



Syzygy: Sam Giunta, Carl Baldassarre, Paul Mihacevich, Al Rolik, Mark Boals

SYZYGY

FOLLOWING THE RELEASE OF THEIR LIVE PACKAGE 'A GLORIOUS DISTURBANCE', CARL BALDASSARRE OF SYZYGY TALKS TO DAVID PEARSON.

From Cleveland, Ohio, Syzygy are a band that bring together elements of classical music, progressive rock and classic rock. It all started back in the 70's when Carl Baldassarre (guitar/vocals), Sam Giunta (keyboards) and Al Rolik (bass) were in a cover band called Abraxas. "The name Abraxas had no special meaning to us or about us. It was picked because it was quite different from the other names on the club circuit. It also stood out in print with the "x" in it - anything for an edge."

Cover bands did quite well back then, but not at the expense of original music as Carl remembers. "Back in the late 70s and early 80s most acts were cover acts, meaning they covered a variety of contemporary popular songs of the day - bands would differentiate themselves by picking certain styles and emphasizing one style over the other. It was good work as there were a lot of clubs to play at and a lot of people of all ages going to clubs.

"The 'tribute' act phenomenon of today was much less prevalent back then for the simple reason that many of the super-star original acts were still active in their careers with a few exceptions. As far as Abraxas was concerned, we were a hybrid act - a cover band playing a tribute set with a few originals thrown in here and there. We broke a lot of rules, but drew crowds. Given that there were so many clubs back then and so many people going out to watch, listen and dance to live music, you could work 7 days a week, no problem. The pay was quite good, especially if you could fill the house regularly,

which we did.

"Although, back then it was easier to find work as a cover band than it was as an original act, you could still always find places to play original music if you were willing to take less money; people still came out. Today, original acts have a hard time finding any venues to play at and people don't seem willing to go out to see unfamiliar music as much anymore. Even fewer people want to apply themselves to the challenge of exploring long-form, original music."

Around 1984 Carl and Sam decided they wanted to pursue a more progressive path in their music. However, it wasn't until 1993 that the debut album 'Cosmos And Chaos' came out. A decade later they released 'The Allegory Of Light' and at the same time changed their name to Syzygy. 2009 saw the release of 'Realms Of Eternity', and now their live album/DVD 'A Glorious Disturbance' is out (reviewed in the last issue).

"It's pretty clear that time takes no holiday for Syzygy!" Carl says. "Our journey was slow due to raising families and other responsibilities - I went back to school for example. That said there was a lot of fundamental music preparedness going on behind the scenes, both separately and together. All of the writing, tinkering, listening, learning and even yearning has had a positive effect on us even to this day. The one constant has been our commitment to each other as artists.

"Looking back on our career, it really has been a handful of separate 'seasons' - each with a

distinct purpose. The Abraxas period was about developing stage craft. We logged over 1,000 gigs in those three-plus years. You can get pretty good at something if you do it enough! The Witsend period (up to and shortly after 'Cosmos & Chaos') represented the preparatory writing period where we began to develop real progressive ideas. The 'Allegory of Light' period (Syzygy version 1 - pre Mark Boals) was about arrangement, orchestration and completion. We were figuring out how to nurture ideas to completion around the time Allegory was being made. The Realms of Eternity period (Syzygy version 2 - with Mark Boals) offered a glimpse at the potential of the band as maturing composer/arrangers. Each musical season has been quite different from the preceding one. That's why I think our live project, 'A Glorious Disturbance', is such an interesting capstone to the previous 30 years. It brings all of our past work forward in a common vernacular uttered by our current lineup.

"Taking your time does give you perspective and a sense of proportion. It allows you to consider everything deeply, do endless revisions and edits - so that's a good thing. Although, back then we wished for more time together, we certainly made the best of it - I think the music attests to that."

I wondered if there was a game plan or goal back then and whether they had an idea of where they wanted the band to be 10 years further on.

