



What can you say about a band named after an Italian folk dance, whose debut release has no song titles and whose stage shows have been known to feature laptop computers? That Tarentel is one of today's most enigmatic rock ensembles is certainly an understatement. Describing their sound to the uninitiated is also a daunting task. Cinematic? Well, their debut full-length ('From Bone To Satellite') was named after the single greatest edit in the history of cinema (from Stanley Kubrick's '2001: A Space Odyssey') and guitarist Jefre Cantu-Ledesma believes it would form the perfect soundtrack to Werner Herzog's 'The Great Ecstasy of the Sculptor Steiner.' A subsequent EP, 'Looking for Things, Searching for Things' also derives its title from a classic film, Terrence Malick's 'Days of Heaven,' and guitarist Daniel Paul Grody ("Grody") confesses that "films have largely influenced our work." [When asked if there was any interest in writing or performing a film soundtrack, drummer Jim Redd told me, "We've been working with a projectionist and filmmaker named Paul Clipson. He's been projecting at all of our shows, and in general, has been pretty integral to the new songs. We actually just finished a song/film for an upcoming Neurot Recordings CD/DVD compilation, but are really just getting started. Several of the songs on 'From Bone to Satellite' and 'The Order of Things' have been used in various films, the most recent and interesting of which is probably 'The Weather Underground,' a documentary film by Sam Green."]

Elsewhere, the band's style has been likened to that of the ever-growing population of post-modern, math rockers. Besides their computer toys, the double vinyl edition of 'Satellite' features bonus tracks with song titles that look more like machine code ('\$\$\$' for example) than sonic descriptions. And while Redd agrees (somewhat) with critic Simon Reynold's oft-quoted definition of 'post rock' as "*bands who combine guitars with digital technology, who abandon riffs for non-rock textures and dynamics...*," he is quick to clarify:

"...personally, I'm not a big fan of definitions. They too quickly become clichés, stereotypes, or styles adopted by less interesting people. If the question is, 'Are we a rock band who explore non-rock ideas?' Then yes, I would agree to that. We play two gui-

tars and drums, and are just as interested in sound and improvisation as we are in melody and song form. But there's a caveat. I find a lot of new instrumental music bland. The reason that it's bland, however, isn't because it's instrumental or 'post rock.' It's usually to do with a lack of identity. It's music that doesn't know historically where it's come from or how it sits in relation to other music currently being made... or that neither of those lines — vertical or horizontal — run very deep."

Space rock? How's 'Ursa Minor, Ursa Major' and 'For Carl Sagan' for song titles? How about criticism that the music is little more than 21<sup>st</sup> Century elevator Muzak? Grody thinks that says more about the critic than it does about their music: "That kind of criticism can only come from a standpoint of incredible bias, or someone

who has no clue as to the history of music itself. It's too much of a sweeping statement to take seriously. It reeks of being jaded, a term I prefer to avoid as much as possible. I'd like to think people can go deeper than that when listening, but I suppose we all have our own orientations."

Then there's those song titles, which have occasionally been branded as little more than pretentious twaddle. Of course, releasing something called 'It's in you right now, just get still, think about it, I am light filled' (from a split 7" with Rothko) isn't going to help your cause. I asked the band if they felt titles were an annoying necessity for identification purposes, but Jef says, "No. I think lately it's become a lot more fun. We've even started to name songs after what they sound like, for instance on the new record: 'Klankity-Klank.' Which makes

a lot of sense when you listen to the record." As for the source of such gems, Jef adds, "Books, movies, inside jokes, world events, etc."

What we do know for certain is that in the spring of 1995, Cantu met Grody at a Mojave 3 concert in San Francisco. [Early biographical reports of them attending (and meeting at) the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) contained, according to Grody, "playfully added facts and embellishments with no other intention than to be ironic and silly."] A mutual admiration for the music of Virginia band, Labradford led them to take a stab at creating instrumental soundscapes of their own. Jefre: "Danny and I had some mutual friends at the concert, started chatting about music and that was that. I had already been playing with Trevor Montgomery for a few months, we



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BY JEFF PENZAK

had met the year before in art school. We played our first show in my house in October, 1995. Aside from Danny and myself, lots of folks have come and gone.” [I’ve counted eight members, past and present, over the band’s ten year existence, Danny and Jef being the two constants.] Danny continues, “Jef and I got on real well. We shared a lot of musical interests and were both interested in starting a band. We started off playing acoustic guitars together in his living room just to feel things out. We seemed to connect right off and decided to bring in other players and instruments—bass, keys, samples. This went on for awhile until we decided to incorporate drums and expand the palette a bit. John Huges stepped into the picture and Tarentel took form. The following years involved a host of line-up changes exemplified by many of the releases, which brings us to where we are now: Jef Cantu, Jim Redd, and myself.”

