



Bio information: **THINKING PLAGUE**

Title: **DECLINE AND FALL** (Cuneiform Rune 320)

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

"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 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*

"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*

The end is near and it's never sounded so good. With the release of *Decline and Fall* the seminal Colorado avant-prog rock band **Thinking Plague** captures the tenor of the times with a caustic look at our troubled state of affairs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Where the band's last studio release, 2003's acclaimed *A History of Madness* (Cuneiform), delved into the Albiginsian Crusades that ravaged 13<sup>th</sup> century France, *Decline and Fall* dissects contemporary woes, delivering a bracing jolt of apocalyptic imagery set to intricately driving rhythms and incantatory melodies.

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. *Decline and Fall* is the latest dispatch from sonic explorers who aren't afraid of the beasts they find at the edge of the musical map.

Featuring six songs written and composed by guitarist **Mike Johnson**, the sole founding member who's played on every TP release, *Decline and Fall* introduces the band's latest incarnation. The most conspicuous addition to the TP 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.

Also new to the TP fold is keyboardist/drummer **Kimara Sajn**, who plays both instruments with tremendous authority (although just before finishing *Decline and Fall* the group added drummer **Robin Chestnut**, who appears on one track). Returning are long-time Thinkers **Mark Harris** on reeds and **Dave Willey** on bass. Its worth noting that Johnson, Harris and Willey also work together in another, stylistically-distinct avant-ensemble, called **Hamster Theatre**, which is co-lead by Willey and another musician and based in Colorado Springs. The trio's on-going musical collaborations outside Thinking Plague contribute to the remarkable sense of continuity that the Denver band retains after so many years and so many other different musicians. But it is Johnson's compositions that form Thinking Plague's defining architecture and give the music its distinctive form, despite the band's fluid lineup. With a trademark sound that embraces knotty polyphony, pulverizing rhythms and mercurial tempo shifts, convoluted forms and thick sticky harmonies, the band seems utterly unimpressed with their status as prog-rock titans.

In many ways, TP's changing cast reflects the flux that has defined the band since its earliest days. Despite its long lifespan and the many years between records, the group's basic sound and instrumentation has evolved incrementally, from the raw approach of the seminal first recordings to the deep layering of electronic sounds and samples of the last album. Tough and sinewy, *Decline and Fall* marks something of a return to the band's roots, with a stripped down sound that reveals TP's well-honed cohesion.

The album opens with "Malthusian Dances," a furious rant against those who pollute, despoil and abuse the earth. With Di Falco declaiming lines like "Fleas conspiring, forests expiring/As diseases multiply and rivers run dry" over a pummeling, stuttering beat, the song is a manifesto announcing that the band has returned to fray with no time to lose.

The deceptively sing-song melody of "I Cannot Fly" strips away the comforts of religion ("Never speak to me of 'Heaven'/No Safety in a sham/screaming lambs") while the hammering "Sleepers Cell Anthem" throws a *j'accuse* in the face of humanity ("We are all of us/The Bringers of hunger/The singers of error/The bearers of terror"). Is there any hope? *Decline and Fall* closes with "Climbing the Mountain," a song that offers respite if not a way out. We may be doomed, but nature still offers succor. Indeed, so does music this smart and uncompromising, though TP isn't in the habit of singing its own praises.

[press release continued on verso]

Founded in 1982 by Mike Johnson and bass guitarist/drummer **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. Drake famously hand-stenciled the album's cover art with spray-paint, and despite pressing only 500 copies of the LP, the band received national attention.

Subsequent albums found TP adding brass and reeds, 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 TP with 1998's *In Extremis* the group found the international audience that had long eluded it.

*In Extremis* marked the start of TP's relationship with Cuneiform, which continues with *Decline and Fall*, a prog-rock jeremiad that pulls no punches. The world may be going to hell in a hand basket, but *Decline and Fall* is the work of a band that's ascending to new creative heights.

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), **Gouveia Art Rock Festival** (Portugal), **Les Tritonales** (France), and such other countries as Germany and Italy. Their concerts are always high-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 **Cunefest's Rock Day**. Fans traveled to their East Coast shows from across and outside the US – from Norway, Sweden, Israel, Canada – resulting in Cunefest's sold-out audiences and capacity crowds.

For more information on Thinking Plague, see:  
[www.generalrubric.com/thinkingplague/](http://www.generalrubric.com/thinkingplague/)

### PROMOTIONAL PHOTO

Digital [High-Resolution] versions of these images are available for download on [www.cuneiformrecords.com](http://www.cuneiformrecords.com).



### WHAT THE PRESS HAS SAID ABOUT:

#### **THINKING PLAGUE**

#### **A HISTORY OF MADNESS**

#### **CUNEIFORM**

#### **2003**

lineup: Mike Johnson (guitars & such), Deborah Perry (singing), Dave Willey (bass guitar & accordions), David Shamrock (drums & percussion), Mark Harris (saxes, clarinet, flute), Matt Mitchell (piano, harmonium, synths) - Guests: Kent McLagan (acoustic bass), Jean Harrison (fiddle), Ron Miles (trumpet), David Kerman (drums and percussion), Leslie Jordan (voice), Mark McCain (samples and various exotica)

"It has been 20 years since Rock In Opposition ceased to exist as a movement in any official sense... Nevertheless, at its best this music can be stimulating and vital. It's only RIO, but I like it.

