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INTERVIEW WITH NOX ARCANA'S JOSEPH VARGO!

There's no better mood music for people like me, who like the spooky, than the TEN albums released by the awesome *Nox Arcana*. Consisting of two guys, Joseph Vargo and William Piotrowski, the band has been together less than five years, and in that short time, have managed to become THE definitive creators of spooky music in time for everyone's favorite holiday, PAULOWEEN (Joseph, give me a call – think that would make a great album title – ha!). Speaking of Joseph Vargo ... in time for Nox Arcana's upcoming [ELEVENTH studio album](#), we sat down with Vargo to talk about all things Nox Arcana – the new album, the books, the art, and...hidden puzzles in the artwork?

Here's a little bit about Vargo:

Joseph Vargo, composer, founder and producer of Nox Arcana, is also an internationally acclaimed gothic fantasy artist and writer. His artwork graces the covers of numerous magazines, books, and cds. He began his own publishing company, Monolith Graphics, in 1991, which is now a world leading producer of gothic and dark-themed products. In 1998 and 1999, Vargo produced and directed the gothic-themed albums, *Born of the Night* and *Realm of Shadows*. In addition to music, Vargo has created various artistic and literary projects including *Tales from the Dark Tower* and *The Gothic Tarot*. His artbook, *Born of the Night: The Gothic Fantasy Artwork of Joseph Vargo*, features a collection of over 100 paintings and illustrations from about 1988 to 2005. Vargo's latest book, *The Legend of Darklore Manor and Other Tales of Terror*, contains 13 sinister stories including the novella that chronicles the grim history of the haunted mansion that inspired Nox Arcana's debut album.



What goes into coming up with ideas for a new album?

When we began Nox Arcana, I had a lot of concepts for various dark musical soundscapes in mind. Some were original, while others were based on literary works and classic horror themes. Many of our concept albums pay tribute to things that inspired my own creative dark side, such as the works of Poe, Lovecraft, Stoker, and even the Brothers Grimm. The goal of Nox Arcana has always been to immerse the listener in a haunted realm that specifically reflects the concept and storyline of our chosen theme. We strive to cover every aspect of the theme with a mixture of haunting melodies, creepy sound effects, ghostly narratives, chanting choirs and pulse-pounding orchestrations.

We started Nox Arcana with a list of concepts, and decided to go with a haunted mansion theme for our first CD. I came up with a general outline for the history of an abandoned mansion called *Darklore Manor* and we began writing themes for several of the mansion's rooms and ghosts. The story of the house developed along with the writing of the music, so much so, that I later expanded the liner notes into a novella. This formula worked very well and we continued the process of fleshing-out the music and story ideas of our albums simultaneously.

We have a lot of variety in our themes, so we like to alternate the concepts of our releases between horror and dark fantasy. We have a long-term goal for Nox Arcana and we're always plotting what our next few CDs will be well in advance. If we write a melody or song that doesn't exactly fit the theme of our current album, we save it for a more appropriate CD before we develop it. We've held back on some really good songs for several CDs simply because they conveyed a different mood than the one we were creating at the time. Because of this, we now have an extensive library of original songs and melodies that are waiting in the wings for future concepts.



Darklore Manor, the first album from Nox Arcana

After 11 albums now, do you have trouble coming up with new and original ideas?

No, the well is far from dry. We still have a substantial list of album ideas and we add to it every year. Most of our future CDs will be based on original concepts that pay homage to classic horror themes. We also get a lot of suggestions from our fans, who offer some really good ideas. I love to be able to make my dreams, and nightmares, a reality.



Blackthorn Asylum, the new album from Nox Arcana

Tell us a little bit about the story behind *Blackthorn Asylum*.

We set *Blackthorn Asylum* in the 1930s and revisit the dark domain of H.P. Lovecraft. The plot builds upon Lovecraft's short story "From Beyond" and adds some creepy new twists. Blackthorn is a sanitarium for the criminally insane that is run by a doctor who conducts horrible experiments on his patients in an attempt to extract the physical essence of evil. No one knows what happened, but for some reason the place was shut down and abandoned, and is now believed to be haunted by the tormented souls of the dead. There are also dark rumors that something unnatural was unleashed by the doctor's diabolical experimentation, and whispers tell of a dark force that dwells in the shadows of the forsaken asylum.