That constantly evolving line-up saw Kenseth Thibideau (bass,) Jeffrey Rosenberg (he of the aforementioned laptop) and Patricia Kavanaugh wander in and out of the group over the next couple of years. Kavanaugh left in ’98, followed by Thibideau in early 2000 to concentrate on his Rumah Sakit and Howard Hello projects (self-titled debuts available on Temporary Residence). Rosenberg quit in August, 2000 to work on his new project, the sonically similar Lumen, whose debut (a ridiculous 46-word title usually abbreviated as ‘The Man Felt An Iron Hand...’ - see related discography below for full title) was also released on Temporary Residence. Even Montgomery quit briefly in ’99, only to return a few months later. He briefly toured (with Grody) under the name The Drift. His current solo project is called Lazarus and his debut album (‘Songs For An Unborn Sun’) is a pun on the working title of Tarentel’s ‘The Order of Things’ (‘Songs For An Unborn Son’) Grody explains, however, that “Trevor was deeply involved in ‘The Order of Things’ and had originally come up with the idea of ‘Songs for an Unborn Son.’ Naturally, when he left and went on to his own pursuits, he chose to use that title because it was a part of him.”

Redd is the most recent addition to the line-up, although he’s known the band members for several years: “My previous band, Sonna is from Baltimore, Maryland, and we all toured the East Coast together a couple

times, and kept in touch ever since. When I ended up moving out here [to San Francisco] a couple years ago, it just made sense to start playing together.”

Obviously, stability is not a strong point with this group (an early 7”, later reissued and expanded on the album, is curiously entitled ‘When We Almost Killed Ourselves’), but Cantu sees these changes as positive contributions to the overall tension which their music evokes:

“It’s actually really been great. I think a lot of the changing of the sound of the music is due to new people coming in and out. The first EP doesn’t sound anything like ‘The Order of Things’ to me. And in turn the new LP [‘We Move Through Weather’] doesn’t sound anything like the last. I think this is one of the things that makes the music really interesting for us. I’m sure we can all name a few so called ‘post rock’ bands without trying very hard, that have released any number of records that all pretty much sound the same.”

With new personnel come new ideas and Grody agrees that this contributed to the evolution of the band’s sound. “Sure, we’ve had turnover over the years and I’m very grateful to have worked with each and every person who’s come and gone. It’s part of collaboration, some stay and some go. Bands change and so do the members and their ideals.”

Having survived these early growing pains, the band turned its attention to developing a unique sound, something that would incorporate the members’ many influences without resorting to mere copycat fanaticism. Redd’s favourites include John Coltrane’s ‘Meditations,’ ‘Led Zeppelin II,’ Neil Young’s ‘After The Gold Rush’ and the work of James Turrell, Gordon Matta-Clark, and Tom Friedman, while, besides ‘The Buddha,’ Cantu has been “listening to lots of jazz, lately: Don Cherry’s 70’s stuff, any Albert Ayler I can get my hands on, Peter Brotzman, Miles Davis’ 70’s stuff...lots of Jamacian stuff & some Afro Beat, Neil Young, Devendra Banhart and Laddio Bolocko.”

Some may also detect more familiar influences on the debut album’s first track, ‘Steede Bonnet,’ where “echoes” of Pink Floyd (pun intended) can be heard in the expansive atmospherics which meld the opening strains of ‘Shine On You Crazy Diamond’ with Kubrick’s use of ‘Also Sprach Zarathustra’ as ‘2001’s opening

theme. The cinematic influences continue with a guitar line lifted from Angelo Badalamenti’s theme from ‘Twin Peaks.’ Elsewhere, ‘When We Almost Killed Ourselves’ revisits the angular, syncopated rhythms of King Crimson (a band who were also no strangers to internal strife) before yielding to guest Michael Carrington Taylor’s haunting lap steel flourishes, which recall The KLFs ‘Chill Out’ release nearly twenty years earlier.

