



Bio information: **THINKING PLAGUE**

Title: **HOPING AGAINST HOPE** (Cuneiform Rune 421) Format: CD / DIGITAL

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

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**In *Hoping Against Hope*, Avant /Art-Rock Band THINKING PLAGUE's Latest Release,  
Compositional Savant Mike Johnson Creates  
an Extraordinary and Beautiful Polyphonic Response to the Dark Times We Live In**

Clouds scud across a storm-wracked sky, sometimes exposing shards of blue, but most often, darker greys lurk behind. *Hoping Against Hope* is a darkly beautiful and complex album that offers hope *against* hope, against the hope that things will somehow work out for the best, or that someone will somehow fix it all for us. In a time when hope seems both scarcer and more necessary than ever, **Thinking Plague** don't offer the fleeting consolation of a fairy tale, but the enduring and tangible value of an unvarnished and courageous artistic response. By creating art, something of beauty, while amidst winds of despair, Thinking Plague has evolved its own means to survive grim times and marked out a path for us. Recorded music, however good, can't mend a broken world, but a record as brilliant as *Hoping Against Hope* offers us artistic refuge, an imaginative space where we can restore body, mind and soul and form our own personal response to a world in crisis.

**Thinking Plague** is a storied band, whose thirty-five year history has seen it cleave consistently to the extreme limits of what is possible to do within rock music. Much of the music it released has owed more to traditions external to rock, such as folk, chamber music, and particularly, the avant-garde tradition of twentieth-century classical music. Its thread has always been twisted into a thicker yarn, variously labeled with terms such as 'art rock', 'avant-rock', 'avant-progressive' and also '**Rock in Opposition**' (RIO), a term associated with European outfits such as **Henry Cow**, **Art Bears**, **Art Zoyd** and **Present** who fused elements and instruments from rock and 20<sup>th</sup> century classical music with compositional rigour and DIY aesthetics. Thinking Plague are often cited as the leading light of the American arm of the 'Rock In Opposition' movement, closely aligned with the fellow **Denver, Colorado** ensemble, **Hamster Theatre**, with which they share personnel. Genre-defying and, above all, unique, **Thinking Plague's** music can be described equally as post-rock and/or post-classical.

Founded in 1982 by **Mike Johnson** and the legendary **Bob Drake**, they have been a continuous presence in the underground since then, although many years have elapsed between recordings, and only **Johnson** remains from the original line-up. Their third album, 1989's *In This Life*, was released on **Chris Cutler's** London-based **ReR** label and widely distributed, and the band enjoyed global attention in avant-rock circles. By 1990 Drake was working as a recording engineer in Los Angeles, and singer **Susanne Lewis** was in New York City, pursuing her own musical vision. It was nearly ten years before their critically acclaimed fourth album, *In Extremis* (1998), was released with a new line-up, inaugurating **Thinking Plague's** ongoing relationship with **Cuneiform Records**. Cuneiform released a further two studio albums -*A History of Madness* (2003) and *Decline and Fall* (2012)- and a compilation of their early studio recordings, called *Early Plague Years* (2000), and in 2015 reissued *In This Life*.

Leader and writer **Johnson** is influenced by harmonically adventurous twentieth-century classical music, as can be heard in the ambiguous tonality of the music, and the rigour of his dense, complex compositions. **Johnson**, like most rock musicians, is self-taught, but very knowledgeable, and his fusion of rock, folk and classical music is as seamless as it is compelling. The electric guitar, whose hard-edged, mordant timbres cut deeper and more savagely than anything available to the classical arranger, doesn't dominate the band's sound, but takes its place as one voice among many, while the drum kit is exploited with subtlety.

The arrangements we hear on *Hoping Against Hope*, as on *Decline and Fall* (the previous album), are those we will hear live. Even when singer **Elaine di Falco's** accordion is written and recorded in multiple voices, the parts are realizable by a single instrument. Conversely, **Johnson** and **Bill Pohl's** tightly scored twin guitars are panned out wide enough for the listener to balance the pursuit of an individual voice against the ensemble texture, which is the creative focus, a carefully crafted polyphony served by each  
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instrumental voice. There is a familiar vocabulary in play, a harmonic palette and a phraseology that has evolved considerably over the band's lifespan without extreme points of rupture, despite major changes and sometimes long gaps between releases; this is clearly the same band that we heard in the 1980s, but **Johnson** is writing from a creative position that is fruitfully removed from that he occupied even four years ago.

Completing the core line-up for this album are long-term members **Mark Harris** (reeds) and **Dave Willey** (bass), as well as more recent recruit **Robin Chestnut** (drums). **Pohl's** addition brings a second electric guitar to the texture for the first time, enabling more sinuous scoring, rather than making the sound more 'rock'. Although other musicians contribute parts, there's a strong sense of continuity, revealing a well-drilled ensemble performing a coherent body of work. As demanding as this music may be, it is made to sound easy, and more importantly, beautiful.

Dark times globally made it hard to produce an optimistic album, but this record is still a constructive critique, rather than a lament or a turning away. With its mention of externalities, '**Commuting to Murder**' highlights the ideological congruity of militarism and capitalist economics, while '**A Dirge for the Unwitting**' notes, and declines to condemn, the disaffection that impels some towards the death-drive of religious fundamentalism. '**The Echoes of Their Cries**' and '**The Great Leap Backwards**' seem overwhelmed by the horrors of military intervention and 'post-truth' culture (respectively), to the extent that they eschew image or allusion; but '**Hoping Against Hope**' asserts the endurance of the critical observer, however isolated or disheartened, and vests its faith in the persistence of a marginalized wisdom.

