



Interview with Joseph Vargo of "Nox Arcana"

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First off I'd like to thank Joseph Vargo who is an accomplished artist and currently the front-man for the group **Nox Arcana** for taking the time to answer a few questions.

Note: The following interview is unedited and contains comments, language and opinions that are exactly as they were given to the GamingReport.com from Joseph Vargo and Nox Arcana.

Nox Arcana has recently released their second CD entitled "**Necronomicon**", which followed their earlier release "**Darklore Manor**".

Lets start off and discuss some of the background of your CDs for Nox Arcana. As far as your intent for the CD's use, were these designed primarily for the goth scene, gaming, or for any other specific group in mind?

My goal has always been to create a body of work that can be appreciated on many levels. The music is intended to spark the listener's imagination and set a dark mood for a variety of purposes. We include elaborate artwork and storylines to convey our concept, but we realize that many people like to come up with their own ideas as to what it can be used for. Our music is atmospheric and soundtrack-oriented, but we wanted to produce songs that were more elaborate than droning background music. Our songs mainly follow a standard three-part framework which includes verse, chorus and bridge, and it's important that the compositions are built upon strong melody lines. Our CD's are definitely directed towards those who have an affinity for the dark side, but they have distinctly different themes and each has a different feel to it. Whereas "Darklore Manor" utilizes pipe organs, piano, chanting and music box sounds to explore the mysteries of a gothic ghost story, "Necronomicon" relies more on orchestra strings, drums, pipes, guitars and choirs to convey a more exotic, dark fantasy sound.

And what was the specific use for these "soundscapes" that you had in mind when you produced these? How did you envision these being used?

I used to get together with my friends once a week to play D&D when I was younger, and we used movie scores and pieces of various songs to make our own soundtracks to accentuate the experience. When I produced "Born of the Night" with Midnight Syndicate, my initial concept was to create music that could be used for gaming, as well as Halloween parties, haunted attractions, and things of that nature. The tracks with the creepy sound effects and vocal narratives were specifically designed with this in mind. While MS has strayed from this path in the past few years, I have continued my original conceptions with Nox Arcana. Aside from writing songs that were very melody-driven, I also wanted the music to utilize a variety of instruments and tempos to encompass the complete dark-fantasy spectrum. The various tracks range from hauntingly melancholy gothic pieces to creepy and nightmarish pulse-pounding orchestrations. Different people enjoy it in different ways. One of our female fans sent us a letter saying that she listens to our music while taking candlelight bubble-baths. I never envisioned that when we were making the music, but now I can't stop envisioning it.

As far as feedback goes, how are they being used?

We've gotten a lot of letters and emails from fans who have been using it for gaming, mainly for D&D, Vampire the Masquerade and Call of Cthulhu. We had one person who created an entire live-action role-playing game around "Darklore Manor" this past Halloween. Also, theme parks have used our music in their Halloween attractions, including the local Six Flags amusement park and a movie horror host who used it for his video spots. We also get letters from people who tell us it's great music to read to and to just get lost in. I envision them reading Stoker, Poe or Anne Rice by the light of their candelabra. There was one couple who wrote to tell us that they had used it for a gothic wedding ceremony. We think that's terrific.

How did you come to work with William Piotrowski? Who found whom?

I've known William for about fifteen years. I'm very good friends with his entire family. After I stopped working with Midnight Syndicate, I always intended to begin a new musical project, but I was always too busy with my art and writing to take the time to assemble the right musicians. The short version of the story is that I knew William played the piano and guitar, but I never realized how talented he was. After hearing the musical score he created for a video production called Ghosts of Ohio, I asked him if he was interested in working together on a gothic soundtrack. We shared a lot of ideas about what we wanted to achieve with the music. I hadn't touched a piano in years, but when we got together things clicked immediately and we just started writing some great melodies. A few weeks later we were in the studio laying down the initial tracks for "Darklore Manor."

Within Nox Arcana what are your roles? Who writes the music, develops the concepts, writes the lyrics....?

We work on all of our music together, although I'm more of the composer and William is the better musician. I write the majority of the basic melodies then we work together to flesh them out to create more elaborate compositions. We mix every song together but William handles all the engineering and mastering. I develop the concepts and write the lyrics. I also create the artwork and work together with Christine Filipak to design the CD packaging.

Where did the inspiration for "Darklore Manor" come from?

It was based on the legend of a haunted house near Salem, Massachusetts. It's a classic tale of a haunting and as the legend goes, three people went missing in the area on Halloween night several years ago. Supposedly they had broken into this deserted Victorian manor to hold a séance in an attempt to contact the owners of the mansion who had abandoned it years ago. The idea behind "Darklore Manor" was to take listeners on a musical journey through the haunted halls of the mansion on that fateful night. We created specific themes for some of the ghosts, such as the lonely piano melody "Belladonna." Several other spirits were reported to haunt the mansion and surrounding grounds, and area residents even claimed that they were responsible for a series of tragic events that occurred in the area. The house burned to the ground years later and some reports say that the police discovered the skeletal remains of several bodies in the ruins. How much of the story is true remains a mystery, but the legend was a great source of inspiration for us to build upon.