Even the album’s two epic centrepieces, the 18-minute ‘Ursa Major, Ursa Minor’ and the 20-minute ‘For Carl Sagan’ have an air of familiarity about them. The former begins with the immediately recognizable guitar pluckings of Yes’ ‘Roundabout’ before Kraftwerk’s motorik ‘Autobahn’ riff takes over, propelling the track along to a cacophonous explosion of white noise. The latter benefits from Cantu and Grody’s hypnotic guitar interplay in the finest tradition of Felt and Television, although both tracks are permeated throughout by the loud/soft, fast/slow dichotomies that invited early comparisons to Godspeed You Black Emperor and Mogwai. Indeed, the entire release ebbs and flows as tensions mount until the bottom falls out and the listener is left suspended on a cloud of meditative guitars anchored by Hughes’ jazzy drum fills.

On later works, such as ‘The Order of Things,’ the band leave no doubt as to who some of their biggest influences are with songs like ‘Popol Vuh.’ While some readers may be familiar with the trilogy of songs with the same title by Flying Saucer Attack or the great krautrock band of the same name (which is essentially the solo project of Florian Fricke), Jef tells me the song is “actually a reference to the ‘Popol Vuh,’ which is the creation story of the Maya,” although Danny adds “We came up with the title more out of Florian Fricke’s work which we actually first discovered through the films of Werner Herzog.” Nevertheless, Jef confirms, “I do love Florian Fricke and Flying Saucer Attack,” and, while also “a big FSA fan,” Danny confesses that he “had no idea about the trilogy until you asked the question...”

I also hear vestiges of the soundtrack work of Ennio Morricone, particularly his guitarist, Alessandro Alessandroni throughout Tarentel’s discography. Some of the sections on the ‘Fear of Bridges’ EP are excellent cases in point. Grody acknowledges Alessandroni’s influence, “Alessandroni’s work, particularly

Morricone’s soundtrack work has absolutely had an impact on us. Such seminal stuff! Everyone should know about it.”

In spite of, or perhaps, due to criticisms levelled at ‘From Bone To Satellite’s’ kitchen sink approach, the band’s next release, the full-length EP ‘Looking for Things, Searching for Things’ saw them focusing on their strengths, namely, the use of improvisational, repetitive, instrumental music. While Jef admits the lack of vocals is due to the fact that “No one can sing, really. If I could sing I totally would,” and Redd offers, “The goal now is to make music where vocals would seem absurd,” Grody elaborates on the band’s predominantly instrumental releases:

“It’s hard to explain the shift in the emergence of instrumental bands. I suppose, it’s always been there lurking beneath the surface. Eventually something/someone punctures that surface into a more accessible format that people can digest and the window opens for others to follow. We formed as an instrumental band partly on our own volition and also due to the kind of music we were listening to at the time. Bands like Tortoise, Labradford, Flying Saucer Attack, Stars of the Lid, Eno... Many of these groups set the standard for contemporary instrumental bands to follow. We just happened to be making music in and around the time this was happening. From the get-go we wanted to break down standards of rock music, yet still work within the instrumental set-up because that’s where we came from. We all have our punk backgrounds, which I absolutely feel continues to carry into Tarentel’s work to date.”

People new to Tarentel might also be attracted to what I call the “speaker hum” school of music - sort of a 21st century take on Eno’s “ambient” music. Jefre: “In the beginning Eno’s ambient music was a big influence on me. I’m still totally floored by ‘Discreet Music.’ Although I wouldn’t describe our new music as “ambient,” I think you can draw a direct line of influence from Eno to what we’re doing now.” Danny:

“Speaker hum” school...that’s perfect, I like that. Well I can definitely relate to Eno’s work. Surely it had some influence, conscious or not. There are a lot of groups throughout the years that have gone on to inspire the way we approach music:



Coletrane, Morton Feldman, This Heat..., and those influences continue to evolve and change. It's never ending. What's even more astounding is to look back in retrospect and see those changes take place. A good example might be a band like Labradford. I remember when they meant everything to me. It was like an epiphany at the time that music like that was available and somewhat popularized in independent musical spheres. It helped to reassure my own ideals. Then I came to know that folks like the aforementioned Eno and many others before and after had deeply influenced bands like Labradford. The more I investigated, the more this back and forth was revealed. One couldn't have existed without the other. It's a big web, each a manifestation of itself. I suppose that's how I feel about our own work. Between the three of us is an amazing pool of influences, many of which aren't necessarily music. Some overlap, some disparate, but all are relevant to what is ultimately created."

