

What the press has said about:

BEAT CIRCUS

DREAMLAND

(CUNEIFORM, 2008)

Lineup: **Brian Carpenter** (vocals, pump organ, harmonica, trumpet, slide trumpet, toy piano, composition), **Ron Caswell** (tuba), **Käthe Hostetter** (violin, viola), **Julia Kent** (cello), **Alec K. Redfearn** (accordion, jawharp), **Curtis Hasselbring** (trombone), **Brandon Seabrook** (tenor banjo, mandolin, slide guitar), **Briggan Krauss** (alto, baritone saxophones), **Matt McLaren** (drums, percussion, washboard)

“...the music and the wonderfully well-realized arrangements are, if anything, even better than on the band's debut. This time, Carpenter is working with an expanded version of the band from the first album, including accordionist Alec K. Redfearn and drummer Matt McLaren ...and New York alt-folk mainstay Brian Dewan, who provides his trademark electric zither as well as the album's lovely/creepy cover art, and the stylistically varied results make for a wonderfully imaginative record. Instrumental tracks like the opener "Gyp the Blood," and the mad Balkan dance tune "Slavochka" work the same stylistic street as folks like Beirut and A Hawk and a Hacksaw, while the more experimental pop-oriented songs recall the warped imagination of Elephant 6 associated eccentrics the Music Tapes. Fans of any of those acts will find much to love here.”

- **Stewart Mason**, *All Music Guide*, www.allmusic.com

“Dreamland...is proof positive that the concept album did not die with vinyl records and is still very much alive. In fact it is one of the most ambitious and peculiar musical endeavors I've ever experienced. ...

... Dreamland is a swirling maelstrom of theatrical post-cabaret and vaudevillian post-rock jazz. The...collective...create eccentric soundtracks for the equally eccentric stories and bizarre characters that inhabit Dreamland with an exotic array of instruments...

...the music...is always a suitable score for Carpenter's tale of an impoverished, alcoholic gold miner who makes a pact with the devil before fleeing eastward to work in Dreamland's sideshows. The combination of lo-fi production, unusual instrument combinations and the intelligent use of unorthodox orchestral arrangements and melancholic strings, all provide a certain antiquated feel, which in turn brings a genuine and familiar quality to the music.

...music...borne out of challenging expressions and executed with skill, but in a darkly theatrical style...

Dreamland is filled with piquant musical abstractions and can be quite rewarding for those willing to put in the time and who enjoy impressionistic compositions, like pieces of musical art. ...”

- **Matt the Raven**, *Adequacy*, July 23, 2008, www.adequacy.net

“... There's a lot going on here that makes describing this man's music a difficult task. ... Styles of music that seem to fade in and out of the equation on this album include gypsy folk, jazz, progressive pop, and soundtrack audio. Carpenter isn't making music to appeal to a specific audience or that will fit into a specific genre. Instead, this fellow is letting music take him wherever it may...and, in the process, creating some rather titillating music with a difference. ... [Rating: 5 (excellent)]”

- **Babysue**, April 2008, www.babysue.com

“...A fascinating song cycle blurring the line between real historical figures and fictional characters and storylines concerning Coney Island at the turn of the last century and an alcoholic gold miner who makes a Faustian pact with the devil, among other things. Their sound is a dark cabaret-noir theatrical art rock, bringing to mind some unholy collaboration between the Residents, Bertolt Brecht and a mad klezmer band. Beautiful graphics in the attendant twelve page booklet.”

- **George Parsons**, *Dream Magazine*, #9, www.dreamgeo.com

“The second full-length album from Cambridge-based singer-songwriter Brian Carpenter...is as eccentric as it is ambitious. ...

The group is...interested in a surreal sense of a faraway time and place turned upside down. Like Reverend Gasseye, another Boston time-machine tripper, Beat Circus builds on the woozy saloon balladry of early Captain Beefheart and Tom Waits. The band blows the caked dust and cobwebs off an antediluvian age and colors in the sepia tones with a bold array of strings, brass, and wind instruments. ...”

- **Jonathan Perry**, *The Boston Globe*, February 12, 2008, www.boston.com

“What a hell of a concept. ...this album tries to capture the music and feel of Coney Island before it was burnt down in 1911. ... Drawing on the talents of other weirdo collaborators, like Alec K. Redfearn, this music is rife with atmosphere and considerable talent... Songs like “The Ghost of Emma Jean” could be enjoyed anytime, with its dreamy, muted trombone and gorgeous banjo playing. ... For those looking to go through the looking glass, this has plenty of weirdo charm.”

- **Chris Whibbs**, *Exclaim!*, July 2008, www.exclaim.ca

“...the music...is dressed up in the costumery of a former age but that it is, in fact, a contemporary creation isn't obscured. ...the composition and execution of *Dreamland*...contain certain marks of modernity. The antique flavor of the music is more a theatrical affectation than a tool of accurate reenactment, though Carpenter's concentration on art over authenticity isn't any sort of damning fault, simply a manner of reconciling the styles of the past with the sound of today.

