



Bio information: **THINKING PLAGUE**

Title: **IN THIS LIFE** (Cuneiform Rune 407) Format: CD / DIGITAL

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**FILE UNDER: AVANT-PROGRESSIVE / ROCK / ART ROCK / POST-ROCK**

**Remastered in Celebration of its 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary,  
*In This Life*, Thinking Plague's Early Art Rock Masterwork,  
Enthralls a New Generation of Rockers**

Musically riveting, an album that grabs listeners by the throat, *In This Life* is not merely an extraordinary album of extraordinary rock-based songs. It is a landmark recording in the life of one of America's most distinctive bands and in the international spread of **Rock in Opposition**-style sophisticated post-rock. Recorded in 1988-89 by Denver-based **Thinking Plague**, one of the most esteemed and longstanding American avant-progressive ensembles, *In This Life* marked Thinking Plague's stylistic coming-of-age. The band had recorded two earlier LPs (...*A Thinking Plague* and *Moonsongs*) in the years since its 1982 co-founding by **Mike Johnson** and **Bob Drake**. Those early works brought Thinking Plague national "underground" acclaim. But the lineup responsible for *In This Life*, with Mike Johnson handling composition and **Susanne Lewis** supplying lyrics and vocals, proved to be the early group's ideal creative brew.

*In This Life* originally came out in 1989 on **Recommended Records (ReR)**, the London-based label run by **Chris Cutler**, founder of the Rock in Opposition movement and member of renowned band **Henry Cow**. One track on the album featured a guest appearance by **Fred Frith**, the legendary **Henry Cow/Art Bears** guitarist. It became ReR's first-ever release on the then-radically-new format of CD – a format that simplified the disc's international distribution. *In This Life* cemented Thinking Plague's status on the international RIO scene and launched their international career, receiving glowing reviews in the music press on both sides of the Atlantic.

Nearly a decade would pass before Thinking Plague released an album following *In This Life*. When it resumed recording under composer Mike Johnson's leadership, it did so with a different lineup. In 1998, Thinking Plague's fourth album, *In Extremis*, came out on **Cuneiform Records**. Subsequent recordings of new Thinking Plague material – *A History of Madness* (2003) and *Decline and Fall* (2012) – would also come out on Cuneiform. In 2000, Cuneiform reissued Thinking Plague's first two recordings, ...*A Thinking Plague* and *Moonsongs*, together as a CD titled *Early Plague Years*. *In This Life* completes Cuneiform's reissue of all of the band's early recordings.

*In This Life's* reissue on **Cuneiform Records** is the first-ever for the sonic landmark, whose music sounds as starkly new and strikingly original today as it did to audiences 25 years ago. The sound is better than ever, thanks to tapes remastered by **Mark Fuller**. The packaging retains Bob Drake's and Susanne Lewis' original artwork, and includes a 12-page booklet featuring Lewis's stunning lyrics. An essential acquisition for fans of Rock in Opposition-inspired music, Cuneiform's reissue of *In This Life* should be an exciting discovery for a new generation of adventurous listeners, interested in expanding the depth, breadth and genre borders of rock songs.

Thinking Plague is currently recording an album of all-new material for Cuneiform, tentatively titled *Hope Against Hope*. Thinking Plague also remains a live ensemble, performing at music festivals worldwide.

*"...absolutely breathtaking... Susanne Lewis intones her cryptic lyrics in eerie nursery rhyme chants. The music underneath, composed by guitarist Mike Johnson, has the density and urgency of a star going nova: thick curdled tone clusters, unexpected geysers of rhythm, knife fights between the guitars and the reeds..."*

*–Boston Rock, 1989 review of In This Life*

**For more information on Thinking Plague:**  
**www.thinkingplague.org – www.cuneiformrecords.com**

## **THINKING PLAGUE BAND BIO**

*"Thinking Plague means the disease of thinking in a society where too much thinking is considered as grounds for shunning...dismissal as out of touch with the "real" world... The disease of the dreamer be she/he a scientist or a poet."*

– **Mike Johnson**

Inspired by avant-art rock bands like **Arts Bears** and **Henry Cow**, as well as by contemporary classical composers, Thinking Plague has earned an avid international following by forging a singular synthesis of prog-rock with 20th century classical, folk, and jazz. Rigorously constructed and passionately played, the music makes a compelling case for rock's relevance as a forum for creative composition. A new album by Thinking Plague is always an event; working slowly and unwaveringly, the group has released a handful of brilliant, art-rock classics.

