

Syzygy - Carl Baldassarre

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- What is your individual musical background?

I was born with a resonant heart for all music. I was always moved to tears as a youngster by strong melody. I was trained in a private conservatory under an Italian professor named Dante Picciotti (theory, counterpoint, harmony, composition, etc.). I also received private training in jazz guitar while a teenager. I am actually studying again under the great Sandra Shapiro at the Cleveland Institute of Music (she is a 6th generation teaching descendant in a line from Beethoven).

- In the beginning, did you all agree that your musical style was going to be progressive rock?

We all loved the innovative spectrum of music from our generation (60's & 70's) and had a special affinity for the more daring composer/performers. Naturally, that defined progressive rock and that's what we related to and gravitated toward.

- In 1993 you recorded the album "Chaos & Chaos" under the name of Witsend. Do you consider it like Syzygy's first job?

That's one way to look at it! Witsend was more of an idea incubator and chamber group than a working rock band. We tried ideas out on each other as well as private gatherings of friends and local musicians (hence the chamber reference). To a certain extent, I believe we're still in training and growing. If we're not growing, it's time to quit and do something else.

- It was ten years until the follow up "Allegory of Light" was released and almost another six years for "Realms of Eternity". Why such a long break in between releases?

Lots of reasons, but the primary reason was to raise our families. A secondary reason was the desire to work diligently on our craft. I think the quality shows it (but the quantity suffers).

- What are the differences and similarities between the last two albums (Allegory of Light and Realms of Eternity)?

The similarities would be that we are coming from a Romantic-era (19th century) aesthetic. That includes; using big subject matter, employing counterpoint, theme & variation, using quartet/quintet orchestration (4 or 5 independent parts) and laying it on top of an incredibly powerful rock dialect. The differences are in the maturation of the compositional style and production. We grew enormously between the two albums.

- What can you tell us about the lyrics of the songs?

Again, it's part of the Romantic-era aesthetic. I write the lyrics and was drawn early on into very large subject matter: faith, life, death, God, grandeur, misery, poetry, science, philosophy, nature, etc. The music and the libretto have to fit one another like a custom made suit. The big sound and orchestration we gravitate toward needs big subject matter. But most importantly, it's who I am as a lyricist, a 19th century troubadour living in the 21st century.

- Your music is quite complex and the songs have a lot of changes and parts. Is there a main songwriter or does the entire band collaborates on writing them?

The writing happens in layers. Sam Giunta (keyboards) and I are the principal writers. We'll bring ideas to one another, pick the best and then begin to develop them. Sam does a lot of manipulation (counterpoint and variations), I do a lot of theme development, arrangement and orchestration. It's not always that way, but that's the general tendencies and roles. We then record an audio demo of all the parts as a duet. The music is then scored out by Sam on Finale software. From there, we share the demos and scores with Paul Mihacevich (percussion) and Al Rolik (Bass). They learn their parts and fill in the gaps that we leave for them. The final arrangement occurs as a group when we get together in a room and knit it together as a band. Once everybody has had their say, and we know our parts, we'll head to the studio to record it.

- When you compose, do you take into account the difficulty of playing a whole piece live given the complexity of your music?

That's a good question. We do sometimes laugh at the prospect of having to play some of the trickier parts. But, in the end, there is

nothing we write which can't be played live from a technical execution perspective – it just takes lots of practice. Actually, the two biggest challenges are singing and playing certain complex parts simultaneously as well as switching sounds/tones on guitars and keyboards. We have lots of sudden scene changes and that's difficult to get right with a limited number of appendages (hands and feet) to use to change settings. Switching between acoustic and electric guitars is probably one of the biggest limitations. That prevented us from playing the Dialectic (from Realms of Eternity) on the last two tours. I recently bought two Variax JTV-89 modeling guitars and I am having them modified to my specs. I am hopeful it can open up more possibilities for us live.

- What are the differences between your music in a live setting compared to your studio recordings?

I think the DVD attests to the fact that we actually play all the original studio parts and arrangements live. That is something we strive to do and are very proud of. The biggest difference between live and studio is that in the live setting you really get confronted with how heavy this band is. We are a rock band first and foremost. That heaviness can sometimes get squeezed down and refined a bit in the studio. In the live setting, we steamroll you with power!

- I'm guessing that there aren't that many chances of playing live. Here in Europe it is very difficult for a new progressive band to play for large audiences. Is it the same in USA?

Sadly, that's true here as well.

- You're doing a lot of promotion in European media. Are there chances to see you playing around here?

I would say the chance is 100%, it's just a matter of when. We are writing a lot of material and really want to focus on that. A European tour will happen eventually. I will be in Europe myself (Spain and Vienna) during 2014 and 2015 (studying in Vienna). I plan to plant some seeds while I am there.