Carrying the torch for these avant Progressive refuseniks are Thinking Plague, part of a stateside Cow-inspired contingent including 5uu's and Motor Totemist Guild. These groups have...produced some extraordinary work... Their music eschews the salon woodwinds and cellos of the European groups for a more traditional electric palette, and its driving, whirlwind climaxes show a marked influence of King Crimson and Yes, names to make their RIO granddaddies run screaming from the room.

...this new album finds the group's main writer Mike Johnson in [an] apocalyptic mood, layering the pale vocals of Deborah Perry into a huge choir of doom, her exquisitely twisted harmonies spinning tales of war, despair and redemption as the music becomes audaciously, perhaps absurdly, complex. ... Thinking Plague are exciting and ridiculous in equal measure, as good Prog rock should be."

- **Keith Moliné, Wire**, Issue 239, January 2004

"Thinking Plague formed in 1983...after guitarist and main composer Mike Johnson answered a notice posted by Bob Drake for a guitarist into "Henry Cow, Yes, etc." ...these initial influences are still prominent in the group's sound - along with King Crimson, Stravinsky, Ligeti, Art Bears, and Univers Zero. ... They're not exactly prolific, but a listen to any of their albums will go to some length at explaining why - the composition and execution obviously takes tons of work. *A History of Madness* is a concept record, inspired by the Albiginian Crusades in 13<sup>th</sup> C. France and its parallels to current world events. There are song-like pieces at either end of the album, with multitracked bell-like vocals provided by Deborah Perry. ... "Rapture of the Deep"...unfolds in as satisfying and beautiful a manner as might be possible by what is, if not essentially, then practically, a rock band. ... The middle third of the CD, inaugurated by the demoniacally virtuosic "Gúdamy Le Máýagot," is more introspective and features...some ambient pieces. These are Johnson's first foray into that area. ... Thinking Plague is undoubtedly producing some of the finest and most rewarding progressive music in the world today. This is an album that must be heard to be believed."

- **James Beaudreau, Signal to Noise**, Winter 2004, Issue 32

"... Thinking Plague, nominally a sextet, picks up five extra players for... *A History Of Madness*...

...the combination works quite well. It ends up sounding full-bodied and detailed, with plenty of understated polyrhythms... unusual instruments pop in and out, including Mike Johnson's four guitars and...miscellaneous percussion, Dave Willey's accordion and melodica, and Mark McCain's scary combination of "sadbefré, lap-fractar, ründerfôn, and 'exquisite porpenar'." But with the unifying force of Deborah Perry's insistent vocals on top, the group never gets lost.

...The thing that has always tied it together is the leadership of guitarist Mike Johnson, who contributes ten of the twelve pieces on the record, as well as the lyrics. ... He's a thinker.

...pieces flow together quite coherently, making up a full-bodied suite that tends to feel psychedelic and uneasy.

... The regular, layered pulse and openly harmonized vocals here betray prog rock roots, as does the structured compositional emphasis and architecture. But it's hard to pin down Thinking Plague, especially when it comes to what bin the record belongs in. Just as well. Mike Johnson may be deadly serious, but his music has enough layers to bypass classification." - **Nils Jacobson, *All About Jazz***, October 2003, [www.allaboutjazz.com](http://www.allaboutjazz.com)

"...this year we've taken a more pragmatic approach to sharing our favorite local releases. We've assembled track lists with the best songs from the best albums and artists for situations you may encounter in the coming year -- a custom set of mix tapes from us to you.

Top Ten Songs for Someone With a Multiple Musicality Disorder... Be yourself, they tell you. But what "self" should you be today? The alternative-music-loving intellectual? The jazz-obsessed boho? The punk-rocking wildman? Or how about all of the above -- simultaneously?:

4. "Blown Apart" from *A History of Madness*, by Thinking Plague...

Colorado's longest-surviving art-rock aggregation checks in with another thoroughly worthy opus courtesy of mastermind Mike Johnson and a batch of mad conspirators. "Blown Apart" is more than eight minutes' worth of stops, starts, eccentric time signatures and mind-bending surprises."

- **Michael Roberts/Westword Staff**, "All Mixed Up: The year's best local music becomes the soundtrack of our lives.", *Westword*, Dec 25, 2003, [www.westword.com](http://www.westword.com)

"... A concept album; meant to be taken in it's entirety, this flows from track to track in a wholly organic manner. This Colorado-based band fuse complex art rock with finely nuanced details and delicate filigree amidst the start-stop tempo shifts and odd meters that add up to sinister secrets and overwhelming questions. ... Inspired by equal parts of Bartok, Stravinsky, Art Bears and Henry Cow, with a strong Euro-folk element as well. There is also more of an accent on acoustic instrumentation here than on their previous releases, which warms things considerably... To my ears this is the most satisfying and enjoyable album these folks have yet produced; merging accessibility with ambitious creativity in a seamless song cycle."

- **Dream Magazine**, #4

"... Most music based on popular forms...is like a photo in that it describes a single situation... A movie, on the other hand, usually presents a journey... Thinking Plague's music is like that. The album is a journey from start to end, and you never pass by the same scene twice. Parts of it are manic and dissonant...other parts are quiet and contemplative... You have to slow yourself down and listen carefully...because a life without rest is exhausting, and something new is coming just around the bend."