Founded in 1982 by guitarist/composer **Mike Johnson** and bass guitarist/drummer/engineer **Bob Drake**, Thinking Plague built its following the old-fashioned way, though word of mouth and recordings passed around by fellow musicians and fans. After recruiting classically trained vocalist **Sharon Bradford**, keyboardist **Harry Fleishman** and drummer **Rick Arsenault**, the band performed around Denver but didn't get any traction until recording, mixing and releasing *...A Thinking Plague* in 1984 on their own **Endemic** label. Released as a limited edition LP with handpainted covers – Drake famously hand-stenciled the album's cover art with spray-paint. It brought the band national attention despite the limited size – 500 copies – of its pressing.

After Thinking Plague's debut release, Johnson and Drake disbanded the original lineup and formed a new version, featuring **Susanne Lewis** & others. This band recorded ***Moonsongs***, which came out in 1986 on London's **Dead Man's Curve Records**. *Moonsongs* received positive reviews in the music press; *Option*, America's premier magazine devoted to cutting-edge music, called it "stunning". Subsequent albums found TP adding reeds, inviting guests to contribute brass on select tracks, experimenting with percussion, and joining forces with legendary Henry Cow guitarist **Fred Frith** on *In This Life*, which was released by ex-Henry Cow drummer **Chris Cutler**'s **Recommended Records** in 1989. It would be a decade before the band released its fourth album, but when Johnson relaunched Thinking Plague with 1998's ***In Extremis*** the group was embraced by longstanding fans, while attracting new, larger international audiences than ever before.

***In Extremis*** marked the start of TP's relationship with **Cuneiform**. Two years after that studio release, Cuneiform reissued Thinking Plague's first two albums, *...A Thinking Plague* and *Moonsongs*, on a single CD called ***Early Plague Years***. A new studio recording followed in 2003, called ***A History of Madness*** (Cuneiform), which delved into the Albigensian Crusades that ravaged 13<sup>th</sup> century France. A decade passed again before Thinking Plague's next studio album, 2012's acclaimed ***Decline and Fall***, a prog-rock jeremiad that pulls no punches. *Decline and Fall* dissects contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> century woes, delivering a bracing jolt of apocalyptic imagery set to intricately driving rhythms and incantatory melodies. The world may be going to hell in a hand basket, but ***Decline and Fall*** is the work of a band that's ascended to new creative heights.

Featuring six songs written and composed by guitarist **Mike Johnson**, the sole founding member who's played on every TP release, *Decline and Fall* introduced the band's latest incarnation. The most conspicuous addition to the Thinking Plague universe is dexterous vocalist **Elaine Di Falco**, who handles the band's steeplechase arrangements with aplomb. Singing with enviable poise and control, she combines cool detachment with righteous anger on elaborate melodic passages that would confound a lesser artist.

Even more impressive than the dark brilliance of its studio releases, is the fact that Thinking Plague is also an astoundingly great live band. Thinking Plague's world-class musicians perform its complex music on stage with joyful enthusiasm and seeming ease. Thinking Plague have performed at progressive rock and experimental music festivals world-wide, including **NEARfest** (USA), **ProgDay** (USA) **Gouveia Art Rock Festival** (Portugal), **Festival MIMI** and **Les Tritonales** (France), and such other countries as Germany and Italy. In July 2000, they toured France and Italy. Their concerts are always highly-anticipated events by the band's devoted international fanbase. In November 2011, they shared a bill with Hamster Theatre to perform at Cuneiform's dual-city label showcases: in New York, **Cuneiform at The Stone**, and in Baltimore, at **Cuneifest's Rock Day**. Fans traveled to their East Coast shows from across and outside the US – from Norway, Sweden, Israel, Canada. In 2013, Thinking Plague performed at two music festivals in the Pacific Northwest: **Seaprogram**, a progressive music festival in Seattle, and the 19<sup>th</sup> **Olympia Experimental Music Festival**; and also performed in France at the renowned 6<sup>th</sup> **Rock in Opposition Festival**.

