

Bio information: **ALEC K. REDFEARN AND THE EYESORES**

Title: **THE BLIND SPOT** (Cuneiform Rune 244)

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**FILE UNDER: ROCK / POST-ROCK / POST-AMERICANA / AMERICAN SURREALISM**

“This is wonderful stuff – brave and experimental, yet warmly human. Make room on your folk revival shelf for something that may be influenced by folk but is in no way a revival.” – *Splendid Magazine*

Post-rock’s magical/“folk” surrealists, **Alec K. Redfearn and the Eyesores** are based in **Providence**, Rhode Island, fertile ground for horror writers (**H.P. Lovecraft, Edgar Allan Poe, Jonathan Thomas**), Italian Mafioso, academics (**Brown University**), colorful politicians (**Buddy Cianci**) and artists of all stripes (**Rhode Island School of Design/RISD**). The band’s music captures that city’s essence, blurring the lines between past and present, fiction and fact, shrouding dark secrets. Simultaneously beautiful and horrific, elegant and lowbrow, playful and cynical, its sound crosses genres as easily as a ghost floats through solid walls. Composed by **Redfearn**, the music combines myriad influences – traditional eastern and western European folk music (including gypsy music), pre-WWII French and German cabaret (**Kurt Weill, Eisler, Bertolt Brecht**), circus music, early 20th century classical (**Erik Satie**), classical minimalism (**Steve Reich**), maverick 20th century Americana (**Tom Waits, Harry Partch, John Cage, Charles Ives**), elements from visionary French iconoclasts (**Pierre Bastien, Pascal Comelade, Albert Marcoeur**), acid folk, noise (radio, paper cutter, alarm clock, telephone), psychedelia, drone rock (**Velvet Underground, Faust**), and more – with a dark, primitive, intentionally rough-edged and gritty, folk-crafted sensibility. Redfearn’s songs, whether instrumental or darkly lyrical, are rhythmically entrancing, evocative and remarkably cinematic, leading one critic to call them “as much stage set as free-standing compositions, a space against which unusual and foreign activities might be acted out.” They share a handcrafted aesthetic with, and can be seen as aural equivalents of, the darkly poetic shadow boxes created by American surrealist artist **Joseph Cornell**, and the enigmatic film fantasies of Czech surrealist animator/filmmaker **Jan Svankmajer**.

A composer, accordionist, songwriter, free improviser and performance artist, **Alec K. Redfearn** was born in Massachusetts. While a teenager in the mid-1980s, he listened to hardcore (**The Minutemen, Meat Puppets, Butthole Surfers**) and metal (**Slayer, Metallica**), and played bass in **Wavering Shapes**, an **SST** influenced band. Redfearn moved to Providence in the late 1980s, becoming involved in the **AS220** arts and performance collective. He began playing self-taught accordion around 1990, while a member of **Meatball Fluxus**, “a Dada, Fluxist performance art group that also did free improvisational music, and...some Cageian things.” He was attracted to the accordion’s “confrontational sound” (his own words); bored with grunge rock, “this lazy revisionist early 1970s thing that was mostly about posturing,” as well as “the twee-pop thing,” he wanted to distance himself from the early-90s rock music that was then considered hip. Redfearn began listening to folk music, intrigued by the stripped-down versions of English, Irish, French and Appalachian folk songs played by Providence’s **Smiling Dog Band**, and began “moving away from...Palmer Hughes tunes and towards these weird bastardizations of Morris Dance tunes and Irish tunes.” He listened to gypsy music in all its global variations, drawn to its scales, “almost like Turkish and Arabic music,” and its intersections with Western music (dance/polkas from Germany and the Czech Republic), as well as listening to a world of other musics outside the contemporary spotlight. In 1990 he started an absurdist “miniature industrial” ensemble called **Space Heater**, which evolved into the **Amoebic Ensemble**. Redfearn composed the bulk of the Amoebic’s music, which used a mix of classical, rock, and folk instrumentation and was influenced by Weimar Republic composers as well as traditional European folk music, free jazz, and punk. Redfearn says that: “the early glimmerings of the noise explosion in Providence made me say, *I could take the music I’m doing now, which was...a mix of circus-y music and all of the folk music I’d been listening to, and then combine it with punk and make it aggressive in the same way those noise bands are...*”

