

Big Ole Face Full of Monster Music Reviews - Carnival of Souls by Nox Arcana Send in the clowns...or else

Band: Nox Arcana
Album: Carnival of Lost Souls
Genre: Gothic Horror
Label: Monolist Graphics
Street Date: 6/6/06
Website: www.NoxArcana.com

Band Members:
Joseph Vargo
William Piotrowski

The Carnival has always been wicked. Its origins extend as far back as pre-Roman times with Lupercalia in which participants would go into trances and become wolves, tearing at sacrifices and drinking blood. In the later Catholic period of Italian history, it was a festival of wantonness prior to Lent. The name translates roughly as "farewell to the flesh," which may refer to giving up meat and other pleasures of the flesh for Lent or it may mean that the celebrants become so ecstatic in their dancing and drinking that they are projected into a realm beyond the body.

In the United States in the 19th century, the name was applied to traveling celebrations that went from town to town, first by wagons and later by trains. P. T. Barnum, the conman who said "There's a sucker born every minute," created the model for the carnival with his Barnum's Museum, Menagerie & Circus which had gypsy fortune tellers, human and animal freaks, pitchmen, hootchie girls, and clowns...always those clowns with their garishly painted smiles hiding whatever they were really thinking. Whatever else it was, the carnival was always outsiders, people who could not be trusted, bringing in strange sights and sounds and delights, all designed to separate the rubes from their money. The carnival or circus did not start out as a wholesome Norman Rockwell America that later became seedy. It was always seedy.

Nox Arcana on their CD *Carnival of Lost Souls* evokes exactly this feeling of the carnival as a place of wickedness and danger. Released appropriately on 6-6-6, the album is mostly instrumental music of the horror goth variety, using synthesizers, sound effects, and a chorus of voices to create a haunting, ghostly journey perfect for haunted houses or Halloween parties. As with this album's setting in a carnival, each of their previous albums, as well as the two already produced since, is a conceptual whole choosing a dark setting and subject to explore sonically. Previous albums include *Darklore Manor* (a journey through a haunted house) and *Necronomicon* (based on Lovecraft's mythical grimoire), and new albums made in



the second half of 2006 by this incredibly prolific band include *Blood of the Dragon* and *Blood of Angels*.

With a name that translates as “mysteries of the night,” Nox Arcana is made up of two musician-composers, Joseph Vargo and William Piotrowski. Vargo had done previous gothic horror work with another band and Piotrowski had done independent soundtrack work when the two created the band in 2003. In addition to quickly putting out several CDs, the band has had their music featured at haunted amusement parks like Busch Gardens and Knott’s Scary Farm. Vargo is also an artist (see his work at monolithgraphics.com) and his stunning work appears on the group’s CDs. His evil clown, demented dolls and two ghostly ladies on carousel horses are gorgeous and terrifying and nearly worth the price of the CD alone.

The album opens with a collage of sounds on “Ghosts of the Midway,” with the crowds shuffling, the calliope in the distance, and underneath it all, a deep droning synthesizer like something dark pervading the fun-seeking crowds. The ringmaster begins shouting a welcome but gives warning as well of dark wonders that may threaten. In “After Hours,” the crowds have gone home and the listener is left alone to see what goes on in the carnival after dark. Spectral laughter cackles from here and there, and a creepy voice implores the listener to “follow me.” Then on “Harlequin’s Lament” a sad piano refrain is joined by the “Gregorian Shadow Choir” that sings on many of the album’s tunes. This is the central style of Nox Arcana’s music: a hovering synthesizer, a mournful piano, and a funerary chorale. This gives the album a uniform quality ideal for background music, but each song also adds individual sound effects and other variations to keep things interesting.

The piece “Calliope” of course features that instrument, a particularly wheezy version like the old Victorian steam-powered style. This calliope then comes and goes throughout the album like a theme revisited. The thundering tympani on “Nightmare Parade” also reappear in other pieces like “Circus Diabolique” and “The Devil’s Daggers” to create a sound like apocalyptic horses charging, such as Basil Poledouris achieved in his *Conan* soundtrack. Quite different are the several pieces that use a delicate and slightly warped music box sound as on “Living Dolls” which gives a feeling more like Goblin’s work on *Suspiria*. The piece “Snake Charmer” uses a melody and beat evocative of Middle Eastern music. And on several pieces, the chorus rises to epic heights giving a feeling like Carl Orff’s “O Fortuna.”

A still more unique piece is “Spellbound” which begins with a sound like a crackly old wax 78 record being played. Mournful strings play as though through a victrola, and a voice begins to sing. The song is very brief, almost a fragment. But on the last track of the album, the song returns after a long pause as a hidden extra. In this version, the song is a full-blown goth rock number with Jim Hamar singing like a glam-era Bowie and guitarist Jeff Endemann providing solid metal riffs. On the last listed track, “Storm,” the ringmaster bids us farewell and the fortune teller lets us know that we only got away this time and that we are still doomed by fate. It’s a classic Hollywood touch that serves well as the end of this cinematic night trip through this diabolical carnival.

by Nemo Swift
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