worked with David on *Mulholland Drive*, in fact Pierre helped save the project after the American backers dropped out and left it stranded. He found financial backers in France so David was able to turn *Mulholland Drive* from an aborted TV pilot into a movie. Pierre was incredibly enthusiastic about my pictures and thought David would love them, which he did.

Photographs from the artist Alex Rose adorn both the 7" and LP. He recently had an exhibition (in which Ossian had a collaboration piece, "Bitten Halo") at Envoy Enterprises in NYC (which also recently had a book release/opening for Ruth Bayer, who took the band's photos for the album insert). What is your connection to Alex Rose's work? (Also, some of his images bring to mind Bernard Faucon; I recall you showing me his work years ago in London.)

OB: We both very much admire Bernard Faucon's works. His work *Les Chambre d'Amour* and *Les Idoles et les Sacrifices*

, and very much his early mannequin photographs are really remarkable, they're some of my favorite pictures. Alex wrote to us earlier this year and we hit it off straight away. I have to say I was stunned when I first saw his work, and it was a big inspiration to us towards the end of recording

Wounded Galaxies

. There's a real darkness in some of his pictures that I find difficult sometimes, but in a way that remains compulsive to explore. Alex's work communicates to me on so many levels, I can find it

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astoundingly beautiful and moving, it's very emotional to me. Very visceral sometimes, but also very magical and immersive, with an obsessiveness that really overwhelms you. I think most of all, for me, it's his pictures of boys birthing out of prolapsing galaxies that I find the most beautiful, like the picture we used for the cover of our single,

The Eclipser

. We had a lot of Alex's pictures hanging up in the studio while writing "Sleeper." It really fed into the spirit of that piece in particular. The pictures we used for the album connect so organically with the music, they bleed together perfectly.

What are some of the overall themes to the album? Any particular influences—spiritually, musically, etc.?

OB: Our greatest influences are our close friends, among whom are the musicians we're working with, Cliff Stapleton, Michael J York, John Contreras and Thighpaulsandra. The way they interpret the ideas we want to perform, the character and emotion they invest, their ability to animate their instruments, is wonderful and very exciting to work with. I personally don't listen to a lot of music, very little at the moment. My interest in playing other artists' music comes in waves. I might have a period when I focus on a small number of records, but when we're recording I really don't go to other music for reference or for pleasure, very occasionally. I'm pretty obsessively focussed on what we're doing and I don't have space to sit and listen to others. So it's all about the work we do in the studio and who we're working with, and our immediate environment of course, such as the pictures we have hanging in our studio, my photography.

What's next for Cyclobe—both in the studio or live?

OB: We're already halfway through our next album which we hope to have out towards the end of spring next year. We've also been recording music for *Haunted Air* which we want to release in time for the American edition of my book in Hallowe'en 2011. It's primarily music for clarinet, voice and hurdy gurdy, but we could deviate as we often do once we really begin to immerse ourselves in work. I plan to create an exhibition around a selection of the

Haunted Air

pictures, and the music was composed with that in mind. In the more immediate future though, we're presently mastering

Wounded Galaxies

for a CD and download release, and also preparing a short film by Anna Thew to accompany "Sleeper," which we'll be putting up on our website soon. We worked with Anna's films for our show at the Donau Festival in Krems several years ago. They're very beautiful, like psychotropic

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meditations on each season. We also plan to work with Ian Johnstone on a film project—he has an amazing exhibition coming up at the Horse Hospital, his new series of drawings are incredible.

Wounded Galaxies Tap at the Window is out now on [Phantom Code](#) . "The Eclipser" c/w "The Moths of Pre-Sleep" is out (sold out) now on [Dot Dot Dot](#) , and [Haunted Air](#) is out now on Random House (UK).