- **Jon Davis, *Exposé***, #28, December 2003

"...this incarnation of the band is perhaps the most balanced of any. ... With this set of twelve pieces, the group falls further under the dark umbrella of Present and Univers Zero as the arranged chaos becomes a familiar pattern of tension and release. ... Deborah Perry's lead vocal...is a constant...her pleasant delivery provides a point of light through the abyss. Daniel Denis and Dagmar Krause would both be proud of the influence they have wrought upon "Consolamentum" that features Perry's semi-spoken-words in a modern dirge enhanced by Johnson's brilliant hammer-on and backwards guitar parts. Johnson and Willey have also dug deeper into mainland European roots with the gypsy-like "Gúdamy Le Máragot" ... Mark McCain...creates a sound mat...not unlike...the disturbing backdrops done by Biota. ...Johnson and crowd can be proud of pushing the envelope yet again to its nth degree."

- **Jeff Melton, *Exposé***, #28, December 2003

"Thinking Plague... create a mad sort of progressive rock that some might call RIO... Track one, "Blown Apart," picks up where 1999's *In Extremis*, left off; it's a visceral and muscular display of angular and atonal prog rock that jumps lithely from brutal aggressiveness...to sublime melodicism. It serves as a model for much of the album's band tracks ... "Consolamentum," delves into a Stockhausen-inspired arrangement that pairs Deborah Perry's broadly sketched vocals to harmonium and brass. ... Lyrically the album offers some biting observations on the world today, though these are nicely balanced with...wistful poetry... The sum total is a vision of a turbulent and unsettled time and place, though intelligent and piercingly insightful. Recommended."

- **Paul Hightower, *Exposé***, #28, December 2003

"...Thinking Plague's studied fusion of various subversive forms of rock, seemingly bound together into a dense, restless macro-fugue, is spit out as polyphonic, rocket scientist prog. ...

"Blown Apart"...Perry delivers an unassuming, yet insistent vocal lead, under which bass and percussion forcefully slam a backbeat into the distinctly out of the pocket groove. ... If I didn't know this was some fairly highbrow happenings, I'd say it jammed. ... Johnson has a flair for making lines and sub-melodies clear in the midst of considerable commotion...

...Eastern-tinged "Gúdamy le Máragot" emits the most potent contact high on the record... It's also one of the few times Thinking Plague really step out of the arrangement and deliver real, adrenaline-fueled stomp... one of the cooler moments on *Madness* is actually the dark-ambient etude "Least Aether for Saxophone & Le Gouffre", featuring one half solo ruminations from reedist Mark Harris...and another micro-polyphonic mix of strings, bubbles and distant metallic friction.

...when a band draws upon aspects of modern composition, arrangement and performance a world removed from even most of the hip underground stuff out there, and still have people coming back for more, they're probably onto something. Interesting stuff and fans will not be disappointed."

- **Dominique Leone, *ground and sky***, December 4, 2011, [www.progreviews.com](http://www.progreviews.com)

"...guitarist Mike Johnson leads his ensemble through a potpourri of unearthly soundscapes coupled with an abstract aesthetic amid offbeat time signatures and more. The core sextet benefits from noted jazz trumpeter Ron Miles and ace prog-rock drummer Dave Kerman... vocalist Deborah Perry adds a sense of innocence to these mystically fabricated works, based upon contoured arrangements.

... Complex music for sure, yet Johnson and associates' stab at madness, largely translates into a *magical mystery tour* for the new millennium. Recommended..."

- **Glenn Astarita, *Jazz Review***, [www.jazzreview.com](http://www.jazzreview.com)

"Whether you consider them progressive rock, avant-garde, or a part of the knottier Rock in Opposition camp, there's little doubt that Thinking Plague are one of the most inventive, original musical ensembles working today. They take a bit from all the aforementioned styles, as well as from jazz and modern classical, and transmute it all into something wholly unique and distinctive. Though *A History of Madness* is as cutting-edge as can be, there's a very definite through line to the compositions, and a melodic sensibility that's forward-looking without being off-putting. ...constantly shifting latticework that offers delightful surprises at every turn, as rewarding as they are challenging." - **Muze**, [www.muze.com](http://www.muze.com), September 16, 2003

"A semi-regular random listing of what's been grabbing our ears/eyes/orifices lately... Thinking Plague *A History of Madness*... Mike Johnson's crew...soldiers on...with their mix of early Crimson dynamics and Henry Cow brittle-rock... Deborah Perry (on 'vocal emissions') makes a good mouth piece..."Blown Apart" is a great tale of destruction and rebirth that even agonistic can believe in."

- Jason Gross and David Manning, "Digital JukeJointBox", *Perfect Sound Forever*, Fall 2003

"...this is "adult music", in the real sense... the listener only has to have an adult perspective on music, and a capability to understand it and its content... The music itself is really well balanced, with no unnecessary musical ideas. ... It works very filmically, story like. ... The story itself is rather dark, the music is "colourful" ...with a real dramatic, but an ever controlled tension. ... An enthralling successful effort. ..."

- Gerald Van Waes, *Progressive Homestead*, progressive.homestead.com

"...this work has own life... Insane rhythmic constructions, sometimes apparently chaotic... this is one the most "difficult" bands of the actual worldwide progressive scene. The point is that...this really sounds great and awakes our sense of adventure and discovery. ..."

- Spulit, *Prog-PT*, August 17, 2004

"... Their brand of progressive rock owes more to Frank Zappa, King Crimson, Henry Cow, and Gentle Giant than the more symphonic groups, as the band has a very angular, avant-garde approach that is high on quirky, complex arrangements. ...

