

TheDay.com - Nox Arcana

By Rick Koster

Halloween sound effects used to be a fairly simple concept. Your Dad, wearing a Frankenstein mask, jumped out from behind a tree on Halloween night, screaming, "BOO!" at trick or treaters. Or you played a cassette tape during your pumpkin-carving party. You bought it at Hallmark and it had a series of bump-in-the-night noises, eerie organ chords, wolf howls and disembodied screams.

Enter Nox Arcana - a musical duo that might be thought of as the Emerson, Lake & Palmer of Halloween music. Comprised of keyboardist Joseph Vargo and multi-instrumentalist William Piotrowski - and based in the decidedly non-Transylvanian environs of Cleveland, Nox Arcana (Latin for "night thoughts") actually make lots of money recording conceptually dark, spooky, mostly instrumental albums.

Some of the 10 CDs in their catalog are "Carnival of Lost Souls," "Darklore Manor," "Shadow of the Raven," "Winter's Knight" and the just-ready-for-release "Phantoms of the High Seas." Each CD is based on a story line conceived by Vargo and fleshed out by Piotrowski. The packaging, liner notes and individual and collective songs are all part of the story.

"Carnival of Lost Souls" is a sort of "Something Wicked This Way Comes" construct, for example, while "Shadow of the Raven" is inspired by Edgar Allen Poe and "Phantoms of the High Seas" invokes the idea of spectral pirates and Flying Dutchmen.

Intriguingly, Nox Arcana CDs are distributed nationwide in Spencer's Gifts franchises and the company's Spirit Halloween stores that pop up every September in malls across America.

Recently, Vargo took a few minutes to answer some questions.

Q: How big was it to get the Nox Arcana albums in all of the Spirit Halloween stores? That's sort of like the Eagles releasing their latest album exclusively in Target stores.

Vargo: It's great to be able to reach a mass market with our music. It exposes more people to something that they don't normally get to hear on the radio. I actually got my first big break in 1997 when Hot Topic started carrying my gothic t-shirts, posters and calendars. Once we started producing CDs they distributed those as well. Spencer's started carrying our CDs and posters a few years later, and now they have their own chain of Halloween stores with Spirit. Nox Arcana has been their top-selling artist ever since they started carrying our music. We sell to hundreds of other stores worldwide as well, and all of our merchandise is available on the Monolith Graphics Web site and through Amazon.

Q: Is it hard to get inspired on Nov. 2, for example - just after Halloween - or in December when Santa and reindeer and happy people are everywhere? There's the "Winter's Knight" album, of course, where you invoke the sort of Dickensian holiday ghosts. But is a sunny March day spooky enough for you?

Vargo: We write music all year round, but we usually work at night, well beyond the midnight hour. We don't limit our music to just the Halloween season. In fact, I'm always so busy during October that we hardly ever do any work in the studio the entire month. I think that most creative people have vivid imaginations that allow them to dream up new ideas and bring their visions to life, but we also get a lot of letters from writers, artists and fellow musicians telling us how our music inspires them.

What drives me crazy is seeing Christmas decorations in some stores before Halloween even rolls around. I'm no Scrooge, but my holiday spirit wears thin when stores start cramming that stuff down their customers' throats two and a half months ahead of time. Wait till after Thanksgiving before breaking out the mistletoe.

Q: Are you surprised by the scope and variety in terms of how the music of Nox Arcana is used?

Vargo: We've gotten letters from fans who say that they use our music for everything from gothic weddings to romantic bubble baths and our CDs are played in every major haunted attraction across the country.

This year a company designed their entire haunted attraction based on our "Darklore Manor" album, and Busch Gardens created a haunted wedding performance using only our music. Last year, Universal Studios chose our "Carnival of Lost Souls" album as their main theme last year. It's amazing the amount of work that goes into creating events like these, so we really love it when our music is part of the program.

Q: Do you worry there is a finite number of creepy topics for inspiration?

Vargo: Honestly, no. I have so many more ideas for concept albums that I don't know if we'll be able to cover them all in my lifetime. Our fans are also constantly suggesting themes for our CDs. We've covered my favorite gothic themes with tributes to Poe, Stoker and Lovecraft, so our future concepts will focus on original story lines along the lines of "Darklore Manor," "Winter's Knight" and "Blood of the Dragon." We're only limited by our own imaginations, so the possibilities are endless.

Regional