*"Thinking Plague lays down some of the most rhythmically complex, texturally inventive, and melodically challenging popular music of the last 30 years, and somehow makes it all sound easy and natural."*

– **All Music Guide**

**We asked Thinking Plague's co-founder, leader and composer Mike Johnson to share his memoria of IN THIS LIFE**

"By 1987 **Thinking Plague** had evolved into a 6-piece ensemble, including a keyboardist, **Lawrence Haugseth**, who also played clarinet. This introduced new possibilities. Previously we had thought of ourselves as a kind of "standard rock ensemble" that played very NON-standard music. With the addition of Lawrence we were able to start evolving more towards what eventually became our true musical "voice", as it were, something more akin to an avant-jazz or even avant-ethnic-Euro band, at least at times. We played several showcase concerts in Denver in the summer and fall of '87, after which almost immediately we lost keyboardist **Eric Moon** (formerly **Jacobson**) and drummer **Mark Fuller**. They had been "guests" on our earlier albums, but subsequently became full members of our live ensemble. With this particular line-up, minus Lawrence who joined a bit later, we had recorded tracks for the song "**Organism**."

So, after some discomfiture over the dissolution of our live unit, I was suddenly moved to try writing some songs utilizing reeds, especially the clarinet, in a less "prog rock" and more almost Euro folk-influenced context. This quickly led to "**Lycanthrope**," the CD opener. "**Run Amok**" and "**Love**" came about as slightly related ideas, which I split into separate pieces. You can hear echoes of the frenzied intro to "Run Amok" in the zany outro of "Love." And then "**Malaise**" was a lament that I wrote to try to express musically what I felt was the tragic waste of human creativity that struggles along under the surface of society, never being recognized or rewarded because it cannot break through the barrier of commerciality that strives for the lowest common aesthetic denominator. This was some years before the universal advent of the Internet, of course.

I never wrote words, however, for any of these songs. I merely had "concepts" and song titles, which I offered to our singer **Susanne Lewis** to see if she could write lyrics for the songs. I may have given her no more than a word, a phrase, some imagery and maybe a short musical motif, if even these. And from so little, she created brilliant vocal melodies, harmonies and lyrics. There was a synergistic effect that shed a whole different light on the songs, and working with our bass player/drummer and recording producer **Bob Drake**, we found we were able to capture this different 'flavor' on the recording. After bandying around a few names, I proposed to call the album ***In This Life***, to which the others agreed. I don't really know what it's supposed to mean, other than some kind of vague expression of existentialism or something. We're open to suggestions on that.

*In This Life*, was a very special album for us in various ways. It was our first album to have all composed song-tracks, with no improvisational, experimental or "noise" tracks. And it was the first and only Thinking Plague album so far where I partnered with one lyricist, Susanne Lewis, for every song, except of course for her own song, "**The Guardian**". And then of course, it was the first release we had as a CD, as well as the first CD-only release by our label, **ReR**.

That also was a big milestone for us, getting ourselves onto THAT label, ReR, which for us the "coolest" in the world at the time. We had been worshippers of **Henry Cow**, the **Art Bears** et al, and we were thrilled when we managed to get some of our earlier records distributed by them. But when **Chris Cutler** came to town drumming with **Pere Ubu** in 1988, I went to the show, and managed to get backstage. I said hello and handed Chris a cassette of *In This Life* right before he had to go on stage. To our astonishment, some weeks later we received a letter from him asking what our plans were for the tape? We wrote back and said we hoped it would be released on ReR...and it WAS! So, with *In This Life* we more or less made our humble debut on the world stage, as it were. For many years, a lot of people thought it was our first album, rather than our third. "