In 1997, after the Amoebics dissolved, Redfearn founded **Alec K. Redfearn and the Eyesores**. Originally a more singer/songwriter oriented project, its music combined the influences shared by the Amoebics (folk music, cabaret, etc.) with a melancholy atmosphere invoked by Redfearn’s bleak lyrics and a more “accessible” sound derived from country and rock music. In 1998, the band self-released **The Eyesores**, a 6 song cassette EP. It was followed by a series of CDs released on a variety of indie-rock labels, which caught the attention of the alt-rock and pop press. In 1999, the Eyesores released a split 7” single with **Iditarod** on **Brentwood Estates**, and also their first full-length CD, **May You Dine on Weeds Made Bitter by the Piss of Drunkards**, on **Magic Eye Singles**. When the Eyesores’ 2nd CD, **Bent at the Waist** came out on **Handsome** in 2002, the webzine *Popmatters* described it as “left-field alternative pop.” **Every Man For Himself & God Against All** (**Corleone**, 2003), the Eyesores’ 3rd CD, was embraced by both the avant/experimental and indie-rock camps. *Dream Magazine* noted that: “From harsh nightmare riddles, to sweetly swooning tranced-out droning somnambulant reveries, or an almost indie-pop brightness, this is all well worth investigating,” praising the “complex mix of psychedelic folk, progrock, old-time country, acidic cabaret, dark circus music, and sinister dream fragments...” To *Splendid*, it was “like tuning into a shortwave station broadcasting **Tom Waits**’ heliocentric brain waves.”

In 2005, **Cuneiform** released **The Quiet Room**, the Eyesores’ 4th CD, which featured an 11-piece band plus guests. Primarily instrumental, the CD included 15 songs (only 3 with vocals) lushly arranged with layers of strings, horns and feedback (electronics, telephones, noise-making devices) over a solid backbone of drums/percussion, accordion and bowed contrabass. Infused with folk rhythms, imbued with a melancholy joy and suffused with occasional showers of noise, the *All Music Guide* described it as “experimental future folk with elements of real dirt and sweat.” Critics called **The Quiet Room** “a delight” [*Copper Press*] and a “gorgeous amalgam of 20th Century Americana, cabaret and theater music, Eastern European folk, noise rock and minimalism...” [*Signal to Noise*]. *Splendid* called it “wonderful stuff – brave and experimental, yet warmly human,” and described it thus:

*“Falling somewhere between psych-folk revival and free jazz, constructed from a diverse and unfashionable set of instruments including accordion, strings, glockenspiel, telephone and pots and pans, Alec K. Redfearn and the Eyesores’ fourth full-length is as bizarre as it is appealing. The pieces change from moment to moment, evoking Eastern European folksongs, Indian sitar music, multi-part madrigals and the sweet-sour celebration of circus music. Although largely organic and hand-fashioned, the tracks also include a substantial measure of electronic sounds...”*

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– Jennifer Kelly, *Splendid Magazine*

The Eyesores’ next CD, *The Smother Party*, came out on **North East Indie** in 2006. Redfearn viewed this music as “the other side of the Eyesores. Songs.” While “*The Quiet Room* hinted at song structure and lyricism...*The Smother Party* puts these elements up front,” noted *Dusted*, diverging from the prior CD’s “drone and abstraction.” A “collection of tales about real and imagined horrors” [*Amazon.com*], *The Smother Party* disguised dark tales within a playful, fairy tale-like lyricism.

