

S i x O r g a n s o f A d m i t t a n c e

Organ The First



You wouldn't get much disagreement from me if you suggested that there is a spiritual dimension absent from a lot of music that lies under the rubric of "rock" these days, be it either popular, underground, or the "alternative" nether-zone that lies uncomfortably somewhere between the two. Which is why I need to tell you about the extraordinary journey of guitarist Ben Chasny from the obstreperous acid-scrrawl nihilism of his first band Plague Lounge to the transcendent acoustic majesty of Six Organs of Admittance - now his main, and largely solo, focus. It's pretty likely that you are going to hear a lot about Six Organs of Admittance from now on, because the recent "Dust and Chimes" CD on Chasny's own Pavilion label is one of those records that uproots listeners from the everyday and transports them into an altogether altered reality - one that is both haunted by dark species memories, and enchanted by things that perhaps exist, and perhaps don't. Wherever they go - these listeners - they don't come back the same, and when they come back, they speak in strange tongues.

"Dust and Chimes" starts with a 90 second track comprising little more than the rumbling of cavernous bass drums accompanied by temple bells - a strange processional track which makes sense (maybe) once the title, 'Stone Finder's Verse I', is known. This track is a perfect lead-in to the torch-lit medieval world of "Dust and Chimes", and what follows it represents one of the most perfectly constructed acid-folk meditations since the golden age of the Pentangle, Incredible String Band and C.O.B. Not only has Chasny utterly absorbed the European pagan aesthetic of the 60s psychedelic folk movement, he has also tuned in to the whole maverick 60s folk-blues guitarist axis from Renbourn and Jansch on one side of the Atlantic to Fahey's Takoma luminaries on the other. When 'Stone Finder's Verse I' segues into 'Assyria' with a brief hallucinatory moment of backwards tape conjuring followed by a quicksilver shower of acoustic guitar notes and charmed vocals, it's apparent that there is some pretty potent mojo at work. Other absolute corkers are the divinely melodic 'Blue Sun Chiming', where Chasny's rich vocals get an airing; and the 10 minute solo guitar excursion 'Journey Through Sankuan Pass', the unfettered passion and skill of which confirmed for me that Chasny has the ability to close the gap on the masters should he decide that he wants to. Finally, 'Dance Among The Waiting' burns a mantra across the sky with the sort of beauty and strangeness that might result from a campfire collaboration between the Supreme Dicks and the Tower Recordings.

Listening to Chasny's guitar, I think of Basho and Bull first, for the eastern influences and open-ended experimentalism of the playing, then Fahey for the soul and melancholy of it all, then Kottke for physicality and harmonics. Chasny only partly confirms my thesis: *"I enjoy listening to Fahey, but he has never really been an influence on my playing, at least not directly. I think Kottke has been a fairly big influence as far as the "lets see how I can drive this melody into the ground" approach to manhandling the acoustic guitar goes. A lot of my solo acoustic playing works with the treble strings wandering around a drone, which I think comes more from listening to some of the English guitarists like Bert Jansch, Nick Drake and John Renbourn. I have actually never had a chance to hear Basho or Bull, though I would like to, as people keep telling me I would enjoy them. The more experimental elements of my music usually arise from a need to convey an abstract "wilderness" element to contrast the "civilized" structures of the preconceived musical systems which I use, such as tempered scales, melodies and chords."*

Organ the Second



But we should begin somewhere near the beginning of the journey, in 1996 in a dank basement with Plague Lounge, and three pretty pissed-off sounding youths sending roaches and rats scurrying in terror before the maximum night of their excoriating acid rock onslaught. Picture a heavily-drugged Fushitsusha playing a gig in an underground cavern. Now imagine it being recorded topside via microphones buried in the soil and then cut onto wax cylinders. With that in your mind you are near to the experience of the Plague Lounge LP "The Wicker Image" on New World of Sound/Holy Mountain. The cover adds to the effect, with a reversed print of a wicker sacrifice stuck on to a plain card sleeve. Everything is focused inwards to the point of autism, portraying a private ceremony between three people utterly indifferent to what the outside world might think of their creations. Unsurprisingly, Chasny doesn't have a lot to say about this period of his development, and is unlikely to tell his grandchildren about it. He will maybe tell you that *"the Plague Lounge were some teenagers who just wanted to play loud music. I think Hendrix and Haino were probably a bit of an influence, as well as the other PSF rockers. It was real chore to keep the band from sounding like some Dead C rip off since the bass player didn't have an original bone in his body and would've made us sound like a cheap imitation if he could have. The band broke up because the other members just had no passion for creation at all. Finally I just said 'forget this shit' and the Six Organs was born. The other members haven't made a sound since"* or maybe he will say nothing. But at the end of the day the Plague Lounge LP is an intriguing but flawed document, containing some blistering acid guitar torching from Chasny but let down by poor sound and ludicrous vocals.