Now with "Necronomicon" it is obvious where the inspiration came from. The question becomes "why"... why a musical tribute to the Mythos and H.P. Lovecraft?

Mainly because I am a huge fan of Lovecraft's writing, and I was surprised that no one had done it before. It's such a fantastic source of inspiration, especially for a concept album. I also wanted to write liner notes that would include brief descriptions of The Great Old Ones and give a general overview of the entire Cthulhu Mythos in order to enlighten the uninitiated and perhaps spark an interest to read Lovecraft's work. Finally, it gave me the opportunity to conjure up some really dark visual elements to create my own version of what I thought the Necronomicon would look like.

Just to jump off topic for a few moments... Now you have been an artist for a while, can you tell us a little about your past major projects that fans may or may not know about, but may want to check out?

In 1991, I established my own business, Monolith Graphics, and began to sell fantasy art prints and T-shirts of my own design at local shops and Renaissance fairs. I started out with some fantasy images of dragons and warriors, but before long I began introducing some gothic elements, such as skeletons, vampires and gargoyles, into our product line. This darker, new direction was well received, and the gothic prints and shirts eventually became our most popular merchandise. Within a few years the business had grown to include posters, stationery and calendars as well.

In 2000, Monolith released the illustrated anthology "Tales from the Dark Tower," 13 gothic tales of vampires, ghosts and other things that go bump in the night are set in and around a haunted gargoyle-encrusted castle known as the Dark Tower. The stories which are based on my artwork were written by various authors. The book is now in its third printing.

The following year we launched Dark Realms Magazine, a quarterly periodical that explores the shadows of art, music and culture. The magazine was created to promote the talents of new artists, writers and musicians. When someone works hard at their chosen craft, I feel that credit should be given where it's due. There's a lot of great talent out there and it's difficult to make a name for yourself in any of the artistic fields, so unfortunately, many deserving artists go unrecognized. Dark Realms provides a format to showcase the works of these emerging talents. The magazine just began its fifth year and it's more popular than ever.

In 2002, we released The Gothic Tarot, a deck of fortune-telling cards that contains 78 original images of gargoyles, ghosts, vampires and dark angels.

We will soon be releasing the first of a series of art books that will feature over 100 original images of gothic fantasy.

Since your musical styles are so similar and seem to have similar target audiences, fans are going to want to know a bit about your work with the Midnight Syndicate.

You were at one point part of Midnight Syndicate. Your bio states:

"Vargo applied his musical influence and trademark title 'Born of the Night' to the band's breakthrough release, which he conceived and produced. Vargo radically altered Midnight Syndicate's sound, giving the band a new direction..."

What was your role with them and how did you influence them? Did you write the music (or take part in it)? What can you tell us?

I met band founder Ed Douglas when he attended a showing of my artwork at my gallery in Cleveland in October of 1997. He had already released one CD, the self-titled "Midnight Syndicate," but it wasn't anything like the kind of music they do now. The CD was a hodge-podge of musical styles including country, rockabilly, easy listening and rap. Because it contained so many styles, the CD couldn't find an audience, but there were a few darker ambient tracks that really stood out to me. A few months later we talked about working on a project together. At the time, my work had become quite popular and I had already made a name for myself with the rapidly-growing goth crowd, so I suggested that we streamline the music to focus on the darker aspects to create a new kind of Halloween music CD. I heard promise in some of Ed's new demo material and decided to work with him and I invested my own money to fund the entire project. We laid the old Midnight Syndicate to rest that day and a new band rose from the ashes.

Ed wanted to work with another local musician named Gavin Gozskas because he had a recording studio set up in the spare bedroom of his parent's house where he lived. Gavin's first few demos didn't exactly fit in with what I was trying to achieve, but he slowly began to come around. I gave him one of my calendars and he used it as inspiration. My role was mainly as producer and artistic director, but I also told them exactly what I wanted to hear on the tracks; ominous strings, haunting pianos, tolling bells and lots of ghostly choirs. At my insistence, several of the songs were re-worked to fit the concept. Now admittedly, I'm a major control freak, so I realize that I may not have handled some things as diplomatically as I could have with them. This led to some resentment on their part, but I knew exactly what I wanted and I was paying for everything so I got the final say. I also wrote and recited various verses to accentuate some of the tracks and add an otherworldly voice to the music. Once the music was shaping up, we agreed to title the CD "Born of the Night" to tie it into a series of calendars, t-shirts and prints I had created that were selling very well. I also came up with all the song titles, basing them on some of my other popular works. Once the music was done, graphic designer Christine Filipak and I put together the packaging and designed numerous ad campaigns to promote the CD. The new sound and

look was very well received and established us in the realm of gothic music. CD sales skyrocketed, prompting us to follow the same formula on our next release "Realm of Shadows."