"The only goal we really had - and still do - is to write music that we would want hear. The game plan was to control our artistic destiny, e.g. own a recording studio - which we do, so we could make the best music possible, no matter the time and expense it took to do it. In the early days, we didn't look beyond the following week, let alone the next ten years. However, if you ask me that question today, it's all about leaving a lasting musical deposit as we go forward from here. I have become very definitive and deliberate in my work as the band leader. Now that we are fully-prepared and situated, it's time to make a lasting musical statement for the ages. I don't want to leave this world with my best music left in me. So we write, write, write! That's what we're doing; that's the game plan; that's the goal from here on out."

As previously mentioned, the band name was changed from Witsend to Syzygy at the time of the release of 'The Allegory Of Light'.

"We tried to trademark Witsend in the U.S. and found that someone else beat us to it. Also, with Allegory of Light, we were really writing more complete pieces with a different sound. We felt it would be a good way to kick off the new sound. Thus, Syzygy was born and we did secure the exclusive rights by trademark to that name."

'Realms Of Eternity' saw the addition of Mark Boals on vocals. "One of the goals we had for 'Realms of Eternity' was to add a vocalist who could complement the compositions and musicianship," Carl explains. "The album was already recorded and mixed. Al Rolik, myself and a couple of other guest vocalists had recorded the vocals. I delayed releasing the album based on a gut feeling I had. Within a few days Sam Giunta called me and said someone suggested



▶ we should try this guy named Mark Boals. I called Mark, sent him some tracks and within a day we had a demo of Darkfield. Our jaws hit the floor! This guy was the voice that expressed our musical aesthetic perfectly. He imbues our music with a rock and concert hall vibe which it naturally seeks. Mark has turned out to be a great friend and we are now writing him into 'the script' with the new music we are currently working on."

Apart from this addition, Syzygy has maintained a stable lineup for a number of years of Carl Baldassarre (guitar), Sam Giunta (keyboards), Al Rolik (bass) and Paul Mihacevich (drums).

"Stability is an understatement - Sam and Al were both with me as far back as 33 years ago!" Carl exclaims. "Sam and I went off to do the Witsend project. Sam and I have been completing each other's musical sentences ever since. Although he and I bring very different perspectives to the table, we both share the same goal of making every note and rest count. He is such a gifted composer. Paul joined us in 1985 and he's one of those rare drummers who has a real musicality about him. He has a total and complete musical gift. Apart from being an unbelievable percussionist and multi-instrumentalist, he is our musical conscience. If we can't please Paul, we feel we have failed. His wide ranging tastes help him bring a huge repertoire to the finished product you hear. Al officially became a member in 2009 with Realms of Eternity and the subsequent live tours. Al is a rock! He has perfect pitch, great musical problem solving skills and is a versatile instrumentalist as well. He is steady, reliable, dedicated and also a dear friend. Mark Boals has become our voice. His reputation speaks for

itself. Long live Mark Boals and Syzygy! I don't have much to say about myself other than I am relentless with everything I do. It's my greatest strength and greatest weakness. I love these guys and I pray I am leading them on a musical journey that delivers each one of them to a place of musical contentment in their lives. They have trusted me with the leadership and I don't take that responsibility lightly. Their dedication and support is overwhelming. We are a wonderful band of brothers."

This year Syzygy have released 'A Glorious Disturbance'. It is a fabulous package with a live DVD, live CD, and a further DVD of extensive special features.

"Thanks for that," says Carl. "We are very happy with how it came out. The idea of a live project came about while playing live to promote 'Realms of Eternity' and seeing how well the band gelled with Mark Boals on stage. There was a 'completeness' to it which felt like an exclamation point at the end of a 30-year run-on sentence. We were finally realizing the vision of what we thought was possible for the music all those years ago. It just seemed obvious that we needed to capture what was going on."