In support of such lyrical texts, and in their own right, **Johnson's** compositions are committed to emotional truth in all its complexity, rather than dictating to the listener what they should feel about the topics of the songs. And although this is not a 'feel-good' album, its hopeful inclination is reflected in a less abstract approach than on previous records. There are extended sections in regular meters, and periods of stable tonality offer the listener a continuity to grasp that is perhaps analogous to the experience of the narrator in 'Hoping Against Hope'.

Despite the complexity of its music, Thinking Plague is an astoundingly impressive live band. It has played worldwide at avant-garde and progressive music festivals, and toured in the US and Europe. The complex arrangements featured on this album are written for live performance, where the passionate commitment and instrumental precision that the works demand can be witnessed in their full fury. Most recently, **Thinking Plague** toured Texas, performing in Dallas' **Kessler Theater**, Austin's **Salvage Vanguard**, and other cities, and played numerous shows in Colorado, at Boulder's **Dairy Center for the Performing Arts** and other venues. They've performed at such international festivals as **Rock in Opposition** and **Les Tritonales** in France, **Gouveia Art Rock Festival** in Portugal, and **Nearfest**, **Cunefest**, **ProgDay**, **Seattle's Seaprog**, and **The Olympia Experimental Music Festival** in the USA. The demanding, rehearsal intensive nature of their material makes their recordings infrequent, and opportunities to hear this important band scarce: performances are often made to capacity crowds as a result. Thinking Plague is looking forward to touring the US East Coast in 2017, and performing at festivals in the US and abroad.

Sometimes a work of art enables us to articulate our thoughts and feelings in times of upheaval and chaos. In an era when the world has seemingly come off its hinges, an album like **Hoping Against Hope** offers listeners the consolation that they are not alone. But more than that, this intellectually complex work offers tools to help us make sense, affectively at least, of the whole sorry mess. Knowledge, as the philosopher Michel Foucault said, is not for understanding: knowledge is for cutting. And in **Hoping Against Hope**, **Thinking Plague** supplies its listeners with a finely honed scalpel.

*For more information on Thinking Plague:*  
[www.thinkingplague.org](http://www.thinkingplague.org) - [www.cuneiformrecords.com](http://www.cuneiformrecords.com)

#### **PROMOTIONAL PHOTOS: THINKING PLAGUE**

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



**Some thoughts from Mike Johnson, Thinking Plague's leader/composer & guitarist, about Thinking Plague's new album, *Hoping Against Hope***

*"The album is entitled **Hoping Against Hope**. After our **Decline and Fall** album we felt we needed to offer something with a more hopeful theme - maybe focus on themes based on positive developments and solutions. As we developed song concepts and lyrics, however... the substance of the album definitely grew more dark. There were just too many grim realities that we needed to deal with. Then with the tribulations of the long primaries and presidential campaign, the title took on a more sort of forlorn hope, which in light of the state of the world, seemed appropriate.*

*My aim for this album as composer was to write a body of art songs for the ensemble as it exists, without relying on overdubbing more parts than there are players. This of course means that, in theory, the material could be performed note for note in a live setting, without having to sacrifice elements of the music. And with the exception of a few vocal overdubs, this is what we achieved.*

*I also wanted the basic sound of the ensemble to be very 'real' and organic, with a certain emphasis on the acoustic elements - accordion, piano, reeds, percussion. And juxtaposed against this is the use of two electric guitars - we added another guitarist since the last CD: the first time Thinking Plague has had two guitarists - playing largely monophonic lineal parts often with a very distorted, aka "fuzz" sound.*

*I wrote separate independent contrapuntal parts for the two guitars, reeds and sometimes the accordion or piano, that collectively create the harmonic content of the music, without relying so much on the usual rock or jazz approach guitars and or keys playing chords. And when there are chords, like on the accordion, we often split them out into separate parts for the recording, so that the accordion sounds more like an accordion "section". Again, all these accordion parts can be played as one part.*

*So my goal was to allow the separate instrumental voices to move independently, but collectively creating shifting and morphing harmonies as they move - more along the lines of chromaticism in classical music. The instrumental voices in our previous music have tended to be fully separate but interwoven or 'hocketed' a la Gentle Giant, say. Whereas in the new material the voices often act more as components of the same musical element, say like an orchestral strings section in which things are moving and shifting, but it's all still the strings.*

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*...I've tried to infuse these songs with flashes of hope and exultation but always complicated by nostalgia, regret, revulsion, loss.... I think this collection is overall more emotionally charged or loaded than our previous albums. It is less "in your face" for the most part, and focuses on taking one on a pretty deep journey. I hope it works that way for listeners.*

*I hope that the album conveys Beauty. More than anything, I want it to resonate with deep ineffable feelings.*

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*Regarding track titles, in some cases, we just looked for words or phrases that imparted something about the message or content of the lyrics as in the case of "The Echoes of Their Cries" or "Commuting to Murder". Whereas in the case of the title track, "Hoping Against Hope," I wanted to evoke something more deeply emotional, sort of sadly nostalgic though sometimes serene and sometimes teetering on the edge of confusion or destruction.*

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*We had to do a crowd-funding campaign to pay for a truly top notch studio where we could get the quality we needed for the acoustic instruments, voice, etc. We were aiming for \$8,000 and reached our goal in half the time allotted - two weeks, which was phenomenal.*

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*Perhaps we are an alternative for people who like deep, complex and adventurous music, but can't abide the onslaught of in-your-face, hyper-aggressive, one dimensional "math metal" or whatever it's being called these days. We've made an album that is deep and broad in emotional expression AND which has a very wide dynamic range. The album was mixed and mastered at a lower volume level to achieve this range without using compression-limiting to squash the sound. So the clarity and shine is retained throughout, and the dynamics are allowed to breathe."*

- Mike Johnson, 11/15/2016