Conceptually inspired by a Coney Island amusement park that burned to the ground the night before it opened its 1911 summer season, *Dreamland* mixes fact and fiction to weave its dark tales, engaging in ghostly surrealism, but also touching on the grittier side of New York life during the early years of the twentieth century. ...”

- **Adam Strohm**, *Fakejazz.com*, June 13, 2008

“...these sixteen pieces project an engagingly neurotic cross-genre stylization. Think of early 1900's good-natured musical simplicity coupled with progressive rock type metrics and much more.

... And with horns, strings, harmonica banjo, tuba, keys and a rhythm section et al, the unit takes the listener on a hazy trek through bizarre interpretations of roots music amid eerie vocals, quirky movements and frameworks. It's a strangely appealing retro-modernist program, indeed. With subtle surprises and deviations, the musicians even incorporate a bit of traditional Jewish music into the grand schema.

... there is some *serious* musicianship here. They take the listener on a happy-go-lucky type sojourn and segue from brief chamber motifs to a Strauss waltz or delve into Civil War-based, melancholic etude. The fun-filled trip surge continues via the ensemble's rendering of bawdy cabaret and old time saloon music. Moreover, Carpenter, performing on trumpet, injects a Mexican serenade within the mix. No doubt, the band fuses an off-kilter dreamscape. Essentially, the artists play tricks on your mind while they somewhat outlandishly, sooth your soul. ”

- **Glenn Astarita**, *Jazzreview*, www.jazzreview.com

“Artists and technologists should pay attention to the culture of a century ago. 1908 was a time of optimism. Hopes were buoyed by discoveries in the sciences, the spread of telephony and electric power to households, and innovation in transportation by automobile and aviation. ... One of these phenomena was Coney Island's Dreamland amusement park, the inspiration for this very listenable album.

... It's an amiable movie soundtrack... American banjos and immigrant klezmer illuminate the piece, creepy as the early Disney cartoon "Cobweb Hotel". ... "The Ghost of Emma Jean" is embroidered with vocals by Orion Rigel Domisse, certainly a good name for a medium. It evokes the Kinks, or Procol Harum's "Souvenir of London", yet the ambiguous lyrics leave us wondering if Emma Jean died, or simply vamoosed.

"Delerium Tremens" is modal and Asiatic, a good track to support a belly dancer; imagine Cab Calloway hi-de-ho-ing it at the Apollo Theater. ...well performed and heart pounding. ...

... "Dark Eyes" gives the listener a solo violin treatment of the Russian folksong "Dark Eyes". Achechonya! It's followed by the cartoony klez of "Slavochka. In "March of the Freaks", Carpenter bellows and chews the scenery like Jim Broadbent in the movie "Moulin Rouge". One imagines sideshow freaks shambling out, ambling around the circus ring and through the streets of Brooklyn. ...

... Brian Carpenters' Beat Circus project Dreamland brings a bit of the creaky, freaky amusement park into our time, and our mundane lives."

- **Michael R. Mosher, *Leonardo Online***, www.leonardo.info

"... The...ensemble features instruments of antique vintage or weird extraction: theremin, jaw harp, pennywhistle, etc. Traditional tunes...as well as tropes on folk musics...are incorporated along the way. "The Gem Saloon" and "Coney Island Freak Show" refract merry musical mayhem and dystopian lyrics through the funhouse mirror that is Carpenter's twisted but abundantly imaginative muse."

- **Christian Carey, *Sequenza 21***, www.sequenza21.com

"...*Dreamland* is...homage to the fabled, turn-of-the-(20th)-century amusement park once part of the soon-to-be-destroyed Coney Island. Built in 1904 by William H. Reynolds, a crooked businessman with Tammany Hall connections, Dreamland was located where the New York Aquarium now resides, and, like its namesake, was an exotic place that challenged the senses. ... Sadly, the park burned in 1911 and was never rebuilt. Thankfully, Carpenter's surreal, gothic calliope/jazz/klezmer-infused soundscapes harkens back to the wonderment and horror associated with that park's amusements, rides, sideshows, and carney barkers, capturing the riveting vibe in a completely engrossing way from this most talented modern composer."

- **Bryan Swirsky, *The Big Takeover***, Issue No. 63

"With a dark but childish joy, Brian Carpenter's Beat Circus takes us through the aisles of Coney Island's *Dreamland* carnival... Full of menacing strings, marching percussion and eerie voices, this album draws listeners along, past rides and freak shows and carnie criers through a twisted Americana landscape. And like the New York of the time, this music becomes a melting pot of styles.

Eastern European and Gypsy melodies, waltzes, and the sounds of the old West all get their turns, alongside homemade American folk music. Beautiful instrumental tracks dominate...

... The writing highlights the ensemble by bringing out the uniqueness of each voice. Theremin, electric zither and toy piano, for instance, each add distinct touches to the music.

The voices are more like the dialogue of actors than singers. Their appearance takes the listener from scene to scene, from the freak show ringleader to the saloon-side prostitute. Always there is the sense of a story being told, though the players and the lessons are unclear.

With each cinematic piece melting into the next, Beat Circus has managed the rare trick of making a real album that defies genre and expectation. With the backdrop of *Dreamland*, Carpenter pulls together all the styles that interest him into a cohesive whole. The result is sinister yet affectionate, comic yet morbid. ...listeners will find considerable rewards silhouetted within the carnival lights."

