

## ***The Allure of Mystery / Thinking About Music***

By Stephen Rennicks

I've always been very interested in mystery and especially the allure of mystery in regard to music and art. I have explored this in some of my own work as an artist which I will talk about later. Mystery can be a powerful and influential force where passion and obsession can get very easily confused. Mysteries can be found everywhere and at every stage in our lives and it could be argued that curiosity is one of the major factors which drives evolution. I think it's worth stating at this point however that we can never completely solve mystery; as long as there is wonder in our hearts there will always be something new for us to discover. The writer Anaïs Nin understood this when she said, *"The possession of knowledge does not kill the sense of wonder and mystery. There is always more mystery."* This is true also for the artist as well, they will never fully understand the strange alchemy which sometimes happens when their band gets together (So often the first album can be the best which I think makes 'beginners luck' a major factor) or even where the impulses comes from that help them create their best work for if they did they would be able to turn it on like a tap. It's often only with hindsight as well that you can really understand what you were trying to express as an artist, so mystery is inherent in the creative process.

A mystery is when you don't have all the information but how we view the information we do have can already be very subjective. So when we imaginatively fill in what is missing as well you could say we are really engaged in a creative act when we listen, or more importantly, when we think about music. For me, with music, perhaps this drive to discover more about it began from listening to the radio as a child and wondering where those signals were coming from, never mind who the musicians were and what their intentions might be. It's also worth stating that of course we get it wrong when we project our interpretation onto an artist and their work but that is inevitable and through that process we can gain a more personal experience of their work which can only belong to us.

I want to give you a few examples from my own experience where mystery and music/the arts have collided for me. The first example happened to someone else but was formative for me. A long time ago in 1992 I went to the Guinness Jazz festival in Cork with a bunch of friends. One of them lived there and we were staying with his family. Before we left he had said to me. *"You listen to a lot of weird music, don't you? I want to play you something when we get to my house that I call my 'secret music'."* I was intrigued and asked more but all he could tell me was that it was music taped onto a blank cassette which he had gotten from a friend he was no longer in contact with. This was a young working class guy with a wife and child, who, like me was doing a printing apprenticeship. He

described the music as sounding like it came from another planet and that he would put it on whenever he needed a break from everyday life. He was speaking about it as if he was the only person in the world who had a copy and really did see the music as a secret to all but him. I was now even more intrigued and not long after we arrived he played it for me. I instantly recognized the signature sound of Cocteau Twins when he did and just as quickly also realized I didn't want to ruin the purity of this relationship for him but knew I had to answer his question as well so I just told him that they might be Cocteau Twins, who I described as being a small cult band from the UK. He wasn't someone who read the music press and as it turned out had never heard of them and so he seemed content enough to learn this much. In 1992, before the internet, that was as much as he might ever learn about them and what I told him didn't threaten to ruin whatever it was he had created in his mind about the music. But I never forgot this relationship he had with this music and the sense of ownership he felt over it and see this now as an example of what can happen when you don't get any resolution of the mystery.

My next example comes from around the same time as this when I heard about an American group called Slint. I must have liked what I read about them as I bought the album on vinyl as soon as I saw a copy. The album was *Spiderland* and it went on to influence what has become known as the post-rock movement. The thing that made this band so mysterious and left me with so many questions was that, as well as producing amazing and at the time very unique music, they had already broken up. Inexplicably splintering just before their final album was released. The album itself with its strange lyrics and scant information was already mysterious enough and because there were no interviews or live gigs etc to add to or contradict the little I had to go on my mind was free to imagine whatever I liked about them. Again this was before the internet, when all you had to go on was the actual record and its artwork and whatever information you could glean from it or hear from other sources. Staring at that record, which I knew every detail of at the time, allowed me to puzzle out and create a whole world from it and my own experience. Through this process I gained a similar deeply personal connection that my friend had experienced with his anonymous cassette. However, in 2005 Slint reformed and went on tour and I suddenly had the choice to test some of my fantasies against reality when they came to Dublin. This choice between imagination and reality would be something I would explore in an art project I did a year later that I will speak of soon. In my opinion I should have stayed at home that night as they played the album tracks way too faithfully for my taste and seemed like a very good but very unexciting Slint covers band.