**—Mike Johnson**

**PROMOTIONAL PHOTOS**

Digital [High-Resolution] versions of these images are available on the Thinking Plague artist page @ [www.cuneiformrecords.com](http://www.cuneiformrecords.com)



#### **WHAT THE PRESS SAID ABOUT THINKING PLAGUE'S *IN THIS LIFE* (WHEN IT WAS RELEASED IN 1989)**

"I just got this yesterday, it's absolutely breathtaking, I'm still reeling, but my snap judgement is, this is quite possibly the album of the year. Susanne Lewis intones her cryptic lyrics in eerie nursery rhyme chants. The music underneath, composed by guitarist Mike Johnson, has the density and urgency of a star going nova: thick curdled tone clusters, unexpected geysers of rhythm, knife fights between the guitars and the reeds, for 72 minutes. Any resemblance to Fred Frith's Art Bears is purely intentional, except Thinking Plague has more changes."

—Mike Bloom, *Boston Rock*

"Thinking Plague have climbed into a cubbyhole uniquely their own. Inside a framework of semi-improvised music and meandering lyrics, Thinking Plague spew forth an idiosyncratic variety of styles. Acid Rock and art rock influences abound, as do, avant-jazz and modern classical styles. Their remix of a previous title track, "Moonsongs," is unearthly..."

—Neil Strauss, *Ear Magazine*

"Art-rock; visceral, complex, dark and beautiful music. Thinking Plague is a remarkable ensemble whose playing is exceptionally tight, marked by riveting transition and layered and haunting tonalities. The first three tracks are like a trilogy reminding one of Henry Cow/Art Bears, only more mystical... Susanne Lewis' vocals...are deceptively intense and focused. "Love"...may be the best original piece on the disc, musically akin to Charles Ives' "Central Park in the Dark" with a rock arrangement, exploring increasingly complex tone clusters that galvanize its angular melody into bursting prisms of sound. ... Thinking Plague's music is intensely challenging and engaging."

—Edan Epstein, *KCRW Radio*, Los Angeles

"Perhaps the finest attempt so far by an American band to add to the pantheon of classic Rock-In-Opposition records... Mike Johnson's composition are astonishing and – the clincher – beautiful, and Susanne Lewis' vocals are...eerily enigmatic and...more accessible... Fred Frith guests on one track..."

—MM, *New Sonic Architecture*

"[Thinking Plague is] a band whose material is complex and carefully crafted...the group's style recalls that of Henry Cow, the Art Bears and other 'Rock in Opposition bands', while adding polyrhythmic drumming reminiscent of the Stravinsky-inspired percussion of Univers Zero..."

—Maria Montgomery, *Option Magazine*

"With titles like "Run Amok" and "Malaise," the tracks are tense and dense musical journeys that tumble together elements of rock, avant garde, jazz, European folksongs, echoes of medieval church music...hypnotic African percussion and icy technology. Most of the music was composed by guitarist Mike Johnson, with lyrics by Susanne Lewis, whose vocals soar through the layers of melody with knife-like precision. ...worth seeking out if you're musically adventurous."

—Gil Asakawa, *Westword Magazine*

"It is a rare pleasure to discover brave, peculiar music which combines intellectual stimulation with sensual reward – music so thoroughly satisfying that it immediately becomes a permanent part of the listener's context for appreciating all other music. Thinking Plague is...a phenomenon: a genre of music unto itself, eclectically derivative in a bold new way and spectacularly innovative in the old fashion sense of genuine originality."

—Andy Watson, *Journal Wired*, 1990

#### **WHAT THE PRESS SAID ABOUT THE BAND THINKING PLAGUE**

"The manner in which Thinking Plague...have condensed only the most fertile (and often the most pulverizing) aspect of the last 30 years of progressive exploration into an nth-degree endgame is nothing short of awe-inspiring."

— *Alternative Press*

"...there's little doubt that Thinking Plague are one of the most inventive, original musical ensembles working today. ..."

— *Muze*

"Thinking Plague... create a mad sort of progressive rock that some might call RIO...The sum total is a vision of a turbulent and unsettled time and place, though intelligent and piercingly insightful. Recommended."

— *Exposé*