... Thinking Plague go for more atmospheric & acoustic moments on the 12 tracks included here. "Blown Apart", which kicks off the CD, is probably most representative of the Thinking Plague style, with repetitive, dissonant keyboards, jagged guitar lines, and Deborah Perry's wispy vocals. ... As on most Thinking Plague releases, there are numerous short pieces that serve as seques to the longer tracks...  
... *A History of Madness*...is an enjoyable slice of the avant-garde as only Thinking Plague can create."

- Pete Pardo, *Sea of Tranquility*, October 2, 2003, www.seaoftranquility.org

"Top 40 (or so) For 2003 ... 5. Thinking Plague *A History Of Madness*" - *Tone Clusters*, 2003

"Putting into words the ravishing beauty of this material is next to impossible: this is without a doubt the best Thinking Plague album – balanced, difficult yet exceedingly evocative in every single minute. This music moves lots of emotions... (think of the creative peaks of Henry Cow, but also Genesis and Yes to get a comparison about the intensity of this CD) – not to mention that maybe Thinking Plague's charts are even harder!

... "normal" progressive projects... can't possibly be compared to such a magnificent compositional dexterity. And what about the sound? Everything's lodged in its perfect place, wonderfully detailed and craftily planned. ... Like magicians, these guys know the formula for appearing and disappearing during a normal life's course – but when they come back, they release records with a noble scale."

- Massimo Ricci, *Touching Extremes*, www.touchingextremes.org

#### EARLY PLAGUE YEARS

#### CUNEIFORM

#### RUNE 121

#### 2000

*A Thinking Plague* lineup: Sharon Bradford (vocals), Bob Drake (bass guitar, drums, etc), Harry Fleishman (keyboards), Mark Fuller (drums), Mike Johnson (guitar). Guests: Mark Bradford (vocals, misc sounds)

*Moonsongs* lineup: Suzanne Lewis (vocals), Bob Drake (bass guitar, drums), Mark Fuller (drums), Erik Moon (keyboards), Mike Johnson (guitar), Mark McCain (drums). Guests: Fred Hess (alto sax), Glenn Nita (soprano sax)

"It's nice to get the early original Thinking Plague on CD after all this time. ...Cuneiform to the rescue, with both crammed onto 1 CD. ...their 1984 debut album *A THINKING PLAGUE* in which... the roots of their influences are obvious, copious amounts of Henry Cow and Art Bears fuse with abstract but powerful King Crimson-like rock fragmentation. ...Innovation was the key to Thinking Plague not being purely copyist... I find *How to Clean a Squid* a bit punky and grating, but it's still radical. ... *The Taste That Lingers On*, which seems to be a parody of radio advert music...After this, the rest of the album gets dark and explorative again, venturing from powerful offbeat rock to pure bric-a-brac avant garde..."

With MOONSONGS they had a more defined sound, largely due to Susanne Lewis joining as lead singer. ...she refocused their style, defining a new American genre of RIO... Notable here is the presence of an extra drummer, enabling the band to achieve some phenomenal multi-percussion work-outs, and extraordinary complex inventions. A great value disc, wisely including the original *Moonsongs*, completing the historical documentation of this important band."

- Alan Freeman, *Audion*, #43, Autumn 2000

"The recent resurgence of Thinking Plague has finally yielded the reissue of their (rare) first two albums (both included on this one CD in their entirety), showcasing the beginnings of one of the more adventurous bands of our era. ...*A Thinking Plague* and *Moonsongs* show that Plague's creative energies and talents were already highly developed, even at this early stage... the remastering that went into this issue gave added great depth and dynamics to the sound...a great bargain as a twofer, and well worth the attention of those interested in more plague."

- Steve Robey, *Exposé*, #21, March 2001

"The disc kicks off with one of my favorite Plague songs, "Warheads"...a real rocker. ...track two, "Etude for Combo"...this particular song sounds like an 80s King Crimson song played backwards. Great stuff. ...this track was recorded "live in the studio", and the production makes it sound like you're right there with them. ...Overall, the *Early Plague Years* disc is a must-have for fans of avant-prog and music that is "progressive" in the dictionary sense rather than the genre-name sense."

- Bob, *roundtable reviews*, *Ground and Sky*

"The album opens with the rocking "Warheads", which at times is relatively straightforward: loud, consistent bass playing, precise picking from Mike Johnson, and everything else a fan of hard-rock prog would want...King Crimson vibes, a bit more skewed, obviously, but a similar feel. ...*Moonsongs* is by far the Thinking Plague album that grabbed me the quickest and the hardest, and it still hasn't let go. I'd recommend it to pretty much anyone with adventurous tastes."

- Brandon, *roundtable reviews*, *Ground and Sky*

"Truly defining the word "eclectic, Thinking Plague touches on progressive, folk, punk, world music and jazz. This music is often labeled as Rock in Opposition – a movement started in the 1960s by Henry Cow. It is the avant-garde/free jazz of the rock and roll world. Just as Albert Ayler and Art Ensemble of Chicago abandoned traditional jazz characteristics, Thinking Plague has abandoned stereotypical rock and roll characteristics such as chorus, break beat and overall structure. The one characteristic that is retained is the breakdown..."