The last example comes from a few years later. In 1995 a friend and I went to the UK for what would turn out to be the only Drive Like Jehu European tour. One of their members was an artist, Rick Froberg, and he would paint fantastic abstract images on their artwork that bore no relation to the music which fired your imagination and even inspired some fans to go as far as tattooing them on their bodies. Being again an American band they were also kind of exotic to me and were also quite mysterious in that while they probably would have liked to talk with the press they were such a small band that few magazines were interested enough to interview them. Actually buying singles from bands like these often entailed writing to small labels with post office box numbers with a 5 or 10 dollar bill you would have gotten from your local banks bureau de change. Then an anticipation filled 2 weeks before a cardboard package containing your single would arrive. How could you not build up these bands and the artifacts they produced in your mind? Drive Like Jehu had just released their second and what would turn out to be their final album which contained a ferocious type of music that would later become quite influential itself, becoming known as math rock. My friend and I knew that album, *Yank Crime*, and its predecessor inside out. We were both such massive fans of both them and Rocket from the Crypt (who they shared a key member, label and city with and their fans also had a thing about tattooing their logo on themselves) that we decided we would have to go and see them in person on this tour as they were not scheduled to play any shows in Ireland. Seeing them in person was the mystery we had to solve, were they real or as good live as their records. In this case we were both blown away by their live performance when we travelled to see two of their shows in Newport in Wales and then in London. I was just 22 at the time and had never really done anything like this before and the reality (of the band and being on the road in a way) totally lived up to and even went beyond my expectations. While we were there however I again met people who were even more into them than we were and had gone to more extremes to find answers to their own questions. One young guy we met in a Rough Trade shop had even gone to the length of visiting the group's hometown of San Diego the year before. If you're lucky, when you find a band you really like you also gain the city or location where they are from to think about, research and imagine as well. For example with a group like Drexciya or Underground Resistance you also get Detroit. (How many of us have considered a trip to the Somewhere in Detroit record store?). Anyway, the legendary venue of their home city of San Diego most connected to Drive Like Jehu and Rocket from the Crypt was The Casbah and I guess this kid had kind of been on a pilgrimage of sorts (which I could totally understand) to see it and the city. One of the aspects of this story that stuck with me was that after going all that way he only got to see the outside of the venue because he wasn't yet over 21 and the door people wouldn't let him in. While we were in the same shop I got another example of the more extreme, obsessive perhaps side that mystery can lead us towards. After some browsing my friend decided to buy the Japanese CD version of *All Systems Go!* This was a Rocket from the Crypt

compilation which had just a few more extra unreleased tracks than the version we both already had. It cost, what to us was a massive, 25 pounds sterling as I recall. At the time this was more than the weekly rent I paid but the curiosity of my friend to own this album and hear those other tracks was too great. One of the most revealing things about this was that he swore me to secrecy about the price. He felt it was shameful, a symptom of addiction perhaps rather than a simple purchase of an album by a band he liked. But basically Drive Like Jehu exceeded anything I could have imagined about them and as they split up soon after and have yet to reform they have really secured their status in my mind and as myth for others who have discovered them since that time.

Here I'll return briefly to a point I made at the start which I think is also an important consideration. While I also loved the music of The KLF in my late teens and enjoyed thinking about and trying to figure out what else it all might mean (if anything); when they in 1994 as the K Foundation burned a million pounds of their own money and began to make art statements I became even more curious about them. As it would turn out, in this case the K Foundation themselves (if you want to believe them) appeared as genuinely mystified as anyone by their actions. So much that they took a film of the burning of the money on tour to ask the public's opinion on why they had done it. I found an image of them looking suitably shell-shocked with a suitcase of ashes after arriving back in London after the burning on Scotland's Isle of Jura. I would recommend you reading the piece Alan Moore wrote on the burning and what it meant to him. In this case if writing about music is like dancing about architecture or singing about economics then what his imagination does with their action (he interpreted it as a precognitive magic ritual) is an inspiring example of what I'm talking about here, one creative act inspiring another.

