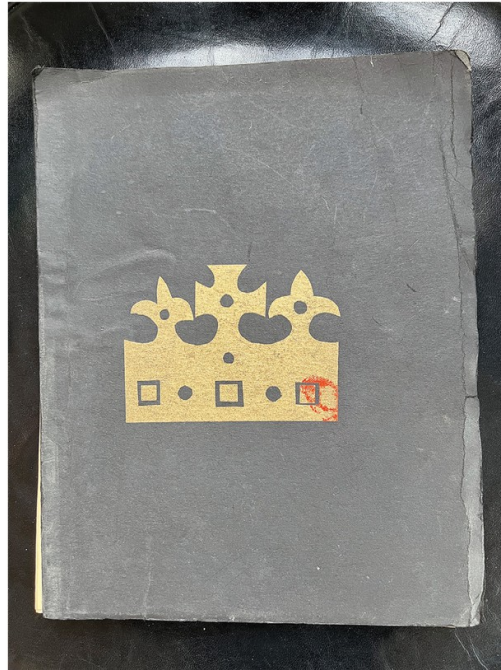


Epiphanies

As a young guitarist
Gary Lucas falls
under the medieval
spell of Third Ear Band
via their *Macbeth*
soundtrack



Shooting script of Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971)

As a card-carrying Anglophile in my youth for all things English – a habit enabled via airmail subscriptions to *Melody Maker* and *Disc & Music Echo*, imported singles from Dobells in London, and membership of The Kinks Appreciation Society – I was riveted when the first batch of Harvest Records arrived Stateside courtesy of EMI/Capitol. What a roster of artists, and their records came in deluxe gatefold packaging, suitable for rolling joints and shaking out seeds and stems. After the shock and awe of my first Harvest album *Ummagumma* had subsided (a return to form for Pink Floyd post-Syd Barrett; we used to skip school and cruise around Syracuse listening to this album on eight-track cartridge, especially in graveyards), my next Harvest purchase was Third Ear Band's 1969 album *Alchemy*. I bought it due to its striking bronze, black and white cover, which featured tarot-like artwork of a medieval sword-wielding figure about to strike a curate's egg-like object to effect some kind of transformation. In those days there was no easy way to hear this stuff, except randomly over a freeform FM station, so sometimes you just had to bite the bullet and buy the sucker.

The music on this album was a revelation to me. Here was a group of musicians playing improvised acoustic chamber music that sounded both ancient and modern, a hypnagogic, primeval flow of sound and energy that caused my whole being to vibrate in awe at its cosmic majesty. Influences included Indian ragas, Middle Eastern modes and Chinese scales, but the net effect was something new under the sun. The only antecedent that came to mind was Tony Scott's 1964 album *Music For Zen Meditation*, but this was no contemplative yoga plabum – these guys, led by percussionist/hand drummer Glen Sweeney, rocked, with barely an electric guitar in sight. They were

capable of levitating audiences at London venues like The Roundhouse and Middle Earth, and they opened for The Rolling Stones at Hyde Park after the death of Brian Jones – appropriate, considering Jones's investigations into the trance music of Jajouka.

Their masterpiece is 1972's *Music From Macbeth* album, which coincided with the release of Roman Polanski's celebrated film – for me, the best version of a Shakespeare play committed to celluloid. I came down to New York from Yale specifically to see it because I'd heard Third Ear Band had composed and performed the score, right after its premiere at the shortlived Playboy Theater, bankrolled by Hugh Hefner, on West 57th Street. The lights came down, the group's weirdly creepy instrumental "Overture" played in the dark, and then the curtain opened and the unforgettable, nightmarish images unspooled. This overture may have been Polanski's nod to Orson Welles's 1948 *Macbeth*, which closes with Jacques Ibert's protracted orchestral composition that rolls on for ten minutes or so even after the end titles finish. Third Ear Band's music was sublime throughout, right up there with Popol Vuh's soundtracks for Werner Herzog.

For recording sessions in London at the time Third Ear Band consisted of Paul Minns (oboe and recorder), Glen Sweeney (hand drums), Simon House from UK psych band High Tide (violin and EMS VCS 3 synthesizer), Denim Bridges (guitar) and most notably, new member and "Space Oddity" arranger Paul Buckmaster on cello and bass guitar, who shortly after completing the soundtrack sessions joined Miles Davis for *On The Corner*. I should also mention a very young pre-TV Keith Chegwin, who sings "Fleance", a composed ballad whose lyrics are actually stanzas cribbed from Chaucer's

poem *Merciless Beauty*. *Music For Macbeth* works fantastically well both in the service of the film and as a standalone album. I cannot imagine Polanski's film retaining its impact to this day without Third Ear Band embedded within.

On my first ever trip to London in 1973, shortly after playing electric guitar in the European premiere of Leonard Bernstein's *Mass* in Vienna, I visited the offices of Blackhill Enterprises, run by Peter Jenner and Andrew King. Jenner kindly arranged an interview with Sweeney at the latter's flat in Ladbroke Grove. I spent a fascinating afternoon with him and his partner Carolyn Looker discussing Third Ear Band's music. He was an absolute gem, full of stories and very glad to share them. According to Sweeney, Polanski picked him up in his Rolls Royce each day and drove him to Air Studios, where he'd sit with the other members and improvise directly to the screen to Polanski's satisfaction, reminiscent of how Miles Davis created his score for Louis Malle's *Ascenseur Pour L'Échafaud*. At the end of my afternoon, he hugged me and gave me his personal copy of the film's shooting script by Kenneth Tynan, sporting a bloody embossed fingerprint on the cover. I will treasure the memory of Glen Sweeney forever.

Third Ear Band's improvisational approach had a profound effect on me at the time, and still does in all my music, particularly scoring for film and TV. The band mixed up some profoundly potent potion in their alembic, and I continue to be inspired by their fearless approach to improvising, an extremely valuable skill, especially, and perhaps most importantly, as it pertains to the Game of Life. □ Gary Lucas's *The Great Lost Live Gods And Monsters Album* is released by Mighty Quinn this month. The Du-Tels' *No Knowledge Of Music Required* is reissued by Don Giovanni in