- In fact, the two "covers" that you have included in the concert are very British. "Burn" is a classic one, but "In the Dead of Night" was not so obvious a choice. Who and why did you choose it?

We all talked about it. ITDON is a seminal piece in both the progressive rock genre and in our lives personally. We have lots of great memories of when we first heard it. We always loved and admired it. It is one of the great, concise masterworks of the genre. It's a complex quartet with lots of power. It was also a challenge to learn and it held our attention. To be able to play it was probably the most exciting part of the tour. We really loved pulling that one off.

- The quality and the large amount of content found in "A Glorious Disturbance" are not typical of a band with only three albums. It seems more suited to a band with a long career. Have you invested heavily in this project?

Thank you for recognizing both the quality and substantial content found on AGD. You have to keep in mind that from our perspective, we have had an extremely long career. We started in 1979 through various acts (preceding Syzygy) wherein there was lots of writing, recording and touring. The number of albums distorts the reality of the epic of time over which we've been playing professionally. Each Syzygy album is sort of a "greatest hits" of each era of our careers. Those three albums span from 1984 – 2009 which is 25 years. So AGD became a quarter-century retrospective of our growth as artists. We invested heavily both financially and with our blood, sweat and tears as artists to neatly close this chapter.

- How and who made the decision to have a "guest" vocalist for your third album (Realms of Eternity)?

I made that decision. It was part of that maturation between the second and third album I referred to earlier. We were ready to have a voice that suited the subject matter as well as the sophistication of the underlying music.

- How has Mark Boals contributed to the sound of the band? What does he give you that you didn't have before?

Mark's voice is a first-rate professional instrument with a classical and rock timbre. His voice truly personifies our music. He also

opens up more possibilities performing live with harmonies and allowing us to focus as instrumentalists. It's a perfect match.

- You have received many positive reviews and your music is compared to bands such as King Crimson, Yes, Kansas, Genesis, and Spock's Beard. Do you agree with these comparisons or do you think that it can be dangerous to raise expectations too high of people that listen to you for the first time?

I think the comparisons are a natural part of the process which occurs when less familiar acts emerge on the scene. People use these comparisons to quickly characterize what they think you sound like so they can easily describe your music to others. I completely understand and accept that. By the way, those are formidable names in the business and I am honored to be mentioned in the same breath. I actually recently read a piece where a critic described another band as sounding like Syzygy! We've entered a new phase.

The second part of your question is interesting. When people compare us to great bands, I understand that that will raise expectations. I am not concerned about disappointing anyone, because I know that true fans of music will enjoy our music even if they disagree with the comparisons others have made. I am pleased with every note we have put out there so I am excited to have new people hear our music even if they were drawn to it mistakenly.

- How did you feel when none other than Steve Hackett called your album "Realms of Eternity" a masterpiece?

It was one of the high points of my career. Validation. The funny part about that story is that apart from playing, we don't spend time together as a group. On this particular evening we had a rare gathering with all our wives on the beach at my lake house. We were sitting around the fire talking and listening to music when our publicist called and read us the letter over the speaker phone. It was a surreal moment and even more bizarre that we were together. It was so fitting and a moment I will never forget.

- Were you able to contact him and thank him for his support?

Oh yes! I offered to come to the UK to thank him in person. It meant so much to me personally.

- What are your favorite bands and your main influences?

All the obvious progressive artists and transitional figures in rock you can imagine (Beatles, Gentle Giant, King Crimson, Genesis, ELP, Yes, Jethro Tull, Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, The Who and on and on). It's hard to single them out because there are so many and you wind up leaving some out. As far as composers are concerned, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Mahler have been most inspirational. Jazz guitar players like Joe Pass, Wes Montgomery, Pat Martino, Django Reinhardt were formative influences for me. As well as Andre Segovia, Liona Boyd, Narciso Yepes on classical guitar; all left a mark. The finger-style of Chet Atkins also made quite an impression.

- What about the future? I hope we do not have to wait more than five years for a new album, in the DVD you say that have a lot of new material.

The future is all about this next phase of growth as composers. I aspire along with my band mates to become the greatest composers of the century over the next decade. I have been undertaking a systematic study of the master composers including instruction, travel, reading and writing about it. We are writing new music and have two albums nearly completed. We have just begun to lay the tracks down in the studio. It may take some time, but the next few years will see us increasingly carve our own distinctive niche and hopefully creating a discernible legacy. I am confident, if God grants me more years, that we can accomplish this ambitious goal.

Thank you so much for the chance to speak with you. I really enjoyed your thoughtful questions!

Saludos,
Oscar LG