I'll talk now a little about some of my art pieces that are directly related to the subject of mystery. In 2005 I did a piece I've already alluded to called *Black Lough Trilogy*. It was essentially about just that moment of truth, when imagination and reality meet. It was done over a year in three parts and explored the choice between fantasy and reality itself. Firstly I found my metaphor by using an Ordnance Survey map (I'm a keen rambler and explorer) and located a small lake deep in woods that had no pathway to it. I myself got lost the first two times I tried to locate it and already found the lake was growing in my imagination because of this. I marked a pathway to it, made a website, contacted the local paper about the project etc. I described it as a mythic lost lake of unspoiled beauty (which it was) and that if people wanted to find it they could now follow the path I had made, or they might prefer to leave it in their imaginations. In this way I was giving people a clear choice between truth and fiction. They could take their choice or at least think about it if they were interested. The second

part was in a gallery and explored just the imaginary aspect of the lake and the last took you back to the reality of the lake itself.

The second project I'll mention was to create a myth you would probably never get to experience or be able to verify. This happened when I stumbled upon a group of people who were truly living a sustainable life without the use of money since the 1970's. I came across what I would call The Tribe when I was again out hill walking and exploring somewhere in the rural northwest of the country. I got to know this community of basically four extended families and asked if I could document them for an art project. They agreed to this as long as I didn't reveal their location or identities. In 2010 this project became *How to Disappear*.

The last project I'll mention is a collaborative one I am doing with Isabel Lofgren, which is called *A Guide to Here Nor There: An Affectionate Guide to Co. Leitrim*. We thought that Leitrim was a place that could do with a guide so we made one. Basically the guide is an attempt to navigate reality through fiction. It's hoped that poetic truths may be found by the viewer as we mix fact with fiction.

Now might be a good time to mention why I started Drexciya Research Lab and how that might fit into what I've been talking about. I basically moved to a new town in 2005, Carrick-on-Shannon in Co. Leitrim and had a lot of spare time on my hands which I ended up doing a lot of new and interesting things with but one of them was to finally figure out some questions I had about them. I see this project now as a lot like if my friend in Cork had chosen to write about and share his own thoughts about the music he heard on his tape. I have a lot more hard information to work from than him but a percentage of what I write is still speculation and my own opinion. Like the order of the Storm Series, the seven albums they released in one year and the ongoing message or concept they may or may not have been trying to communicate through their releases. Perhaps there never even was a final order of the storm albums but by telling us there was they knew we would look for and find one. I also got to archive, as much for myself as anyone, all of the interviews James Stinson had done before he died and anything else I came across like press releases, images etc. Doing it online made sense and I never thought I would still be doing it to this day, or get asked to write The Wire's primer piece on them or get invited to take part in an event like this. As I kept doing the site however and thought more deeply about it I came to see it as an example of a concept I was coming up with in my art. In 2009 I put a name on this process, *Deeper into Nothing*. What I meant by this paradoxical phrase was that the nothing referred to the seeming nothing of the present moment and the depth was how far you could explore it. I would say that with some effort you will find that each moment we live is infinitely rich and similarly if you concentrate on one narrow field of interest, such as in this case

Drexciya, but any subject will do and sometimes the more unpromising the better, you will discover an infinite depth to it from that fixed starting point and after almost 8 years I have yet to find an end point with Drexciya. What really happens though is that on some level you end up exploring aspects of yourself when you do this. It might be fitting to end on what James Stinson himself said about using the ocean in this context. Using it as a fixed starting point for his limitless personal and conceptual journey, *“I adopted the same way that you view the waters, with the depths, creatures, and undiscovered territories, it's the same way I see the music. That's the way I like to approach it, because I want it to be endless.”*

<http://stephenrennicks.webs.com>

<http://drexciyaresearchlab.blogspot.com>

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