...Bob Drake explained...the band's moniker: "...Thinking Plague means the disease of thinking in a society where too much thinking is considered...out of touch with the "real" world. The disease of the dreamer be she/he a scientist or a poet."

The album *Early Plague Years* is a collection of the band's first two albums *Moonsongs* (1986) and ...*A Thinking Plague* (1984). Bob Drake re-mastered and repackaged the two original LPs into one fine CD package. ... The album ranges from the hard rocking, sonically pungent, politically

motivated “Warheads” and then moves into the ethereal, percussive, chant laden tracks...

This album is for those who are looking for a fresh look at what can be created within...rock and roll. ...” - **Brian L. Knight, *The Vermont Review***

“... Thinking Plague had...lanky melodies right down to the saccharine-saturated Ultravox drum machines. However, their major flaw stemmed from the fact that their influences were one too many...mix of Frank Zappa, Lydia Lunch, early Sonic Youth and ritual music for esoteric new age religions.”

- **Roman Sokal, *Exclaim!***, December 2000/January 2001

“Thinking Plague is one of the most progressive bands...always balancing on the edge between extremely technical musicianship and total madness, blending Art Rock, Avant Garde, Jazz, experimental Progressive Rock and RIO. There aren't many bands that can equal them when it comes to originality. Their music is a blend between Suu's, Art Bears, Gentle Giant, Henry Cow, King Crimson, Slapp Happy, U Totem and Frank Zappa. Thinking Plague's first two LPs..."-A Thinking Plague" (1984) and "Moonsongs" (1986) ...finally re-mastered and released on one CD. ... The music is highly recommended if you're into intricate progressive rock.

- **Greger Rönqvist, *prog-reviews/Yahoo! Music, Launch Groups***, May 22, 2001

“... Combining both *Moonsongs* and...*A Thinking Plague* on one CD has given listeners an opportunity to finally hear these long out-of-print gems that introduced the band to the prog world. ... Combining the complexity of Henry Cow with the power of early King Crimson and the overall weirdness of Frank Zappa, Thinking Plague conjure up a musical maelstrom that is easily identifiable yet tough to describe.

Band leader and guitarist Mike Johnson has some serious chops, and his metallic playing is smattered throughout the 12 tracks... On “Etude for Combo” he lays down complex riff after riff...tasty runs that would make Robert Fripp or Gary Green smile. ...

...“Moonsongs” ...is a bizarre piece that is as brutal as it is beautiful. ... Imagine a...nightmare that seemingly never ends ... and yet you don't want to wake up. ...

...tracks from the second album...more bouncy material...more lively and less dark. ...culmination for me is the fantastic “Possessed,” a complex piece that features some furious guitar/keyboard exchanges before changing over to a wonderful and haunting vocal piece highlighted by the singing of Sharon Bradford. ...this was how Gentle Giant would have sounded with a female vocalist.

...this is highly recommended for those who want something different, adventurous, and definitely not commercial.”

- **Pete Pardo, *Sea of Tranquility***, Issue #6, Fall 2000

#### **THINKING PLAGUE**

#### **IN EXTREMIS**

#### **CUNEIFORM**

#### **RUNE 113**

#### **1998**

lineup: Mike Johnson (guitars, synthesizers and sequencing), David Kerman (drums and percussion), Mark Harris (saxes, clarinet, flute, bass clarinet), Deborah Perry (voice), Dave Willey (bass guitar, accordion), Shane Hotle (piano, synthesizers and mellotron), Bob Drake (bass guitar, voice)

“Rating: Aces/ hands down classic Head-spinningly complex prog-rock of the highest order.

Among the vanguard of groups riding the crest of a largely unheralded contemporary avant-progressive tsunami, Denver's Thinking Plague stand out in bas-relief...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. On *In Extremis*... these unsung geniuses have channeled the crushing fury of King Crimson, the existential angst of the Art Bears, the dense contrapuntal irregularity of Henry Cow and the pitch-black angularity of Present into a disquieting concoction whose ceaseless paroxysms of unabated intensity are tempered only by “Les Etudes D'Organism”'s disturbed diversion into perversely cheerful and structurally perverse circus music.... a relentless tide of head-spinning complexity...wildly shifting plates of sound. ...for those who enjoy rising to the challenge...the feverish surfeit of spellbind ideas investigated here are almost without precedent.”

- **Eric Lumbeau, *Alternative Press***, v13, #126, Jan 1999

“...while Fripp's many Crimsons have made the art of musical intertwining synonymous with prog music, Thinking Plague take those same developments and move them outward. ...Fripp's difficult equations are nearly always resolved, while the music of Thinking Plague seems to spawn other musical avenues and interludes, like a fractal that keeps blossoming and expanding. ...it's a brand of improvisational prog that may eventually filter through the ranks of the Knitting Factory and Avant Chicago fans that enjoy these kind of musical cross-pollinations, Mystical flutes, ghostly vocals, percussive allsorts – all giving Johnson's scores a multi-textured sound that clearly defines one transition from another. Especially recommended to those adventuresome listeners who have been looking for an excuse to try out some new sounds – quench your curiosity here (Note to Crimsophiles: Beat the boots! The closing intensity of “Kingdom Come” here is the only true successor to “Red”).