What kind of sound are you going for in *Blackthorn Asylum*?

Ominous, creepy and unnerving with brief moments of haunting respite to ease the mounting tension and dread. It's a place where bad things

happened, so there's a brooding sense of nostalgic horror combined with a bleak echo of tragedy and sadness. Some of the melodies have a dissonant sound to create a feeling of madness, while other songs pay tribute to the work of some of my favorite soundtrack composers, specifically John Carpenter's scores for *Halloween* and *Prince of Darkness*, as well as Jerry Goldsmith's theme for *The Omen*. The Asylum operated in the 1930's, during the early experimental years of brain surgery and electroshock therapy, so there are some very unsettling sound effect pieces incorporated between the musical tracks.



Phantoms of the High Seas, Nox Arcana's
Tenth Studio Album

Actually, since it wasn't that long ago, tell us a little bit about the process of creating *Phantoms of the High Seas* also. How do you have the time to produce such a frequent output of new music?

We had previously done CDs centering around a haunted mansion and a haunted carnival, so we wanted our next excursion into the domain of the undead to be something different. I love pirates and ghost stories, and thought that the film *Pirates of The Caribbean* did a terrific job of combining the two elements. I came up with a story about a ghostly pirate vessel named "The Tempest" that haunts the sea in the misty dead of night. The first half of the album consists of dramatic fantasy adventure music that conveys the feeling of marauding pirates on the high seas. The second half is much darker, setting the haunting backdrop for the spectral ghost ship that is cursed to sail the fog-shrouded ocean for eternity. The album has some of our most powerful work and even contains a hidden quest to discover a lost pirate treasure.

William and I dedicate some very long hours to working on our albums. I have a professional studio in my home, so I spend a lot of time there tinkering with new songs. Between the initial writing stage and the final mastering stage, each CD takes between 700 to 800 hours of studio time. Considering the fact that all of our CDs have 21 tracks, it averages out to almost an entire week in the studio to write, record, mix and master each individual track.

Why does every album have 21 tracks? Is there a significance to the number?

We are contractually bound to put 21 tracks on all of our CDs. It's part of our pact with the Devil. Seriously though, we get a lot of questions about that and the easiest way to explain it is that 21 has just kind of become our magic number. It's part of our original formula. It enables us to divide the album into three parts, each with seven songs to convey the introduction, middle and finale. This gives us lots of creative flexibility to try some new sounds and incorporate some familiar themes with each of the three parts. Also, since our tracks aren't that long, it allows us to put over an hour of music on each CD. We just started doing it with our first album and we never broke tradition.

I notice you have some pretty cool storylines behind your albums, and art to accompany the ideas. Have you ever thought about fleshing out these tales into something larger, like you have with *Darklore Manor*?

Since the majority of our work is instrumental music, the storylines help establish the mood and flow of our CDs. Some people envision their own story while they listen to our CDs, and that's fine—I love to inspire creativity. But most people really like to know the history and plot behind our albums, so we provide plenty of details and artwork to create a vivid picture of the musical realm they are exploring.

Since some of our albums are based on classic literary works, they supply a fitting soundtrack to reading gothic horror. I think that the themes that are based on original concepts, such as *Winter's Knight*, *Carnival of Lost Souls*, *Blood of the Dragon* and *Phantoms of the High Seas* would lend themselves very nicely to being adapted into short stories, novels, computer games or films. I'm always cooking up new schemes, so you never know what direction some of our future projects might take. I'd love to construct a haunted murder mystery mansion based on *Darklore Manor*.

Speaking of *Darklore Manor*, tell us a little bit about the book for those who may not be familiar with it.



