

Bio information: **THINKING PLAGUE**

Title: **HISTORY OF MADNESS** (Cuneiform Rune 180)

Cuneiform promotion dept: (301) 589-8894 / fax (301) 589-1819

email: Cuneiform2@aol.com

<http://members.aol.com/Cuneiform2/cuneiform.html>

FILE UNDER: ROCK

Led by composer/ guitarist **Mike Johnson**, **Thinking Plague** is a Colorado-based ensemble that explores the aural frontier where rock (in all its manifestations), modern classical, folk, and jazz music meet. *Journal Wired* called Thinking Plague's work "a genre of music unto itself, eclectically derivative in a bold way and spectacularly innovative in the old-fashioned sense of genuine originality." Defining this genre further, *Alternative Press* places them, along with the 5uus and "a select array of contemporary Japanese units" in the "vanguard of groups riding the crest of a largely unheralded avant-progressive tsunami... an idiom responsible for some of the 20th century's most significant musical achievements. ...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."

Thinking Plague grew out of the recording experiments of Johnson and bassist/drummer **Bob Drake** in the early 1980s. Johnson recalls being: "a classical fan since childhood, which led me to Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Bartok, Shostakovich, W. Schumann, Britten, etc...I developed the desire to achieve that kind of expression and depth while using the power or "rawness" of rock instruments or styles. When Bob and I met [1978] we clicked on these lines instantly"[*Audion*]. They were also inspired by the Art Bears and Henry Cow, who Johnson calls "The true pathfinders...[who] showed the rest of us a new way out of the limited old progressive rock/ jazz of the 70s"[*ProgVisions*]. In 1982 Johnson and Drake formed an ensemble with **Harry Fleishman**, **Mark Bradford** and vocalist **Sharon Bradford**, and others, and in 1984, self-released their first LP, *...a thinking plagu*" on Endemic (cassette reissue, Prolific). Featuring album covers hand painted by Drake and music from across the spectrum, it captured the attention of the art and experimental rock communities.

A new singer/songwriter, **Suzanne Lewis**, joined the band in 1985. Drummer **Mark Fuller** and keyboardist **Eric Moon** also came on board. By the time of their 2nd recording, *Moonsongs* (1987 lp, Dead Man's Curve/ 1986 cassette, Endemic) Thinking Plague's sound had come into its own; *Option* called it "stunning". Cuneiform would later (2000) reissue both *Moonsongs* and *...a thinking plagu* on a single CD called *Early Plague Years*.

During the late 1980s, Thinking Plague expanded its instrumentation, bringing reed player **Mark Harris** and keyboardist **Shane Hotle** on board. Their 3rd recording, *In This Life*, came out as a CD in 1989 on Chris Cutler's ReR label. *Boston Rock* called it "astonishing!" and *Ear Magazine* said, "Thinking Plague has climbed into a niche uniquely its own." After this release, Lewis left Colorado and the band. Drake moved to LA, where he met drummer **David Kerman** (Suu's). Kerman joined Thinking Plague in 1990, and the new lineup performed and recorded material before Drake moved to France in 1994.

In 1996, a new Thinking Plague nucleus featuring vocalist **Deborah Perry**, bassist **Dave Willey**, Johnson, Kerman (who later moved to Europe), Harris, and Hotle began recording Johnson's new work with other guests. This material and some from the early 90's were released by Cuneiform in 1998 as the CD *In Extremis*, Thinking Plague's 1st on that label. *Alternative Press* called it "without precedent", a "hands down classic"; *Exposé* agreed "Yes, it is THAT good. A perfect "10."

Thinking Plague's new CD on Cuneiform, *A History of Madness*, presents a further maturation of the band's sound, featuring a more pronounced lyric sensibility with Johnson's compositions and lyrics and Perry's voice at its core. The band's lineup features a new keyboardist, **Matt Mitchell**, a graduate of the Eastman Conservatory of Music and an accomplished jazz player, and a new drummer, **Dave Shamrock**, the former drummer and contributing composer for **Sleepytime Gorilla Museum's** *Grand Opening and Closing*. Guest musicians on the CD include Kerman, **Mark McCoin**, and others.

