

Fear and Loathing in Long Beach

Japonize Elephants ... let's get bizarre

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Kevin McGovern

The new record is a dizzying array of masterful instrumentation that sounds like Bach and P.T Barnum leading an amphetamine-fueled orchestra of crazed and unpredictable players. Many of our readers are new to the Japonize Elephants experience, how would you entice them to listen to this other worldly new record?

Well, think of the album as a story in which not everything is divulged in the beginning but in which it develops throughout the album and characters come and go as the narrative progresses.

Throughout the *Mélo die Fantastique* album, unpredictability is omnipresent, with styles ranging from Appalachia to Country, Swing, Blues, and Baroque. Is this intentional in its origin and how do the varying styles play into the fact that the disc was recorded in several different locations, including your own living rooms.

*The music on *Mélo die Fantastique* is largely a reflection of all of our musical influences. The varying styles and unpredictability is most likely a result of writing music for the individuals in the group and then letting each person's musical voice lead the direction the arrangements take. We don't necessarily seek to create music that is unpredictable, and to us (or at least most of us) it isn't. Although this particular album was recorded in many different locations, the individual songs were pretty much already arranged before we began the recording process. In reality much of the diverse styles present in the music are probably more a result of everyone in the group being in a room together hashing out musical ideas.*

We have many readers into Johnny Cash, Tom Waits, and hardcore punk as their playlist mainstays. How would you lure the “hardcore punk” fan to check out the Japonize Elephants Old Time Eastern Honk Orchestra?

*We have a pretty raw rhythmic core driven by junk percussion (heavy buckets, lamps, etc...) and driving rhythm guitar. Musically we try to really embrace the visceral aspects of music. On this album we also experimented with re-amping the junk to give it a very heavy and punchy feel. The beginning of *The Zorlockian Anthem* is a good example of a super driving section with machine gun like guitar/bass/junk percussion riffs supporting a circusy horn-driven melody. We also have songs about pirates, whiskey, gambling, and debauchery in general.*

Is Burlesque included in the live show? A carnival atmosphere of whiskey drenched belly dancers and back woods erotica flows throughout the disc. Do you consider your music romantic or more sexual in nature?

We don't provide the burlesque in our live shows although I guess there is some sort of a weird circus/pirate clown/whiskey drenched/red neck/belly dancer vibe that does seem to run throughout our music. We do provide quite a bit of banter at our live shows which will no doubt bring tears of laughter to your eyes...or at least to mine. I never really thought of it, but I guess I would say our music is more romantic than sexual, although both descriptions don't seem to fit in my mind. With that said, I hope that everyone feels free to find what they want in our music.

What led to the initial formation of the group, where did you begin, and what has kept you gigging throughout the years from New York to San Francisco to Los Angeles.

David Gantz (junk percussion and vocals) and I (guitar and vocals) began the group in Bloomington, Indiana as an excuse to make up songs. We ended up randomly playing at an open mic in Chicago and soon afterwards we were joined by our likeminded friends that liked hanging out and playing different music with us. The Japonize Elephants has always been a band of friends and that is definitely what has kept us playing for almost 20 years. Moving from Bloomington to San Francisco only solidified the bond and made us more determined to keep it going. We are now spread out between San Francisco, New York, LA, Boston and Italy but the idea of getting together and playing a gig or working out music for a recording definitely brings us together. Basically it provides us with an excuse (not that we really need one) to hang out.

How many lineup changes throughout and is it a natural growing apart or do people decide to leave a recording and touring group altogether because of the hardships?

*I would say that although we have slightly different personnel at our live shows, the lineup hasn't changed and has actually gotten bigger. When we moved from Bloomington to San Francisco we actually did stop playing as the Japonize Elephants for a year or so but then realized we enjoyed it too much to let it go. As the years have gone by we have gotten more spread out throughout the country (and the world) but no one has "left" the group. Because not everyone in the original group could make all of the gigs we began adding people to play their parts. I don't think we've ever thought of anyone as a sub for someone else though. As a result, every album the personnel gets bigger and bigger. On *Mélodie Fantastique* we have a total of 20 musicians.*

What is your biggest turn off with modern media and modern music? Does it affect the band?

I don't really have anything against modern media...I'd like to have less interest based propaganda parading as news, but other than that it is what it is I guess. As far as modern music, I know there's some I love and some I don't really care for but I can't say I'm against any of it.

I love the track, *Mélodie Fantastique*, with its spiraling arrangement that entices and caterwauls at the same time. The sound is very atmospheric and I was wondering if the group has had any soundtrack offers or working relationships with cinema?

Getting into composing soundtracks and syncing is definitely something we'd like to become more involved with and something I've wanted to do more of but never really had the time to get into. We don't have anything we're working on just yet but look forward to seeing what type of opportunities present themselves.

Being from the mid-west originally, what cultural differences in attitude and style do you notice in your current residence of San Francisco? Are your crowds in NYC and LA strikingly different in any areas?

The Japonize Elephants has its roots in Bloomington, IN which is a cool little college town centered around a big university with a great music school. Being a college town, Bloomington is pretty open to other cultures and we were able to really let loose and experiment musically and find people who were drawn to that. We were also exposed to music from all over the world and because of the small town nature of Bloomington we were actually able to meet some of these incredible musicians. For instance, the Master Musicians of Jajuka came to town for a concert and after their show they were looking for something to do so we invited them to our house for a jam session that went until the early hours of the morning. But I digress...as far as our crowds go, they are all over the map. We've played for punk warehouse scenes, jazz festivals, bluegrass festivals, unitarian churches, cafés, art openings, silent films, chili cook offs, new music concerts, bars, theaters, and busked in the streets all over the US and Europe playing for tourists and locals from everywhere...I'm not sure that answers your question. I guess I don't really notice a specific cultural difference in our audience, based solely on local, that I can quantify.

Since 1998, what differences have you witnessed in live and recorded music? Is it a positive or negative evolution? Where do the Japonize Elephants fit, if anywhere, in the music wasteland of 2013?

In music in general I've definitely noticed more and more of a "world music" influence. In modern pop you can hear "eastern" sounds more present either with introduction of new instruments or different types of ornamentation and modes making their way into western music.

Once again, the new record is AMAZING and I recommend all of our readers to catch

the show and pick up the CD or LP! I love vinyl, as I am an avid collector. What prompted the vinyl decision that seems so popular nowadays?

Each one of us in the group has a modest vinyl collection and has always been enamored with the sound and feel of vinyl. The physical format is also larger making the LP more of a work of art. As far as the listening experience goes, it is a little more interactive than cds and way more than mp3s. Because each side can only be 20 min or so, you can't just let the music run on for hours, you have to actually get up and switch sides if you want to keep listening. Also, I really enjoy the concept of the album as a whole work or piece that flows from the beginning to the end and we've always conceived of our music in this fashion. Finally getting the chance to release an LP only made sense.

Any last words of caution, knowledge, or wisdom for our readers? Thanks for hanging out with us!

We hope you enjoy the record as much as we do!