Can you tell us why you were not part of their later releases?

Now you're getting to the dirt. After I had invested so much money, time and effort into launching Midnight Syndicate, those two ingrates, who, I might add, never once thanked me for handing them their careers on a silver platter, didn't think they needed to pay me for my artistic and musical direction anymore. Ed Douglas, who is a major butt-weasel, was overcome by his own ego and began leaving my name out of interviews and not giving me credit for my contributions. He actually began telling people that I just did the artwork and even tried taking credit for some of the things that I had done. He had the gaul to give an interview where he said that he had always intended to do gothic music. What a load of crap. He had every opportunity to create a gothic soundtrack on his own, but instead, his first attempt at a music CD, the self-titled "Midnight Syndicate," which he produced and wrote himself was a mixture of rap, country and other silly-sounding songs with titles like "Wall-2-Wall Karpit" and "Wamma Wamma Jamma." He lists the album as "out of print," yet he's re-pressed the other CD's dozens of times. The truth is that Ed's first Midnight Syndicate album was a major embarrassment and after it failed miserably he was ready to hang it up. He would never have released another album, let alone a gothic soundtrack, if it wasn't for my intervention

The final straw came after Ed called me, practically in tears, over a scathing review of our album "Born of the Night" that was posted on an online goth zine. This review was so bad that it was almost funny, but he was so bummed-out over it that I felt bad for him and told him that I would contact the publisher to see what I could do. I got the review removed but things got nasty and I ended up burning a bridge with a publisher that I had been friends with. After the smoke cleared, Eddie boy donned his butt-snorkel and contacted the publisher to tell her that he had nothing to do with what I had said, when in fact, he had put me up to it. When that got back to me, I decided to finish my work on "Realm of Shadows," wash my hands of the project and never work with them again. And I can honestly say that I couldn't be happier. Their next few albums were tepid and uninspired and lacked any sense of conceptual theme.

One of the reviews of Darklore Manor states:

"Former Midnight Syndicate mastermind Joseph Vargo is back with a vengeance..."

Could you elaborate on this? Why "with a vengeance"?

It's no secret that there's bad blood between us now. After everything I had done for this couple of local unknowns to get them to where they are, these two clowns tried omitting my name from copyright forms and the BMI registry for the tracks I wrote and performed vocals on. They attempted to re-negotiate our contract to cut me out of my fair share of the profits from the albums I had worked on and invested my own money in. They've tried to rewrite history and paint me out of the picture on several occasions. They actually did remove my image from a group shot of the three of us when they posted it on their website. These guys know me very well as someone that you wouldn't want to mess with, yet, to throw more gas on the fire, Ed started a smear campaign on his own fan-site, under his ridiculous pseudonym Carl Shadow, that painted me as the devil, and even tried to sabotage the Nox Arcana project. Of course he tried to deny it when I confronted him about it. That's just part of his spineless nature. Neither of them dare to come anywhere near me, and that's a smart move on their part. It's ironic that their greed and ego fanned the flames of my vengeance and motivated me to prove that I was a major factor in creating their style. I still collect royalties from the two albums I worked on with them, and the supreme irony is that I funded the entire Nox Arcana project with the money I earned from the MS project, so in a sense, not only did they create their own competition, they also funded it. That's true genius for you.

As far as Nox Arcana goes, what is your next move? What is next on the Nox Arcana horizon? Can you tell us about some of your current or future projects?

Our current project is a musical ghost story for the holiday season entitled "Winter's Knight." We're using orchestra strings, pipe organs, harpsichords, choirs and tolling bells to achieve a dark, gothic Christmas feel but we are also utilizing more acoustic guitars for a medieval minstrel sound. We'll also be working with some guest vocalists and have a few tracks with singing. We wanted to have it done before Christmas, but we decided not to

rush it, so we're taking our time with the music and it should be out around February or March. After that, we will return to our gothic horror roots and begin work on a much darker album that will be released around Halloween. Beyond that, we've got three major concepts that explore various other dark avenues.

Do you plan to ever do live performances? Is that even possible with this type of music? Do you have any plans for it?

We do plan on performing live, but not until after we have a few more albums under our belts. I have some pretty elaborate ideas for our stage show that would incorporate a moody light show, moveable backdrops and a cast of actors, but it's going to take some time to put it all together. To be honest, I'd rather create and develop a dark fantasy computer game.

Where can fans find your CDs?

They can get the CDs at the Nox Arcana website <http://www.noxarcana.com> and the Monolith Graphics website <http://www.monolithgraphics.com> as well as CDBaby and Amazon. Hot Topic carries the "Darklore Manor" CD, however, they deemed "Necronomicon" too dark and demonic to carry in their stores.

Finally, is there anything that you would like to say to your fans?

We love hearing from you, and we take your comments to heart. We have our own ideas of what directions we want to pursue, but we also take our fans suggestions into consideration.

Thank you very much for the interview and for giving me the opportunity to set the record straight.

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