"In addition, by 2010 we had developed a great repertoire for the live set which covered our entire careers. It had a real retrospective feel to it as well as offering a glimpse of the future with Mark Boals singing new words and melodies to pieces previously released as instrumental-only music. Once we got a listen and look at the footage from the concerts, we knew we had to release it. It was at that point, we started to think about what else we should include in the package to make 'A Glorious Disturbance' more than just another concert DVD in an ugly plastic clamshell case.

"As the saying goes, 'you live life forward, but you understand it looking backwards'. So while we were putting all the video and audio together and realising it was sort of a summary of our musical lives to date, it made sense to bring in the other dimensions - interviews, analysis, old footage, insight into composing, etc. - to complete the statement. The final product feels like the close of a long chapter in our lives. I laugh because I've called it our Old Testament period - a huge 'biblical' epic of time that went into the making of the story. It is the definitive statement of what we've accomplished through 30 years of hard work. Going forward, 'A Glorious Disturbance' will appear as a line of demarcation separating the long, formative period of the group (1984-2010) from what I believe will be the true lasting compositional legacy we are currently in the process of writing as we speak."

The marketing for the release has been extensive but the band remains independent. Have they considered signing to a label?

"We've had some discussions, but nothing has ever come of it. We're very open to any and all opportunities to expand our distribution so more fans can hear us. We would certainly welcome that. In the meantime, we just keep plugging away with persistence and patience." As for the UK, "it's probably one of our better markets from a sales perspective," Carl adds. "But like every market, we're still just scratching the surface."

For those that haven't heard the band yet, Carl offers the following description of Syzygy: "If you are not familiar with us, I would tell you that we speak in a rock dialect as an electric quintet with a classical music aesthetic. Our compositions are both complex and intricate,

while remaining accessible and intuitive. The music feels vaguely familiar which is comforting, but altogether new in its own right. It stands up to repeated listening and scrutiny, but reveals itself to any intentional listener on the first hearing. The lyrical subject matter is allegorical and appeals to one's higher nature."

Having been in the music for over 30 years Carl has an insight into the key positive and major negative changes over that time. He remarks that this is a topic for a book but offers up some thoughts...

Negatives:

- Less live music (destination/event) and more music on demand (Youtube, iPods, etc.)
- Low fidelity (MP3) versus high fidelity (vinyl and magnetic tape)
- Less time in today's busy culture means short attention spans and a requirement for instant gratification which yields short form music of limited depth
- Multi-tasking your life to music (work, exercise, etc.) vs. just listening to and exploring music more deeply
- Less artwork (CDs vs album covers) and now no artwork (downloads)
- The dumbing down of culture and weakening in our education systems has dumbed down much of the music through near-illiteracy and sloppy thinking.
- Technology enables the free and unfettered copying of original music

Positives:

- It's a good thing that big recording studios have been dis-intermediated by home recording



technologies. Anybody can make music on any budget.

- Limited barriers to entry: Without a major

record label system, you can publish your own music on the web through social networks instantly.

- No major record labels, and no single medium (eg. vinyl records) means lots of choices for the consumer - but it also means the market is oversaturation (with immense amounts of mediocrity) and it's harder to find good music (but the hidden gems are out there).

I'm sure many readers of this magazine would agree with much of that!

Finally, I ask Carl what he thinks might happen for Syzygy over the next ten years.

"I obviously can't predict that, but I can tell you, we will either 'say' something new with our music or nothing at all. We are not interested in reheating old ideas or just adding to the noise level. If we think we can expand the boundaries of what's possible with music, then we will continue. That requires a continuation of God's blessing. We'll follow his lead. For now, I am happy to report that we are nearly done writing two new studio albums and have already begun to record tracks for the first of the two albums. The music is completely scored and it's so lovely that I can't begin to describe it. I am very excited about what's coming and confident it will meet the lofty goals we have set for ourselves and our music." ©

A Glorious Disturbance is available now from the band's website <http://www.syzygymusic.com/>

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