It is, indeed, easy for the listener to get enveloped by the cyclical guitar lines weaving themselves throughout 'Looking for Things....' Around a simple theme, the group's improvisational skills take over until the air is filled with the spirit of fellow San Franciscan improv legends, The Grateful Dead. When asked if this combination of non-linear improvisation and unstructured composition is something the band plans to pursue, Jefre is quick to clarify, "I wouldn't say we avoid structure or direction at all. I think we just try to move in ways that we haven't considered. And

in my experience thus far the best way to do that is just to play and see what happens. See what the music brings up." Danny adds, "We do make an effort to avoid a certain amount of structure. The direction of our music falls into place as it happens in many cases. You just have to be open to it and listen to each other. The more we work with that in mind, the easier it becomes to let go and simply trust one another with the notion that whatever happens has its place in the experience. Our new work definitely supports this idea. So much of it consists of surprises that came out of improvising with no pretence whatsoever. It was by far the most free I've felt in the context of the studio. So much can happen when music is experienced this way."

As is often the case with improvisational music, the trick is to capture on record that "sound in your head." Redd explains how Tarentel tackles this dilemma:

"We all have sounds in our heads. Stuff we've never heard before, but wish we had... which I guess has as much to do with record buying as it does writing music. So there's that. And then there's the concepts. We all have ideas as to where things should go or what should happen when, but our best stuff comes from just letting go, trying new things, risking sounding stupid, listening to each other, and either trying to do something complimentary, or just swallowing it all up, and taking it somewhere new. Its always changing. We don't have a method, and if we realized we did, we'd immediately try

something new."

Jefre adds, "When we're making music I try to pay as much attention to what is going on as possible. Drifting away or being in my head doesn't interest me at all. Being present and listening are for me the most important aspect to making our music. Moods and general directions would probably be the best way to describe what we're currently doing live. Songs tend to be based on drum patterns and various sound textures rather than x instrument playing x part for x long and so on."

One might be led to believe from all this that a Tarentel live gig could become an endurance test, particularly as there is little conversation with the audience and there are usually no discernible "beginnings" and "endings" to their songs. As Jef says, "Generally, since we don't stop during our set, I think people usually don't know we're done until we say 'Thanks!'" Coupled with the fact that the band is not averse to stretching tracks past the 15- and 20-minute mark, I wondered about the audience's reaction (and patience), but Danny says, "We've been lucky for the most part at our shows. People seem to engage with the sound right off. As far as the end, we've had all sorts of reactions—most of which were positive, but sometimes the hesitance of claps were suspect for sure. I think about when I see intense performances, it definitely takes a moment to "come to" and realize you're in this space with other people who've shared the experience with you. This happens

to me especially in film, where I have a momentary lapse of place and feel very disoriented. I can only hope that people can transcend that way to our work."

The lengths of the songs are also something the band doesn't consciously consider ahead of time. Jef tells me, "We don't really have conversations about how long a piece of music should be. It's more along the lines of 'well that seemed a bit rushed...' or 'that was kinda dragging....'" Danny admits that the band "absolutely" does self-edit, "but it really depends upon the context. In practice, we're usually investigating new ideas and tend to draw things out to exploit that idea and see all the angles. At shows, depending on where a piece is placed in context of other material, we might shorten it or even extend it. Losing control is not really a fear of ours—it's an integral part of our music. To get someplace, we have to give into a loss of control. It's the driving force in many ways."

I have also noted that silence plays a key role in many of the band's compositions. 'Latency B,' for example, ends with an extended period of silence and a track on the self-titled EP even clocks in with two minutes of nothing but silence. Redd agrees, but explains that, while "the 'Latency' 12" gets pretty quiet, there's definitely no silence on it, and although it was before my time, I believe the silence on the first EP is meant as a breather between the Tarentel songs proper and the Lilienthal remix."