At the same time as the Plague Lounge was going on, Chasny was involved in an acoustic project with violinist known only as Aolani. They called themselves Eta Corina, and released nothing, although they did record. The material that I have heard

reveals a wonderful Yin to the Plague Lounge's Yang, with Chasny's intricate and highly skilled classical guitar forming an airfield from which Aolani's bright violin excursions could really take off into a sky that a pilot would grinningly describe as eight-eighths deep blue and cloudless. There is a touch of Windham Hill to it all, but the best of it recalls the ozone-headiness of the Jefferies/Lonie underground classic 'At Swim Two Birds', a fine thing to get anywhere near. Most importantly, the musical relationship between Chasny and Aolani was to be crucial signpost to the direction that Six Organs of Admittance would take. I asked him about her:

"Aolani's actually a really amazing woman. We've known each other since we were about 8 years old. She used to be in a hardcore band called Sak that was pretty popular in that particular scene in the US. I had the Plague Lounge and she would scream her head off in Sak and then the kids couldn't make head nor tail of it when we got together to play as Eta Corina. Those were fun times. She's a big fan of Diamanda Galas and Kronos Quartet. We used to play at this open mike coffee house with bluegrass bands and folkies and hippies and such. They never knew how to peg us. One thing, though, is that everybody thought that it was her band and even that her name was Eta Corina. The Eta Corina stuff is mainly interesting from an archival point. We broke up because I wanted to do more psych-folk things like Six Organs and she wanted to continue in the compositional style of Eta Corina. Musically, my guitar approach on the Eta Corina stuff has more of a classical leaning with less drone and more bass lines and counterpoint playing. Aolani really helped me figure out the guitar and how to play it the way I wanted. She's been exploring the world for the last couple of years. Last I heard she was living in an abandoned pueblo outside of Madrid with her Spanish boyfriend. She might play with Six Organs when she returns."

Existing in the dimensionless transition zone between the Yin and the Yang is one other Chasny project, Badgerlore, subject of a CD-R co-released by Pavilion and White Tapes in a quantity of only 50. It is a splendid black-on-black card package held together by a band of eucalyptus bark, no doubt making it an interesting challenge to bring through customs. Chasny provides some background:

"Badgerlore is a mostly quiet electric improv duet with the guitarist for Deerhoof, Rob Fisk. He's a dear friend and has taught me many things regarding the approach to music, art, and life itself. I don't think the Six Organs of Admittance would sound like it does without him. So, even though the CDR is pretty abstract, and sounds radically different to Six Organs, it is actually tied to the same source. One might think of the Six Organs and Badgerlore as two manifestations of the same essence of being. I'm not saying people have to like it as much as my other music. But it may help them understand where it comes from."

The seven tracks on Badgerlore CD-R explore Chasny's experimental side, which is always present in the background of the Six Organs material, but never really given reign. An exercise in the pure electro-acoustic hum and scrape of highly-amplified string instruments, the Badgerlore recordings are aligned sonically with Japanese and NZ free noise, celebrating texture over structure, atmosphere over development. It is the sounds your house makes when you are in bed late at night and you think you hear the front door being opened. Edgy and riveting listening, most certainly, but still with the sense of strange rituals being conducted among inscrutable redwoods about it.