- **Richard Proplesch, *Focus***, Dec 10-Jan 6, 1999

“From the very first moment of the first track... it is clear that this is a very special CD. “Dead Silence” is hypnotic and parts enter contrapuntally creating a marvelous sense of static interweaving. Johnson and company never let the excitement abate, as each succeeding track is just as engaging as the one before it, culminating in the 14-minute “Kingdom Come.” ... a masterly blending of avant-garde musical resources with rock, and some exceptional playing from everyone involved. “

- **John Covach, *Progression***, #29, Fall/Winter 1998-99

“Possibly the best release of 1998. ...The album opener “Dead Silence” is practically an avant-prog single, starting with catchy riffage on guitar and descending into a cacophony of sounds about halfway through. The lyrics are dark and beautiful. ... Compositionally it may be the most advanced album yet, and there's always something going on in the background that is barely discernable right away and must be listened for. ...People who love and accept News from Babel, Suu's and similar bands will find this right up their alley.”

- **Sean, *roundtable reviews, Ground and Sky***

“I can safely say that this album wins my #1 slot for best new releases of 1998, and may very well occupy that slot for the entire decade. Yes, it is THAT good. A perfect “10”. Johnson has created an emotionally charged Maelstrom of progressive rock sounds, the statistical density of which is still hard to fathom. .... no two measures of music on this album are alike, yet the album has a very logical, linear flow and is surprisingly easy to listen to... Johnson's guitar is the star of the show, incorporating the styles of Fred Frith and Robert Fripp, along with the brief speedy outbursts of Steve Howe circa “Topographic Oceans” and “Relayer”. The voices...in true RIO fashion, dance around the complex rhythms of the music, convening again with the musical flow at just the right moments. Kerman's drumming, as always, is phenomenal; he must be one of the greatest drummers alive today. The lyrics... are very intelligent and philosophical, and make damn good reading on their own... All of the songs are uniformly fantastic, and there is not a single weak moment on the seven tracks and sixty minutes of this disc. The biggest treat of all is the 14-minute instrumental “Les Etudes d'Organism,” ...mind-boggling changes in temp and mood... humor...aggressive ensemble playing and killer chops... delivers everything I would ever hope to hear in a progressive rock instrumental. ... Truly a jaw-dropping album, and the best album I have heard in a very long time..”

- **Steve Robey, *Roundtable review, Exposé***, #16, 12/98

“...Thinking Plague are back and as compelling as always, integrating the musical experiences of the members over the last 9 years into a music as good as you’d expect from this line-up... An outstanding release and one of the best this year.”

– **Mike McLatchey, Roundtable review, *Exposé*, #16, Dec. 1998**

“...Thinking Plague is back with a vengeance. Their music is angular, drives hard and is laden with a complex and brilliant precision, one that combines the accessibility of the best progressive rock with the creative spark of Frank Zappa – and in the end sounds like neither. ...This is one of those discs that offers new surprises with every listen. My highest recommendation.” – **Peter Thelen, Roundtable review, *Exposé*, #16, Dec. 1998**

“...this music is an intellectual declaration of independence as well as total renewal of musical styles. Borrowing from progressive and crimson influences, Thinking Plague’s music has a beautiful and disturbing capacity to constantly invent new musical paths as the music unfolds. ... one can really figure what ‘In Opposition’ means when listening to this really mind-blowing album.”

– **Jerome Schmidt, Roundtable review, *Exposé*, #16, Dec. 1998**

“... music that doesn’t sound like anything else. ...incredible good musicians. Well composed and very carefully structured... The music lies within avant-garde and art-rock in the boundaries between rock, folk, jazz, and modern symphonic music. Odd and unique music that makes the adventurous listener never want to stop listening. The title “In Extremis” is Latin and means “at the time of dying”, and at times you may think this music sounds like it’s coming from the land of the dead. Sometimes its close to Magma and Eskaton, sometimes Yes, but most of the time, they sound like no other band. The whole album is a masterpiece... Highly recommended!”

– **G.Ronnqvist, *Prog-Reviews*, #38, 2001**

““If this is prog-rock, it’s progressive music with sharp teeth, making serious demands on most listeners.”

– **Jason Gross and Steve Smith, “American Contraband: Alternative Rock and American Experimental Music,” *New Music Box*, Issue 15, v.2 #3**

“Thinking Plague have triumphed with *In Extremis* in creating an album that both challenges and attracts the listener at the same time. Thinking Plague’s music isn’t dark at all; it’s bizarre, all right, but also almost celebratory...As a fan of upbeat rock, I find much to enjoy about *In Extremis*. It’s an album that’s not easily summarized, but here’s a try: varied strange, intricate compositions that are played with great precision and a lot of heart. If you’re not into avant-garde music (as I am not), I would recommend that you don’t simply dismiss this album – this work has a lot to offer for more mainstream progressive fans as well.”

– **Jon F., roundtable review, *Ground and Sky***

“...I heard so much about Thinking Plague...that I decided to give them a shot. I’m glad I did. ...The music here is often jagged dissonant and oppressively rhythmic, grabbing you by the neck and jerking you from here to there and back again with alarming effect. Yet...there is a great deal of honest beauty and power in the music.... The center of the album...is “Les Etudes de Organisms”, a massive epic of power, intensity, and humor. Dark and driving passages give way to a truly bizarre middle section that puts the prog spin on klezmer, circus music, and bad horror film scores. ...In the end, *In Extremis* is a very interesting and satisfying album. ...if you’re willing to throw yourself in head-first and not look back, you’re in for a real treat. If this is what RIO is like, I need to check out some more.”

