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Interview with Joseph Vargo of Nox Arcana

Interview by Gary Hill

Music Street Journal: Joseph, you are a busy guy—between art, music and more—can you catch the readers up on your history in regards to your various endeavors?

Joseph Vargo: I started Monolith Graphics in 1991 as an outlet to distribute prints, t-shirts and calendars of my gothic fantasy artwork. In the following years I began selling my art in local stores and Renaissance fairs, and eventually through larger chain stores like Hot Topic. In 1997, my partner Christine Filipak and I built and operated a large art gallery called “The Realm: Showcase of the Fantastic” in Cleveland, Ohio. Over the next few years, I worked with a local band and developed two gothic soundscape cd’s, which received critical acclaim. During the same period, I collaborated with several other writers to bring some of the characters in my paintings to life in the illustrated anthology *Tales From The Dark Tower*.

In 2000, we began "Dark Realms" magazine, a national publication that featured the best in dark art, music and literature, and in 2002, we released The Gothic Tarot, a deck of 78 cards that featured my paintings of vampires, gargoyles and ghosts. We’ve also released calendars of gothic art every year since 1992, as well as the art book *Born of the Night: The Gothic Fantasy Artwork of Joseph Vargo*, which features over 100 original paintings and illustrations. In 2003, I returned to the musical arena and formed the band Nox Arcana to continue my original concepts of creating dark thematic soundscapes.

Music Street Journal: What about the other member of Nox Arcana, William Piotrowski, what’s his background and how did you guys hook up?

Joseph Vargo: I'm actually very good friends with William's father, so I've known William since he was very young. After leaving my former band, I was looking for a new musical partner to collaborate with. William was only fifteen at the time, but he had created the score for a local production called "Ghosts of Ohio." He plays guitar and piano and his musical expertise and studio skills were so impressive that I asked him if he wanted to work together. After a few sessions, we were writing some great stuff. We are totally in tune with each other's style, but our differences really compliment one another. We built our own recording studio and wrote and recorded our first CD, Darklore Manor in about six months. Since then, we recorded four more albums while he was still in High School.

Music Street Journal: I know artists hate to have their art described or pigeonholed, but how would you describe it?

Joseph Vargo: I've always classified my style of artwork as "gothic fantasy." The music of Nox Arcana is very gothic in the classic sense. It's very melodic, but darkly atmospheric at the same time. A lot of people use the term "gothic" very loosely and try to attach the words "goth" and "gothic" to things that aren't even remotely related, but I think that the music of Nox Arcana truly captures a haunting and mysterious feeling.

Music Street Journal: Who do you see as your musical influences?

Joseph Vargo: My background is rock and metal, and if you listen to our music closely, some of that influence comes through in a few of our songs. As far as classical musicians are concerned, our music is very melody-driven and has more in common with modern soundtrack composers. Some of our favorites are Jerry Goldsmith, Danny Elfman, Trevor Jones, John Carpenter, and Wojciech Kilar.

Music Street Journal: Are there musicians you'd like to play with in the future?

Joseph Vargo: We just wrote and recorded an album with our friend Michelle Belanger, and we'll be working with singer and musician Jeff Endemann. We've worked with both of them in the past, and the results were fantastic. Jeff has a terrific voice and is an excellent guitar player and we'll be helping him with his solo project. We've also worked with my good friend Jim Hamar, vocalist extraordinaire for the heavy metal band Nightcrawler. They play our music to prime their audience before their live shows, and we'll be working with them on a gothic instrumental piece on their next album. Aside from the friends we've worked with, both William and I would love to create an album with Loreena Mckennit. Her voice has a great haunting and mystical quality to it.

Music Street Journal: Do you think that downloading of music is a help or hindrance to the careers of musicians? It's been said by the major labels that it's essentially the heart of all the problems they are having in terms of lower sales. Would you agree?

Joseph Vargo: That's a complicated subject with various pros and cons to it. It actually helps unsigned bands when they're starting out. It levels the playing field for them and allows anyone who's interested in their style of music to check them out online. For the major record companies, however, it's been a bad thing, because they've spent millions to establish certain artists and they expect to make it back with record sales, but then a large amount of their intended audience simply downloads the band's songs and albums and in some cases, the band and the label don't make a penny. In legitimate instances, people have to pay to download music, and that's fine because the bands get paid. But when people download music illegally, the bands don't make any money. And if they don't make money, the chances of them ever putting out another CD are slim. If you really enjoy a band's music, then show your support by paying them for their hard work.