Organ the Third



aving arrived in our journey at mystical sign that reads "Six Organs of Admittance", one of the first things that should be cleared up is that name. Possibly just words arranged in an eye-pleasing fashion, or perhaps (and most likely) some careful philosophical construct, relating sound, soul and meaning. According to Chasny "The name originated from the Buddhist concept of the five senses plus the soul, which make up the six organs of admittance. I believe that different schools of Buddhism may have variations on that concept. It is a somewhat dynamic phrase that has universal ties to various spiritual traditions and religions as well. Lately I have considered the sixth organ not to be the soul but to be the active imagination that provides access to what the late philosopher and mystic Henry Corbin called the "mundus imaginalis", that place where visions and prophetic dreams exist between the corporeal world and the world of spirits."

When Plague Lounge called it a day, Chasny decided to return to the type of music that he could conceive of himself without having to worry about the lack of motivation and derivative tendencies of others. His most successful collaboration to date had been with Aolani in Eta Corina, who had helped him understand what he wanted to do with traditional folk forms. She played on the first Six Organ of Admittance release, a self-titled LP on Pavillion, creating a buzzsaw drone on the second track 'The Sum of All Heaven' with a detuned hand-made electric violin. Other than that, most sounds on Chasny's new project were to be self-generated. The 1998 debut LP (great hand painted cover) starts dramatically with short modal improvisation that recalls Davey Graham, underpinned by a pulsating bass drone that makes you want to tie down any loose objects within range. Nothing really prepares you for 'The Sum of All Heaven', though, which will have you tying *yourself* down to avoid premature ascension to the nearest waiting sky palace. Nearly 18 minutes of kaleidoscopic sound: elegant folk guitar, the aforementioned skull-buzz of detuned violin, Ben and Aolini's zoned "heading for the sun" chant, more acoustic guitar sections backed by spooked electronics and feedback, finally reaching a quiet temple space with just bells and thoughts for company. Simply one of the most extraordinary pieces of psychedelic music of the 90s. Side two offers two more glorious short instrumental pieces, and the wild 'Race from Vishnu', played in a mode that was created for an Eta Corina song and conjuring a swirling maelstrom of lightning modal guitar that would have a troupe of whirling dervishes utterly knackered and calling for time out.

I asked Chasny whether he thought the Six Organs approach had changed between the self-titled LP and the 'Dust and Chimes' CD:

"There is definitely an evolution intended between the two records. The LP was created from culling my acoustic work and trying to create a particular listening experience from what I already had, though some of the music was recorded with the thought of putting it on the LP. With the CD, I was much more conscious of an exact experience that I wanted to produce. The first song recorded was 'Dance Among The Waiting'. Once written, I tried to keep that song as the ideal path for the listener. Much more time was taken to really map out the listening trajectory and experience of the disk, which isn't to say that I think the LP is inferior at all. The LP has a spontaneity of execution that is a little more brisk than 'Dust and Chimes,' which I tried to make up for by including songs like 'Oak Path' on the disc. That song is basically the first take of a late night acoustic meditation. I also worked more with overdubbing acoustic parts on the disc, something I was hesitant to do with the LP."

The most recent Six Organs release is a lathe-cut 12" called "Nightly Trembling", containing two extended tracks that demonstrate that the river of inspiration is not going to run dry anytime soon. But it seems only fair to defer discussion of this material until a forthcoming "proper" release, since the lathe-cut was done in such a tiny quantity, is not readily available, and is in any case "challenging" sonically, in the best tradition of the polycarbonate medium.

Organ the Fourth



here is a magical sense of place in the Six Organs of Admittance records that Chasny explains thus:

"There are a few small towns that are closely situated together. The closest city is San Francisco, about 270 miles south of here. Eureka is the largest local town. It has a population of about 30,000, I think. A little to the north of that is Arcata, the last great hippie bastion in America. A little to the north of that is McKinleyville, a tiny dirtspeck with some stores and gas stations. I generally move around between these local places. The LP was recorded while I was living in Eureka and the CD while I was living in Arcata. However, I grew up in a tiny house at the end of a place called Elk River Valley. We had a gigantic redwood tree in our yard and Elk River flowed through our backyard. My childhood was spent climbing trees and playing in the forest and exploring the woods. I think my music draws a lot from those places I used to visit and hide in the woods when I was a child. I recently went back to visit that place. Memories of childhood reveries flooded my senses and it was so powerful. I realised that my folk music comes from this place and the trees, smells and all the feelings that are locked up and the only way back to them is through music. Many times, in my acoustic improvisations, I aim to reach a state of consciousness where the reveries flow and are transmuted into sound. Sometimes I don't even know where my mind has been until I listen back to the recording. Then I will smell or hear things from where I had just been in my mind. Also, when I sing of the 'magic' of the woods it's not from reading Tolkien or listening to goblin rock, but from the memories I have of the woodlands being very mysterious and filled with danger and magic when I was young. Those elements were important for the past recordings. I was in a very stable space emotionally when I wrote that music, which allowed me the comfort of letting my mind explore. I'm not so sure about the future music that will be created though."

Something else that gives the Six Organs of Admittance material great resonance is the way it is recorded, which isn't lo-fi by any means, rather it is home-recorded in the best kind of way, with great immediacy and intimacy. Chasny explains, "I record on a Tascam 4-track Portastudio. The guitars are actually recorded with a mike in the sound hole, something that I'm sure would make a studio tech cringe, but since I have fairly crappy guitars it doesn't really matter. I like the fact that the mike touches the wood of the guitar, almost like a contact mike that picks up the movement of the instrument. Sometimes you can hear the rattle of the guitar in the recordings, especially towards the end or beginning of the songs. On the solo acoustic pieces another mike is set up in standard fashion. The "Dust and Chimes" CD was recorded in a house by a highway so I had to do most of the recordings late at night, something that probably influenced the aura as well."

Organ the Fifth



s far as I know, the Six Organs of Admittance has only played live once, with a band Chasny assembled to play on a recent bill with The Sunburned Hand of Man, John Fahey and No Neck Blues Band in San Francisco. It was apparently a little difficult to cast the same range of spells in a live environment.

"We were pretty nervous since it was our first show ever", explains Chasny, "and the show was fairly quiet which meant that people had trouble hearing us. I'm not really the kind of person to get up and talk to the audience to figure out what the best situation is. I just try to do the best I can by adjusting the given parameters but I understand that it must have been frustrating for some people. Oh well. If I had banged on a huge drum and howled the whole time the avant set could've rubbed their chins and thought, 'post-primitive experimental.' But when confronted with people playing as sincerely as they can, but for some reason they are difficult to hear, it didn't necessarily register well with everyone. We did get a range of really good responses though, so I guess some people did hear it. It was also a case of the place having the loudest damn refrigerator I've ever heard in my life. The people in the No Neck Blues Band and Sun Burned Hand Of The Man were really nice though and wanted to trade music, so that made us feel better since we really enjoyed listening to those bands."

Organ the Sixth



uring our series of exchanges, I make Ben Chasny a copy of two essential LPs, 'Seal of the Blue Lotus' and 'The Grail and the Lotus' by legendary folk guitarist Robbie Basho, the artist that he is most often compared to, and that he had not previously heard. His reaction was interesting:

"The Basho tape is really something special. I guess I kind of expected the same Takoma moves as the rest of those guys but he really has some unique methods of communication. I love the way Basho digs his whole fucking hand into the strings like he's digging into the earth looking for water or something."

Wherever Basho is now, I hope he can hear the Six Organs playing. I reckon he just might be smiling if he can.

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Notes:

1. The Plague Lounge LP "The Wicker Image" was also reviewed in PT24
2. The debut Six Organs of Admittance record was reviewed in PT26

Discography:

- 1996 Plague Lounge LP – 'The Wicker Image' (New World of Sound/Holy Mountain)
- 1997 Eta Corina – unreleased tapes
- 1998 Six Organs of Admittance LP – s/t (Pavilion PVL-001)
- 1998 Badgerlore CD-R – s/t (Pavilion PVL-002/White Tapes whi8.CD)
- 1999 Six Organs of Admittance CD – 'Dust and Chimes' (Pavilion PVL-003)
- 1999 Six Organs of Admittance lathe cut 12" – 'Nightly Trembling' (Pavilion PVL-004)