*The Blind Spot*, Alec K. Redfearn and the Eyesores’ 6th CD and its 2nd release on Cuneiform, is musically and conceptually the band’s most ambitious work to date. The recording was funded in part by **The Rhode Island State Council on the Arts** and a **MacColl/Johnson Fellowship** from the **Rhode Island Foundation**, and produced by **Rob Pemberton** and **John Jacobson**. It features contributions from 15 musicians: **Redfearn** (voice, accordion, jawharp, organ, slide/fuzz guitar, loops), **Frank Difficult** (loops, processing, electronics), **Orion Rigel Dommissie** (voice, organ), **Jason McGill** (alto sax), **Laura Gulley** (violin, viola, voice), **Matt McLaren** (drums, glockenspiel, percussion), **Ann Schattle** (French horn), **Erica Schattle** (bassoon), **Domenick Panzarella** (guitar), **Steve Jobe** (hurdy-gurdy, drone hurdy-gurdy, gong-drum), **Sarah Tolan-Mee** (volin), **Olivia Geiger** (violin), **Margie Wienk** (contrabass, voice), **Chris Sadlers** (contrabass), and **Ellen Santaniello** (soprano voice). A mixture of classical and folk instrumentation, electronics and processed noise, vocals and several invented/experimental musical instruments (gong-drums, drone hurdy-gurdy), the band’s sound is simultaneously organic and strangely inhuman, primitive and ethereal. Most of the 11 tracks – all composed by Redfearn – feature vocals, sung either by Redfearn in minor key or by several female vocalists. The lyrics, all written by Redfearn, are printed in an 8-page booklet featuring artwork by **Abigail Karp**.

At the core of *The Blind Spot* lays an astonishing 8-song funeral song cycle – “**I am the Resurrection and the Light**” – that Redfearn created as a eulogy for friends who died from addiction and as a personal lament on spiritual bankruptcy, physical addiction and human loss. The song cycle was the culmination of four years of work; Redfearn began developing it in 2003, conceiving, writing and eventually recording the music and lyrics “in layers”. Two tracks feature experimental musical instruments – the drone hurdy-gurdy and gong-drum – played by their inventor, RISD alumni and musician **Steve Jobe**. The gong-drum (built by Providence artist **Dennis Hlynsky** in 2001) was inspired by the instruments (drum, hurdy-gurdy) that **Hieronymus Bosch** depicted in Musical Hell in his painting, “**Garden of Earthly Delights**”. The sounds of these instruments – medieval and strangely primitive, their dark, otherworldly beauty sliding easily into the horrific and hellish – starkly contrasts with the heavenly, ethereal soprano voice of **Ellen Santaniello** and the refined beauty of classical strings (violin, viola). Redfearn’s choice of instrumentation – classical instrumentation and vocals, folk instruments and untrained voice, and hand-fashioned instruments and electronics – is truly inspired, enabling him to express his subject matter in an unprecedented manner. While other rock artists, including **Lou Reed**, **Tom Waits** and **Patti Smith**, have explored the subjects of addiction and loss, and while Reed’s droning sonics and internal urgency have impacted Redfearn’s sound, none has treated these themes in as timeless and universal a manner. “I am the Resurrection and the Light” celebrates death and life, heaven and hell, the spirit and the flesh, deliverance and addiction – and in doing so evokes a medieval Catholic Mass that “celebrates” the death, and rebirth, of Christ. Theatrical in its nature, infused with emotional and spiritual life, the Eyesores’ 8-song funeral song-cycle is more closely aligned with classical opera and liturgical Mass (or “folk” Mass) than 2-dimensional rock songs.

In the 11 songs on *The Blind Spot*, Redfearn explores the wavering veil that separates life and death, heaven and hell, soul and body, fact and fiction, and art and reality. In doing so, he blurs the lines separating musical genres, and folk and fine art. In *The Blind Spot*, he also blurs the line between popular and classical music, the sacred and the profane.

“Always evolving and ever elusive” is how Redfearn has described both his band’s lineup and music. In his own words: “Instrumentally, the Eyesores can at times sound like Weimar period cabaret music, gritty Reich-ish minimalism, Middle Eastern disco, or droning Velvet Underground-style thronging. During any given performance, the Eyesores might number between 3 and 15 people and are just as likely to launch into a chaotic medley of traditional Eastern European melodies which disintegrates into a wall of howling feedback as they are to spin off a delicate and mournful country-pop song.”

Active as a live band, Alec K. Redfearn and the Eyesores has performed widely in the US, done three European tours, and is currently planning a summer 2008 European tour. It has collaborated with both theater and dance ensembles, working with playwrights **Christine Evans** and **Steve Ventura**, and doing numerous projects with the **Everett Dance Theatre**. The group has also worked on film soundtracks, including projects with Providence independent film director **Laura Colella** (*Stay Until Tomorrow*).

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