– **Jon B., roundtable review, *Ground and Sky***

“I hate to start this review using the word “wow”. But here it goes...wow! *In Extremis*... is quite a treat. ...First off, the drum and bass work on this album is top-notch. ...most listeners will be amazed at the amount of layers in this music. Each musician seems to be in their separate world but somehow the colliding sound fit perfectly together. ...over the rhythm-layer we get into some very interesting use of classical and rock instruments. The melodies, and flurries of counter-melodies, seem influenced by Schoenberg and Boulez’s 12-tone music. ...The chords created by the various instruments are densely dissonant (but not ugly) and have an Edgar Varese-quality to them. I even noticed microtonal influences in a number of sections...great to hear in rock. Now this may sound like too much for some, but the band has a talent for creating hooks that remain locked in your head long after the album is done. ...singer Deborah Perry has an important role for making this musically complex album accessible... the vocals sound strangely beautiful...Overall, I would recommend *In Extremis* to musically adventurous prog fans. But if you’re also looking for an introduction to avant-garde music, RIO, and even the 20<sup>th</sup> century modern classical this is the perfect CD to start with.”

– **Steve, roundtable reviews, *Ground and Sky***

“Thinking Plague are at the forefront of a subsection of the progressive genre named ‘Rock In Opposition’ or ‘RIO’. ... The origins of RIO go back to bands like Henry Cow and White Noise. ... The title, *In Extremis*, is Latin, meaning ‘at the very point of death’. ...songs delve into the feelings of fear, resignation and enlightenment...from one’s realization of the imminence of death. Heavy stuff... 1. Dead Silence... Anything but! ‘Scat’ female vocals random time signatures. The structure of symphonic rock is stretched to the boundaries. ... 3. This Weird Wind... Male vocals. This could almost be Jon Anderson on a cosmic collision course with Robert Fripp. The best track so far. Imagine ‘Olias of Sunhillow’ meets something from Crimson’s ‘Beat’. ... The production quality and musicianship of this CD are simply stunning if not staggering. ...I found the album highly intriguing, definitely challenging...it’s an album I return to and I do highly recommend it to anyone that is seeking to expand their understanding of all that is ‘progressive’ within rock music.”

– **Ian Oakley, *Bathtub of Adventures*, Feb 2001, [www.binternet.com/~archimedes.com](http://www.binternet.com/~archimedes.com)**

“...exotic melodies...Deborah Perry’s delicious voice.... from the point of view of the composition everything is unbeatable, brilliant, definitely extraordinary. ...there are so many musicians and they play so many instruments that really astonish me; plus it even astonishes me their origins...no, they are not Swedish, not even Scandinavian...against all the possibilities...it had never [occurred to me] that they were Yankees...”The Etudes d’Organism” is the heart of the disc...an epic composition of 14 minutes where we will be able to find a heap of shades and tensions...”

– **Diego Carrere, *Nucleus* [webzine]**

“As an intense concoction of rock and all manner of RIO fusions, songs and avant garde, it’s one that’s destined to challenge, with flashes of Henry Cow rubbing shoulder with Magma and King Crimson... it took Mike Johnson these past 10 years to compose such an opus...he’s managed to outdo Suu’s acclaimed Hunger’s TEETH...”

– **Nigel Harris, *Audion*, #41, Nov 1999”**

“Thinking Plague (of Colorado) does a fabulous job of weaving together the strands of immediatism, avant-garde noodling, evocative lyrics and kick-butt composition. It all adds up to something great: a disc that will challenge your ear without upsetting your balance, fill your mind with unique and personal imagery, and keep your toes tapping! ... If after all this you aren’t running to grab *In Extremis*, I just have to shake my head.”

– **Bruce Young, *Cyber-Psychosis AOD*, #9, Aug 1999**

“The menacing cover artwork of *In Extremis* – what appears to be a tornado forming over a cheerless landscape – foreshadows the music within: a roiling, tireless brew of chaotic dissonance. ...But subsequent auditions gradually untangled the web of “random noise,” revealing a gem of startling

beauty. ...In any event it works, and I've never gotten bored with this CD. ...*In Extremis* is a stressful album. But it can be beautiful at the same time – dissonant yet melodic, disturbing yet playful. Try it.”  
– **Gary V., roundtable reviews, *Ground and Sky***

“...definitely a worthwhile release. ...All the trademarks of RIO/avant-prog are here: disjointed melodies, themes that don't last for more than a few bars before fragmenting, lots of harmonic complexities, wacky vocals, diverse orchestration, and so on. ...Sorting through the apparent chaos and making sense of it all is a great reward for listening closely... you should definitely get this one ASAP. If you're looking to begin exploring modern avant-prog, this makes a pretty good place to start.”  
– **Brandon, roundtable reviews, *Ground and Sky***

“This band has been described as “accessible RIO”, which seems like a contradiction in terms but really is true for Thinking Plague. The music manages to be experimental and yet catchy at the same time. The plaintive vocals, which often jump from octave to octave and sometimes seem entirely unrelated to the music...sound wonderful. ...My favorite tracks are...“Dead Silence” and the longest track on the album, “Les Etudes D' Organism”. The former seems like it could stand a chance of being a hit single...The latter...comes as close to my idea of perfect prog as anything I've ever heard. ...this album is highly recommended, as is their earlier album *In This Life*.”  
– **Bob, roundtable review, *Ground and Sky***