A History of Madness is the first Thinking Plague CD to be digitally recorded. Its warm, organic sound is due in part to the inclusion of acoustic instruments in the mix, which is also interwoven with McCoin's electronic sounds and samples. The CD includes two soundscape pieces, "War on Terra" and "Le Gouffre", created by Johnson and McCoin, that Johnson maintains: "are really a departure for me, or a beginning, as it were, in that they are my first really serious forays into the realm of semi-composed, sonic environments rather than organized pieces or songs. "

Inspired by the Albiginian Crusades in 13thC. France as well as current world events, *A History of Madness* is a thematically complex work, with multiple layers of music, sound and symbolism intertwined. Johnson intended the title to have at least two meanings: "the" history of madness, as in "man's inhumanity to man" over the centuries... Or it can refer to one's having "a

history of madness”, as in the family, or in one’s case file”. The CD’s magic reveals itself on multiple listenings, in exploring the work’s threads like currents in a stream. However, a single listen will suffice to leave most spellbound.

For those who want to know more about *A History of Madness*:

We asked Mike Johnson to tell us here at Cuneiform a bit about the conceptual background of / inspiration for the disc. Here's his answer to us:

"The title, "A History of Madness" has at least 2 obvious possible interpretations; "the" history of madness, as in "man's inhumanity to man" over the centuries, etc. Or it can refer to one's having "a history of madness", as in the family, or in one's case file, as it were. Both meanings are intended in this CD.

The primary historical inspiration was the Albigensian Crusades in 13th Century southern France (the area around Bob Drake's Studio Midi-Pyrenees), and the various alleged mysteries and 'secrets' associated with the Cathars, a medieval Manichæan or dualist sect who were obliterated as a result of a series of "crusades" and an ongoing inquisition. My own ancestors were Waldensians, a related sect from Lyon who were often besieged and burned at the stake with the Cathars.

I use this historical event as an example or a symbol of the greed and cruelty which occurs throughout history right up to today, in the name of so-called religious or moral convictions. I read a number of books, including *Holy Blood-Holy Grail*, *Massacre at Monsegur*, *The Albigensian Crusades*, *From Romance to Ritual*, *The Knights Templars*, and others that discuss (sometimes spuriously) the connection between the "holy grail", the Templars, the secret "treasure of the Cathars", the village of Rennes-le-Chateau in L'Aude near Bob, and so on. The tracks "Consolamentum", "The Underground Stream", "Le Gouffre", and to some extent "Our 'Way of Life" & "War on Terra" deal with these ideas, and imply parallels with current events (similar to what I tried to do with "Kingdom Come" on *In Extremis*).

The personal madness theme refers to thoughts on emotional/psychological issues (depression, anxiety, and shall we say a general 'malaise') widespread in our western societies. I believe the materialistic but cynically phony religious milieu of modern society, with its heightened awareness and expectations combining with information overload, disenchantment, alienation, existential struggles (loss of meaning, purpose), fear of the future (overpopulation, environmental devastation, conflict over shrinking resources, war, "weapons-of-mass-destruction", etc., etc.) is driving many of us insane.

The songs "Blown Apart" and "Lux Lucet" deal specifically with this theme. Lux Lucet is Latin for "a light shines", which is shortened from Lux Lucet In Tenebris, meaning "a light shines in the darkness" - from John 1:5 (it happens to be the ancient motto from the Waldensian logo - so there again I found a connection). It symbolized for me the search for hope in the struggle to find a way through the darkness. That song represents a journey, which incorporates a little of the symbolism analyzed by Weston in *From Ritual to Romance*, i.e., the "wasteland" (this book also inspired T.S. Elliot's poem), the illness and/or death and the resurrection or recovery of the "fisher king", the "grail king", etc. There's a recurring theme of water in many ancient fertility rituals. The water comes and rejuvenates the king (meaning the land). So, throughout this record I have used the sound of water, references to water, and even images of a very old fountain (in the south of France - compliments of E. M. Thomas) to express this theme."

Mike Johnson, July 21, 2003