The Legend of Darklore Manor and
Other Tales of Terror

When the CD came out in 2003, we posted a detailed history of Darklore Manor on the Nox Arcana website, complete with photos and news reports. Over the years we received several letters from curious fans who wanted to know if this legendary mansion actually existed. I had previously written numerous short stories for the book *Tales from the Dark Tower* and also for *Dark Realms Magazine*, so I thought it would be cool to write a story that embellished the website history and fully explained the Darklore Curse. The story "The Legend of Darklore Manor" follows a group of paranormal investigators who explore the abandoned mansion in 1967. They encounter several spirits of the restless dead and awaken an ancient entity that hungers for human souls. Years later, the surviving members of the group are plagued by nightmares and they return to the mansion to face their darkest fears.

The finished product turned out to be much longer than I had originally planned. We decided to publish it in a collection with other horror stories that I had written, along with stories from Joseph Iorillo and Timothy Bennett, in an anthology titled *The Legend of Darklore Manor and Other Tales of Terror*. The other stories deal with horror topics ranging from living gargoyles and urban legends to creepy dolls and secret societies. It's the kind of book that's perfect for a midnight read.

I know time is of course an issue, but have you thought about an ongoing, web-based storyline, along the lines of what was done for *Darklore Manor*, leading up to the release of the new album? Almost like a game, such as what Universal Studios did last year leading up their Bloody Mary Halloween Horror Nights event.

We actually do have online stories for all of our CDs. There's a page on the Nox Arcana website called "[Legends](#)" where people can get a full history of each of the dark realms we explore with our albums. Every story is accented by creepy artwork and there are hidden links to other pages that lure unwary visitors deeper and deeper into our shadowy domain. There will be a new page dedicated to the sinister mystery surrounding *Blackthorn Asylum* before the CD is released. It will show the final pages from a doctor's journal that was discovered inside the abandoned sanitarium. We haven't incorporated any video footage into our legends yet, like the Bloody Mary teaser, but we may in the future.

For the art side of things, is there going to be a collection of Nox Arcana pieces one day? Is there already one and I'm just ignorant? For fans of your art, what can we pick up to get our fix?

I've toyed with the idea of putting out a book containing a compilation of art and stories from our CDs, but I haven't really given it serious consideration. I do have an art book that contains over 100 of my original paintings and illustrations, including work from the first few Nox Arcana CDs. The book, *Born of the Night: The Gothic Fantasy Artwork of Joseph Vargo*, is available from the [Monolith Graphics website](#) or from [Amazon.com](#).

What is this I read about puzzles on your CD packaging? Am I just that oblivious?

Don't beat yourself up over it. The vast percentage of people who own our CDs don't ever realize that there are puzzles and coded messages hidden in them. It started when we were developing *Blood of the Dragon* in 2006. I wanted to create a general quest that could be used by RPG Dungeonmasters who utilized our music for their games. I wrote the song "Treasure of the Four Crowns," which had lyrics about a fabled treasure that was hidden in ancient times, and then got the idea to hide the entire quest in the CD, utilizing the booklet, packaging, disc and music to conceal the clues. Part of the lyrics to the song state that a cryptic key to finding the treasure is concealed beyond a black barrier behind the Dark Lord's throne. The back of the CD case shows a dark warrior sitting in a black throne.



Blood of the Dragon

SPOILER ALERT! If you pry the black CD case apart, you'll discover a circular design that holds four ancient alphabets and four coded quest objects. Other messages are hidden in the booklet that lead to other secrets. It's very elaborate and fairly difficult, but it's a fun challenge. Since then, we've incorporated various themed puzzles and riddles into all subsequent releases, and even included them in the reprints of our earlier releases. Currently, 9 of our 11 CDs have some sort of hidden puzzle or quest. Only an elite few have solved all of them.

All of our CDs have elaborate booklets filled with artwork and stories, but the puzzles are an added bonus that no one else offers. It's a lot of extra work, but my twisted mind has fun putting it all together. The puzzles serve as rewards for the people who actually buy our CDs instead of downloading them.

Any hints on the puzzle for *Blackthorn Asylum*?