Having survived personnel changes and criticisms of wearing their influences on their sleeves, Tarentel soldiers on. 'The Order of Things' was issued on CD and 2xLP in the summer of 2001. A singles collection, including both sides of the 'Looking For Things, Searching For Things' EP ('Ephemera') and the 'Fear of Bridges' CD-EP followed in 2002. In June, 2003, the band released the 'Latency' 12" EP as part of the Dutch 'En/Of' series of musical collaborations with contemporary artists (the signed artwork was created by Jonathan Monk.) Another Jonathan was the subject of their compilation track, 'Wheel Within A Wheel,' as Redd explains: 'For Jonathan' is a benefit CD in memory of Jonathan Hicks who died at age 23 in 2000 of a rare form of cancer. It's the first song we recorded after I joined the band, and is intended as a soundtrack to a short film

by Chris Bennett, a childhood friend of Jonathan's."

Fans may also notice that the band's instrumentation tends to vary with each release, and I wondered if there was any conscious decision to limit the more acoustic, experimental pieces to their compilation appearances. Jef agreed that live shows "tend to [feature] electric instruments aside from the occasional melodica or clarinet. Although we have done a couple of shows with a lot more acoustic instrumentation recently. As for recording, anything goes." Danny says the vehicle doesn't really matter:

"We try not to be exclusive in either direction, but generally with our own releases we have more time and the instrumentation often reflects that. There have been some releases that have had a direct focus that deviated into a specific idea like that of the En/Of series. The release was combined with original visual work from artist Jonathan Monk and we felt it would be appropriate to try something new. All the music was composed on the computer using a collage of sources that included field recordings and live instruments. It was one of the first projects we had done with Jim Redd who was fairly new to the band at the time, so it was a nice trajectory for us. But as far as taking chances, that seems to be the focal point in everything we do, regardless of the type of release."

They continued to tour heavily (including a stop at Terrastock IV in Seattle in November, 2000) and eventually made their way (twice!) over to Europe. The debut release from the new trio ('We Move Through Weather') was released on October 5 on Temporary Residence. Redd says "It was mainly recorded with our friend Jeff Byrd, and partially by us at home. In addition to the three of us, Tony Cross and Steve Dye are on the record pretty much start to finish." [The band also accompanied Cross in concert last January under the name Ambulance Ensemble, so keep that in mind when checking your local gig listings!] It marked yet another musical direction for the band that refuses to sit still long enough to be categorized. The title track has a strong percussive vibe that gives me PIL-like shivers and I wondered if this was something they wanted to explore before, but just got the opportunity since Jim joined the band. Jefre: "Definitely. Having Jim in the band has given way to a lot of new ideas, but also old ones that just could not happen due to the line-up at the time."

The new album also features a harsher minimalism, punctuated by Jim's dominant presence, and his drums eclipsing guitar as the focal point for many of the improvisations. "Get Away From Me You Clouds of Doom" also features a lot of experimental noises, found sounds (electronic and otherwise), and random guitar scrapings that bring Joan of Arc's recent work to mind.

Fans of Jim's previous project may find that the new material sounds more like a new Sonna album than Tarentel, and while he is quick to point out that "Minimalism is a pretty loaded word," he does agree that

"You could definitely call the new songs minimal. It's probably partially to do with us pairing down to a three piece, and partially to do with a mode of working we call the "big black square." For us it's more about being economic; getting the most out of the least by the simplest means. 'Get Away From Me You Clouds of Doom' is totally improvised. With the exception of a guitar and horn part at the very end, it was all done in the first take. With the help of masking tape, looping pedals, and laptops, we're all playing a couple of instruments at once, as well as processing each other's sounds. So even though it's just the three of us, a lot of the time you can't tell what the fuck is going on. That's definitely one of the songs we're most happy with."

"As far as the new songs sounding like Sonna or previous Tarentel, it's definitely there—just because its part of who we are, but I think about it totally differently. Sonna was concerned with dynamic gradients, not having just loud and quiet, but 100 things in between, and by our second record [2002's 'Smile and The World Smiles With You'] the syncopation of everything was definitely maximal. But there was also definitely a concern with things being pretty or tasteful or proportional. And I think that goes for older Tarentel as well. Now, we're all at a point where we're just concerned with different things. Every song doesn't have to sound pretty. They can be pretty, but they should also be ugly, sexy, confusing, chaotic, minimal, maximal, and anything else you can think of. The world's too fucked up right now to just make pretty music."