- **Warren Allen, *PerformerMag.com***

"... Principal composer Brian Carpenter...draws on ragtime, klezmer, German cabaret and other light-footed historical styles. Although most of the album's 16 numbers are instrumental, Carpenter sings, sometimes in a demonic barker's voice, on such ominous ditties as "The Ghost of Emma Jean" and "Coney Island Creepshow."

... such instrumental sketches as "Hypnogogia" and "The Good Witch" are deft time machines, transporting listeners to a world that's alluring and eerie."

- **Mark Jenkins, *The Washington Post***, February 8, 2008

"Beat Circus' *Dreamland* is one of the most unsettling albums released in 2008... The music, conceived by leader Brian Carpenter - a brilliantly imaginative multi-instrumentalist - is a damnation-like concoction of styles, a hypothetical synthesis of Harry Partch, Univers Zero, Tom Waits, Snow White's Seven Dwarfs on LSD and Ed Wood imagery in which instruments such as banjo, trombone and Theremin recite an essential role amidst a general feel of out-of-timeness bathed in warped sinuosity. The large part of the tunes is instrumental - lots of food for bad-tempered thought everywhere... Still, the really distressing track has to be "Coney Island Creepshow", a veritable aural depiction of a horror show becoming substantial through ruthlessly frenzied vocals and wicked laughs in the background. Preposterously, something that would terrorize many children is exactly what pushes this writer's attention even more towards the twisted, trippy, outstandingly designed adventures that Carpenter dreamed of. ... The production is a great achievement by Martin Bisi, who Carpenter thus defines: "a meticulous sculptor who took my big, seemingly impossible ideas and moved them forward to an outcome which more often than not surpassed what I had originally envisioned". Amen."

- **Massimo Ricci, *TEMPORARY FAULT***, temporaryfault.blogspot.com

"Lovers of turn-of-the-century Americana will go wild for "Dreamland" by Beat Circus, which effortlessly evokes the mysterious and macabre atmosphere of New York's Coney Island, and in particular its circus environment. This is surely the house band for "Something Wicked This Way Comes," or in fact any other depiction of sinister circus goings-on... Hitchcock, anyone? ... Some of the tracks are instrumental, some have carnival lyrics, sung solo and in chorus. The recording and production is faultless. In a final twist of irony, Carpenter's voice sounds not unlike Metallica's James Hetfield, most notably on the freakish "Death Fugue." The artwork is fantastic, adding much to the atmosphere. ...as an evocation of ghostly goings on in old-time America it's perfect. This is the first part of a New Weird Americana trilogy, so expect two more nightmares..."

- **Simon Lewis / Stephen Palmer, *Terrascope Online***, December 2008, www.terrascope.co.uk

"Beat Circus with some references is going back to the days of wonder in some of...America's big cities like New York... The great surreal idea of the Beat Circus is that they bring the whole area of associations, of the city live experiences especially, back to some of its folk origins, by letting it melt with i.e. Balkan brass band festivity music, a form of real people's enjoyment with music. Also old time American folk with washboard, banjo and mandolin adds more of such an association, bridging and completing with a more American old time context, without forgetting the fairground attraction themes and sounds now and then (and an at times, a freaks show presentation, with backing band). There are also more dramatic associations, almost rock, like modern chamber-music rock driven cabaret with horn voices and wordless backing vocalists. ... The booklet shows many old photographs to support the imagination the music provokes."

- **Psyche Van Het Folk, *Psyche Music***, psychemusic.org

“Beat Circus boil up a rather potent mixture of junk band music, demented brass band work-outs, flamboyant and often doomy string work, old time jazz colours that have often quite a Jewish feel, sawing folk and the odd hint of off-kilter pop sensibilities. All to make *Dreamland* a rather pleasing and heady soundtrack for dreams of American freak shows and amusement park of the past, Victorian tragedies and general dark Americana.

With the band managing throughout *Dreamland* to make the songs the perfect balance between been dramatic, camp, theatrically and memorable. ...the tones of band leader Brian Carpenter's voice...goes from darkly freak show barker to almost Mike Patton like croons, to Victorian stage show like delivery. With his vocals being embodied here and there with theatrical and old-time female harmonise and vocalising.

A few of my favourite moments that come along the albums pretty much faultless 16 track run are: the banjo pick, washboard shuffle and trombone bob of the freak show pop of *The Ghost of Emma Jean*. The foot slamming klezmer and demented Russian dance meets Spanish air of *Slavochka*, the demented gone wrong fair ride waltzes meets drunken brass band vibe of the *Hellgate*. To the emotional to playful Victorian music hall piano pitter-patter and raciness of *Meet me tonight in Dreamland* which is all nicely under run by seaside and fair ground sounds. ...

Dreamland is a quirky, dramatic and fun ride from beginning to end that's executed and delivered with great charm, authenticity yet originality and sonic flare. [Rating: 4 out of 5 stars]”

- **Roger Batty**, *Musique Machine*, www.musiquemachine.com