



Escape into a realm of your own imagination

Interview with Joseph Vargo

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Let's start the conversation by going back in time, to your childhood. Tell us something about the period when the fascination with horror films and monsters, with one word, the dark side of existence, sparked a fire in you that keeps on burning to this day?

I'm not sure where the fascination came from, but I've always loved anything to do with monsters and the supernatural. In my youth, I was constantly drawing dragons, vampires, werewolves, gargoyles and other nightmarish creatures. I watched horror films on TV whenever I could, and those movies were my first exposure to the classics of Gothic literature. I loved the old black and white *Universal* horror films, *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *The Mummy*, *The Wolf Man*, and *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*. My interest in Edgar Allan Poe began after watching the American International films based on his stories, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, and *Masque of the Red Death*. The more frightening something was, the more I was intrigued by it. I think my parents thought it was just a young phase in my life that I would outgrow, never thinking that I would someday make a living following my dark passions.

H.P. Lovecraft wrote, "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown." I think fear evokes a primal excitement that is mentally stimulating to many people. Whatever the case may be, my fascination with the dark side is still very strong and has been my biggest inspiration, continually driving me to create art, music and literature that reflects my love for all things gothic.

It is known that Frank Frazetta had a major role to play in your further development as an artist. What does this legendary icon mean to you?

Frazetta was a modern artistic genius that influenced an entire generation of fantasy artists and filmmakers as well. His work is so vibrant and filled with raw energy, capturing the primal essence of his subject matter at the peak moment of action. I remember going to a local bookstore when I was a teenager and seeing one of Frazetta's art books. I stood there mesmerized as I turned the pages to see barbarian warriors, monstrous beasts and provocative women in shadowy, fantasy settings. The images stirred something in my subconscious and in those few moments, I realized that this was the type of art I wanted to create. When I attended art school a few years later, I was disappointed that no one could teach me how to paint like Frazetta. But that kind of genius and passion can't be taught. You must have your own passion that drives you to express the ideas that haunt the shadows of your mind.

All of my earlier paintings were heavily inspired by Frank Frazetta's work. Slowly I began to develop my own style, although Frazetta's influence was still evident. My success with art allowed me to pursue my other passions such as music and writing. I often think that if it were not for Frazetta's inspiration, I may never have pursued or fulfilled any of my artistic dreams.

We know that in 1997 you opened your own fantasy art gallery known as *The Realm: Showcase of the Fantastic*. Are you feeling nostalgic for those years of the last century, or are you maybe planning to open a new gallery or maybe a project similar to it?

The Realm gallery was a great experience, although it was very short-lived. I have many fond memories of what we accomplished there. My partner, Christine Filipak, and I renovated the top floor of an old warehouse to reflect the gothic fantasy style of artwork we exhibited, creating lancet window arches, free-hanging walls and stone columns surrounded by gargoyles. Attendance was very good among Goths and the fantasy crowd, but the gallery was never really embraced by the media or general public. Even though we exhibited the works of artists who were world-renowned, the local press in Cleveland gave us very little coverage, due to the fact that their arrogant critics did not consider fantasy art to be fine art.

Building *The Realm* was quite a challenge, but running and promoting the gallery was not as exciting as creating new works. I have quite a few other projects that I want to complete, so I don't think I will ever have the time to open another gallery, however, a few years after we closed the doors of *The Realm*, my company, *Monolith Graphics* published a magazine called *Dark Realms* to showcase emerging talents in art, music and literature. We ran the magazine for eight years, and during that time we featured hundreds of artists and bands that explored the dark side with their work. It was very satisfying to be able to help like-minded artists gain exposure.

In 2003, you formed the band *Nox Arcana* along with William Piotrowski and throughout all of these years what kind of a journey did you take on to get to where you are today, with 21 thematic albums that your fans can get a hold on?

Though I had been in a few rock bands, I always loved instrumental music, especially horror film soundtracks. After achieving a level of success with my art and other musical projects, I decided to create a series of moody, immersive concept albums of haunting melodies and sound effects that revolved around specific gothic themes. I teamed with William, who was only 15 at the time. Aside from his musical skills, he possessed an amazing aptitude for studio engineering. We built our own home studio and began writing and recording every day. Within a few months, we had created the first *Nox Arcana* album, *Darklore Manor*. The haunting music was accented by eerie sound effects and ghostly narratives reciting creepy poems, sinister nursery rhymes and even spells from the black books.

Over the next few years, we released a series of albums based on various dark themes that intrigued us. The concepts of the albums ranged from haunted Victorian mansions and creepy carnivals to Grimm fairy tales, ghostly pirates and sword and sorcery. We paid tribute to some icons of gothic literature, such as Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft, and even released several albums for the winter holidays. *Nox Arcana's* music has been used in television, independent films and computer games, and has been performed by two different orchestras. The music is moody and melodic instrumental music inspired by classical composers such as Beethoven and Mozart, as well as modern soundtrack composers such as Ennio Morricone, Wojciech Kilar, John Carpenter and Danny Elfman. William left the band in 2009 and moved to Los Angeles to pursue a career as a film composer, but I continued *Nox Arcana* as a solo project and have produced nine albums on my own since then. William and I are still very close friends and he continues to act as the studio engineer for the mastering process of all *Nox Arcana* albums.