Completists may want to keep an eye out for releases from several side-projects, including Your Friend, featuring Grody. Jef has also been keep-

ing busy with Joshua Torres [named after his cousin], Colophon [named after the part of a book where the publisher puts their trademark or emblem, and not to be confused with the work of British artist, Ed Powley, who also uses the Colophon moniker], as well as some solo recordings ('Dialogue, Pts 1-5'). Tarentel fans shouldn't be worried that yet another personnel change is in the offing, however! For starters, Grody adds acoustic guitar to the Colophon 'Spring' EP, and Jef assured me that his projects were

"Just to keep me occupied! After 'The Order of Things,' Tarentel took a much-needed break. During that time I worked a lot on producing my own stuff on my computer and at some point I just decided that maybe I could put it out. At the time I think I couldn't really see its relation to Tarentel, or how it would fit in to our music-making process. Danny was really persistent about incorporating some of these elements into our set up, and over time I just got more comfortable using the computer at practice and so the two worlds kinda came together. I still do stuff on my own just out of pleasure and I think I have some ideas which don't necessarily fit into our music making practice. Ultimately, I think I prefer the dynamic of collaboration over working solo."

Besides, the band's upcoming release schedule is very busy, including several CD EPs ('Ghost Weight' is due this fall from Acurela Discos in Spain and 'Paper White' and 'Big Black Square' are on Temporary Residence's Spring '05 schedule), compilation tracks ('Bell Jar' is out now on Temporary Residence's special 50<sup>th</sup> release, 'Thank You,' which also features contributions from Howard Hello, Rumah Sakit and Sonna), a Neurot Recordings CD/DVD, and a TV Pow remix CD ('Powerful Friends and Devoted Lovers') on Bottrop-Boy.

*Written and directed by Jeff Penczak. Tarentel can be contacted via their website at [www.tarentel.com](http://www.tarentel.com).*

## D I S C O G R A P H Y

'Tarentel' EP (1998), Temporary Residence  
'Travels in Constants, Vol. 3' EP (1999), Temporary Residence  
'When We Almost Killed Ourselves' 8" EP (1999), Temporary Residence  
'From Bone To Satellite' (2000) [the 2LP version contains two additional tracks], Temporary Residence  
'Looking for Things, Searching for Things' EP (2000), Resonant  
'Two Sides of Myself, Pts. 1 and 2' 7" (2000), Static Caravan  
'It's in you right now, just get still, think about it, I am light filled' 7" split with Rothko (2000), Jonathon Whiskey  
'Sets and Rises' 7" split with Lilienthal (2000), Awkward Silence  
'The Order of Things' (2001), 2LP Static Caravan/ CD Neurot Recordings  
'Mort Aux Vaches' (2002), Staalplaat (Netherlands)  
'Ephemera' (2002), Temporary Residence  
'Fear of Bridges' EP (2002), Three Lobed Recordings  
'Latency' EP (2003), EN/OF (Netherlands)  
'We Move Through Weather' (2004), Temporary Residence  
'Ghost Weight' EP (Fall, 2004), Acurela (Spain)  
'Paper White' EP (Spring, 2005), Temporary Residence  
'Big Black Square' EP (Spring, 2005), Temporary Residence

## R E L A T E D R E L E A S E S

[Colophon (Cantu)]: 'Spring' EP (2002), Dreams By Degrees  
[Howard Hello (Thibideau)]: 'Howard Hello' (2002), 'Don't Drink His Blood' (2003)  
[Lazarus (Montgomery)]: 'Songs For An Unborn Sun' (2003)  
[Lumen (Rosenberg)]: 'The man felt an iron hand grasp him by the hair, at the nape, not one hand, a hundred hands seized him, each by the hair, and tore him head to foot, the way you tear up a sheet of paper, into hundreds of little pieces' (2001)  
[Rumah Sakit (Thibideau)]: 'Rumah Sakit' (2000), 'Obscured By Clowns' (2002)  
[Sonna (Redd)]: 'Sing Soft Tonight' (2001), 'Smile and The World Smiles With You' (2002)

All (except Colophon) on Temporary Residence. There are also several compilation appearances completists may want to seek out.