

WHAT THE PRESS HAS SAID ABOUT:

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 crimsomic 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, July 2000-

“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 20th 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 Crimsons ‘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

Exposé Writers’ Choices: Best of 1998

Steve Robey: #1 = Thinking Plague – “In Extremis”

Rob Walker: #1 = Thinking Plague – “In Extremis”

Peter Thelen: #1 = Thinking Plague – “In Extremis”

Mike McLatchey: #4 = Thinking Plague – “In Extremis”

“...exotic melodies...Deborah Perry’s delicious voice... from the point of view of the composition everything is unbeatable, brilliant, definitively 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 Rönnqvist, *prog-reviews/Yahoo! Music Launch Groups*, May 22, 2011