“I cannot give musical similarities because I have never quite heard anything like this before.” – **Terry Craven, *Wondrous Stories*, #84, Dec 1998**

“...cohesive and vibrant, and as usual when it comes to these guys, the music is tricky, quirky and playful, to say the least. If you want a piece of this kind of music, then Thinking Plague should be the choice. You won't regret it.”  
– **Roger Karlsson, *Sonitus*, progmusic.com/sonitus**

“One of the most valuable tenets of prog-rock has been the freedom to move outside existing restrictions. ...Thinking Plague have all the earmarks of a solid prog-rock unit: excellent musicianship, complex song-structures, and bizarre changes. ...Thinking Plague could easily develop into something exciting. Certainly there are numerous elements on this disc that prove it. ...*In Extremis*, is destined for “fans of the genre...”  
– **Mitchell Foy, *Atlanta Press*, 1/ 1-7/99**

“... On their two first albums, *A Thinking Plague* (83) and *Moonsongs* (85) the group presented a very original presentation of impulses, from Art Bears and News From Babel, and the critically acclaimed *In This Life* (89) amazed a lot of “alternative rock” critics...by being...genuinely progressive... But then nothing was heard until you discovered the group's name in the stable of the last real progressive label in USA, Cuneiform. ... The hair-raising complexity...characterizes almost every second of this 52 minute CD... composition-wise as well as production-wise, rhythmically as well as harmonically, lyrically as well as instrumentally. ... *In Extremis* deals with melodies, with deconstructed, but anyway clearly defined forms, so that the...ultimate impression is not of a “technically competent band with difficult material”, but of all-embracing compositional authority. To describe this as “clever music” is parallel to accusing the London Symphony Orchestra for “showing off” when performing *The Rite of Spring*.

...*In Extremis*...represents an actual progressive initiative completely in, for, and by its own time. The spirit of Henry Cow, Egg (i.e. Civil Surface) and Kohntarkosz-era Magma is found here, so is the ballast from Charles Ives, John Cage, Yes, Slayer and Björk.

In other words, this is an outstanding example of the level of REALLY progressive rock today, and the CD can...be characterized as considerably more radical and creative than anything Crimson and Gentle Giant issued in the 70s. ...

What you get here is heavy bass and grumpy guitars, raging precision drumming, keyboardism which...redefines the place of keyboards in a sound picture... sober vocals...and inexplicable, abstract atmospheres which escape any formal description. Rarely do I hear such thoroughly prepared sound art, and the result is also painstakingly mixed...

A single excerpt from this CD effectively reduces Gentle Giant's *So Sincere* to an average Status Quo track. ... *In Extremis* contains everything the title promises, and indefinitely much more, it is a masterpiece which the stagnated and quasi-like prog rock genre of the 90s desperately needs - shocking, relieving.

The greatest event since the release of Present's *Le Poison Qui Rend Fou*... - **Tarkus, 2001**

“Thinking Plague is one of the growing number of bands gathering under the Cuneiform banner. ... *In Extremis* has grown out of this new line-up. ... *Dead Silence* sets the scene for the whole album. Deborah's jazz vocals amidst organized chaos and melodic cacophony. ... The whole thing is like King Crimson at their most obtuse - and then some... To say Thinking Plague are tight is almost a misnomer... The whole composition swirls and twists... this is not the kind of stuff you will hear on your local radio station... *Kingdom Come* closes the album; a massive composition...there is a hell of a lot that Thinking Plague can pack into almost quarter of an hour's music - probably more than some bands put into a decade of releases; more that Status Quo fitted into their whole career! *Kingdom Come* is a real epic in the true sense of the word. The power and pomp that the band infuses into sections of this track are stunning to listen to. If you are going to finish an album well, this is how you should do it!

I guess this is exactly what you should come to expect from anyone under the Cuneiform banner. This is a complex fusion of rock, jazz, folk and modern symphonic music meet. *Journal Wired* described Thinking Plague as “a genre unto itself, eclectically derivative in a bold way and spectacularly innovative in the old-fashioned sense of genuine originality”. Actually there are a lot of bands I would put into the same genre - many of them, Boud Deun...Birdsongs of the Mesozoic, etc, on the Cuneiform label. This is what happens where experimental contemporary musicians meet Canterbury rock. ... this is progressive music in the more literal sense of the word.

...*In Extremis* was awarded the Alternate View Album of the Month for February 1999.” – **Frank Blades, *Alternate View*, February 1999**

“...Deborah Perry...succeeds in singing on dense, angular and dissonant music. The general style is close to the one of 5uu's and Utotem...although the sound is often less heavy and more acoustic... Bob Drake's production and mixing are exemplary... They greatly help organize a complex instrumentation which generates a binding spell provided that you make the effort to immerse yourself into it.”

– **J.L. Putaux, *Koid '9*, #28, December 98**

“It's always hard to describe music that doesn't sound like anything else. ... It's always a pleasure to listen to such incredible good musicians. Well composed and very carefully structured... The music lies within avant-garde and art-rock in the boundaries between rock, folk, jazz and modern symphonic music. ... Sometimes it's close to Magma and Eskaton, sometimes Yes, but most of the time, they sound like no other band.

The whole album is a masterpiece... Highly recommended! [Rating: 10/10]”

– **Greger Rönqvist, *prog-reviews/Yahoo! Music Launch Groups*, May 22, 2011**