Music Street Journal: In a related question how do you feel about fans recording shows and trading them?

Joseph Vargo: I don't think that it's as big of a problem as downloading music. Most bands don't release live show performances, so they don't feel that the bootleg shows are competing with any of their products. As long as the people who share the recorded performance aren't doing it to make a profit, I think it helps the band by giving them more exposure to people who haven't seen them in concert.

Music Street Journal: What's ahead for you?

Joseph Vargo: I have so many projects that I want to work on, but they all require a lot of time and attention, so I have to be very selective. My new gothic fantasy art calendar is in stores now, and we are compiling artwork for a second art book. We just finished a new album called Blood of Angels with our friend, occult author Michelle Belanger. She has a beautiful operatic voice. We are also wrapping up the sixth Nox Arcana album, Blood of the Dragon, which will be released this coming November. Blood of the Dragon is an epic sword and sorcery concept album that centers around an ancient quest. It has some of our most powerful pieces to date. After that, we'll begin work on a new Nox Arcana album entitled Shadow of the Raven, which will be a musical tribute to the works of Edgar Allan Poe. We are also putting together the soundtrack for a computer game called Inherent Evil 2. In the literary department, we have begun working on the first sequel to "Tales From The Dark Tower," which will be titled "Beyond the Dark Tower," and we will also be releasing a companion book for The Gothic Tarot.

Music Street Journal: What was the last CD you bought, or what have you been listening to lately?

Joseph Vargo: Because we run a magazine, we get a lot of music sent to us for review, so I don't buy a lot of CD's. The last CD I bought was Blackmore's Night, The Village Lantern. Lately I've been listening to a great new goth rock band called Grigori 3.

Music Street Journal: What about the last concert you attended for your enjoyment?

Joseph Vargo: I just saw Mortiiis and the Genatorturers in concert here in Cleveland. That was a wild show. Mortiiis was great.

Music Street Journal: You seem to be quite literary minded, too. What have you been reading lately?

Joseph Vargo: I just finished a terrific novel called *This House is Empty Now* by my friend Joseph Iorillo. It's a really intriguing supernatural mystery, along the lines of *The Sixth Sense*. As you know, I am a huge Lovecraft fan, so I'm always on the lookout for any books that deal with the Cthulhu Mythos, or are even reminiscent of his style. Another book I recently read by William Meikle, titled *The Midnight Eye Files: The Amulet*, was a very cool Lovecraftian mystery. Of course, there's also a great new book called *The Strange Sound of Cthulhu*. For those who haven't read it, it's a fantastic retrospect of bands and rock music inspired by Lovecraft's writing.

Music Street Journal: By the same token, your music definitely calls to mind the cinema. So, what movies and/or television have you been catching lately? How about some favorites in those various categories?

Joseph Vargo: As far as TV, I'm hooked on "Lost." It's beginning its third season and although several theories abound, no one is sure what's really going on, yet it's very intriguing. I also like "24," and lately I've been watching "Rock Star Supernova." They've got some really talented singers and musicians who really know how to rock. It makes you realize how truly crappy "American Idol" is.

I really love movies, mainly horror or dark adventure films, but I can appreciate anything if it's done well. Some of my all-time favorites are "The Crow," "Brotherhood of the Wolf," "Bram Stoker's Dracula," "The 13th Warrior," "Terminator 2," "Halloween," "Sleepy Hollow," "Last of the Mohicans," and the Lord of the Rings trilogy.

Music Street Journal: What has been your biggest Spinal Tap moment?

Joseph Vargo: I love that movie, but I'm not sure if our meager travails would qualify as Spinal Tap moments. The closest we've come is when we get stuck with a song composition or mix that we're just not happy with. Our studio sessions are usually very smooth and productive, but we've wasted entire days in the studio rearranging problem songs and mixes, only to listen to it the next day and scrap the previous day's work to start over. Sometimes you just get caught up in the creation process and you need to step back and reassess the situation.