Your multi expressionism and talent as an illustrator, musician and writer, all take you on a journey through the world of art, and the dark mythical side of the human existence. Today's modern society has a very fast way of living. How do you manage to nurture your artistic potential and at the same time find Gothic inspiration in this twenty first century, where the whole world is connected via social networks, and it's all about power, money and corruption?

Creating art or music allows you to escape the world around you and envision a realm of your own imagination. It's very common for artists to disconnect and withdraw from social surroundings during the creative process. I prefer to shut myself off from the distractions of the everyday world in order to focus on my craft. I don't have any personal social media accounts and I don't text. I really enjoy spending time together with my friends and would prefer to engage in a discussion with people whose company I enjoy, rather than type messages to strangers I met on the internet. I work out of a home studio where I paint, write and produce music. The main room is decorated with gothic paintings, skulls, swords, gargoyles and other sculptures. It's important that your surroundings set the proper mood for your work. I tend to work at night, when there are very few interruptions or distractions. When I'm in my zone, I can work all through the night without taking a break.

When you work on several projects simultaneously, how do you prioritize between them?

I am constantly juggling ideas for various projects in my head, so even when I focus my mind on one project, I'm also thinking about several others throughout each day. Over the years, I've learned to jot down notes so I don't forget any good ideas. I also try to give myself strict deadlines for every project, otherwise I might never quit tinkering with the final details of whatever I'm working on.

When I work on a *Nox Arcana* album, I begin by writing music to fit the theme, then I work on developing the concept story and finally, the artwork. The whole album develops at the same time in my mind. On the earlier albums, I had a lot of existing artwork that I used, so I wrote the concept story to fit these images, but even then I always had to create a few pieces of new art to fill in missing details once the musical story was set. Some parts come together more smoothly than other parts, so I'm always prepared to spend more time on whatever needs the most work.

How many times have you reread *Dracula* from Bram Stoker and the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe?

I tried reading *Dracula* when I was a teenager, but lost interest in the book before I finished it. I was only 14 or 15, and like most teenagers, I preferred the visual stimulus of movies to reading classic literature. I read the novel again several years later and loved it. One of the things that really influenced me was how Stoker combined elements of horror and gothic romance to weave a fantastic and timeless tale. He researched the various vampire myths and combined them with the sinister lore surrounding the historical prince Vlad Tsepes to create a classic character in Count Dracula, the vampire lord tortured by lost love and his own dark desires. Our album *Transylvania* paid homage to Stoker's novel with a mixture of brooding horror themes and hauntingly beautiful compositions, and Stoker's influence is also evident throughout my *Dark Tower* book series.

As for Edgar Allan Poe, I have read all of his stories and poems numerous times. His work had a profound influence on me as well. Poe was truly a tortured soul, misunderstood and even despised by many of his peers. He had a very dark and vivid imagination, creating tales of madness, mystery, vengeance and sheer horror, yet many of his stories and poems had an underlying theme of deep-seeded love and tragic loss. I paid tribute to Poe with the *Nox Arcana* album *Shadow of the Raven*. Several of the tracks were musical interpretations of his classic works, such as *The Tell-tale Heart*, *The Black Cat*, *The Pit and The Pendulum*, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, and of course, *The Raven*.

Who of the new artists have got your attention with their way of thinking and talent?

As for art, I've seen a lot of beautiful dark works on *Deviant Art* and other sites dedicated to the young artistic community. Even though many of the contributors aren't professional artists, a lot of their work is really fantastic. I always prefer physical paintings over digital art, but over the past decade, digital artists have been creating some amazing pieces. I admire artists who are driven to create simply for the love of their art. Before I was ever published, I had painted more than one hundred fantasy paintings that filled a spare room of my home. As soon as I finished one, I would begin another, as if I were obsessed by some dark muse. I believe all true artists have to surrender to their obsessions in order to truly express what they are feeling deep inside.

Musically, I love hard rock and metal, and I'm impressed by the new wave of female-fronted rock bands that have a dark bite like *Halestorm* and *The Pretty Reckless*. There are so many terrific artists and bands on the internet that are not published by any major labels. It's difficult to name just a few. Because of the internet, these artists can get worldwide exposure. However, the internet also makes it very easy for people to steal any artist's work. We are constantly combating internet pirate sites that share and illegally sell our music. These sites all get millions of dollars from advertisers, yet none of the artists ever get paid. Bands put a lot of their own time and money into writing, rehearsing and recording their music. If you like a band and want to support them, buy their music, don't steal it, otherwise, they may not be able to afford to make any more music.

What are you working on at the moment and what can your fans expect from you in the near future?

All this year I have been working on a gothic adventure computer game, based on the *Nox Arcana* album, *Theater of Illusion*. The game itself is accented by my gothic artwork and music, as well as dozens of diabolical puzzles that unlock several dark secrets as the story progresses. Players will find themselves trapped inside the abandoned mansion of a sinister magician who mysteriously vanished long ago and must search the creepy manor to find a way to escape. It's a real labor of love to put together a game like this, so it will consume most of my creative energy this year. By the end of the year, I will create new musical tracks for my annual *Ebonshire* holiday release. I started doing it in 2013, after I finished my trilogy of winter albums and have released three or four tracks each year. After that, I have several other ideas for new projects. I always have more ideas than time, but eventually, I'll complete all the projects on my list. It's just a matter of staying focused and being diligent.

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