The puzzle involves discovering what happened in the asylum that caused it to be abandoned. The website will contain lost journal pages that include a list of patients and the various dementias that plague them. Fans of Lovecraft should recognize many of the names on the patient list. The mystery revolves around the horrific experiments conducted by the sanitarium warden, Dr. Aldritch, and discovering the identity of an inmate known only as "Patient X." The clues are concealed inside the CD booklet and packaging, but delving into the mystery surrounding Blackthorn Asylum may drive some people to the threshold of madness.

I know it's only May, but any idea where we might be able to hear your music this October? Have you already been in talks with any amusement parks? I know, locally, I was pretty upset to hear "The Dark Knight" soundtrack at Busch Gardens in Virginia, instead of Nox Arcana music.



Carnival of Lost Souls

Hopefully they'll be listening to it in their own homes, but if you visit any local or national haunted attractions during the Halloween Season, it's a pretty safe bet that you'll be hearing our CDs. Universal studios plays *Carnival of Lost Souls* and *Grimm Tales* to enhance specific themes in their Halloween attractions. Busch Gardens used to use *Darklore Manor* for a haunted wedding ceremony that they acted out. It was very cool. I'd like to see them do something more creative like that in the future.

I won't ask you to pick favorites of course, but have you attended any of the events that your music plays at, like Halloween Horror Nights or Howl-O-Scream at Busch Gardens?

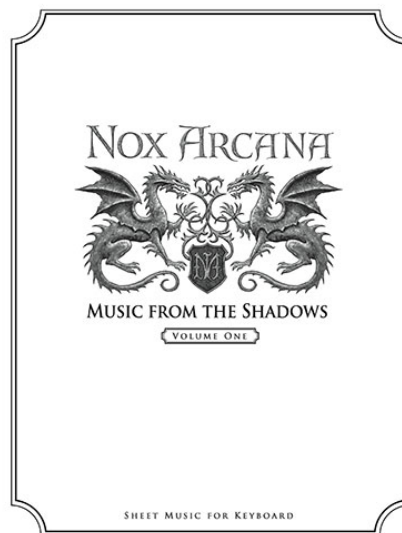
My schedule is always pretty hectic during the entire month of October, so I rarely get a chance to visit some of the big national Halloween attractions, but I get detailed reports from friends and fans who attend events around the country. There are several attractions that have been based entirely around some of our CDs like *Darklore Manor* and *Carnival of Lost Souls*. It think it's terrific that so many people are inspired by our music.

Tell us a little bit about the Nox Arcana songbook, “Music from the Shadows.” What was your thinking for releasing it, and what went into choosing the songs that made it to the final book?

We were getting a lot of letters and emails from fans requesting sheet music for specific songs, so William and I discussed the possibility of putting together a book of some of our most popular tracks. After seeing videos on Youtube with fans performing their own versions of our songs, we realized that there were a lot of young musicians out there who were actually craving something dark and classical to play. We chose songs that were originally written for the piano and picked an even selection of pieces with varying degrees of difficulty—21 to be exact. We’ve already gotten requests for new songs to be included in our next volume.

I know the answer to this, but where can our readers find their Nox Arcana goodies?

Our music is available at: <http://www.NoxArcana.com> as well as Amazon.com and at Spirit Halloween stores. My art book, Gothic Tarot cards, and other cool stuff are available at: <http://www.MonolithGraphics.com>.



The Nox Arcana songbook, Music from the Shadows

What’s next for Nox Arcana?

We have a side project in development with our friend Jeff “Buzz” Hartz. He put together some really cool horror-themed techno/industrial tracks centering around a zombie invasion, so we’ll be working with him to produce his first CD, tentatively titled “Zombie Influx.” After that, we’ll begin work on the next Nox Arcana album. I’ve already got a lot of material written for the next two CDs, so we should release yet another album before the end of the year. Somewhere down the road I’d love to create a computer game based on one or more of our albums, and possibly even a movie or two. The possibilities are endless in the shadowy realm of Nox Arcana.

Keep it tuned here to IoM to find out how you can win a signed copy of Nox Arcana’s ELEVENTH studio album, *Blackthorn Asylum*! And for more info on the band, check out their [official site](#)!



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