

# ▶ A COMMUNIQUÉ FIRE RECORDS



## >> Pere Ubu – Carnival of Souls >> Release Date 8/9 September 2014

*Carnival Of Souls* is, according to Pere Ubu's frontman and architect David Thomas, music that doesn't fit that tells stories about people who don't fit.

"It's about a guy sitting by a river," Thomas says. "After a while he takes some clothes off, jumps in the water, and drops to the bottom where he looks up and watches the moon as he's pulled downstream for as long as he can hold his breath."

The mention of a 'concept' album may lead some to envisage a spectre of Prog Music excess but what emerges with this album has little to do with the genre in any obvious sense. *Carnival of Souls* does not relate Prog's notorious stiffness, flash and convolution; it is loose and lithe, sliding and spiralling according to its own improvised and alternative logic.

Regardless of its improvised beginnings (see 'Background' below), the finished album frames Pere Ubu as an extraordinary unit of incomparable creativity and refinement. In truth, *Carnival of Souls* feels devoid of genre; jazz, blues, rock, folk, and electronica congratulate each other rather than fight for space or identity within each track. Thomas' lyrics are renowned for their multifarious nature but equally appreciated for their subtlety in taking us on a journey through the many Ghost Towns that thrive within his narrative, his voice moving from a tortured wail to a calming assurance as he carries you through.

These nine tracks might be prophecies, but they are soothed by reprieve in an Other World, as evidenced with songs such as 'Visions of the Moon' with its marching, wistful optimism - "I live on the moon," Thomas warns - and the bittersweet tenderness of 'Irene.'

'Bus Station,' meanwhile, is insistent one moment, utterly weightless the next, as the track hollows into an echoing vacuum of muted sound; a tunnel that slows you down for a few floating yards before the song returns with determined pace.

Many tracks evoke a cinematic sense of disorientation but, as is often the case with Pere Ubu, there is an underlying hint of wry humour finely fracturing the intensity, such as the mischievous quoting of the universally recognisable Here-Comes-The-Bad-Guy theme at the start of 'Road To Utah.' The door is then opened to an intense euphony of sound, drums pounding a hoodoo groove as synthesizers zap wavering lines throughout, as though a spaceman has been dropped into an aboriginal parade.

The bookend pieces 'Drag the River' and 'Carnival' centre on an uncoiling Noir riff. "The monkey is loose inside my head," Thomas declares in the latter. With clarinet and guitar twisting behind, above and beneath him, the track conjures a grotesque carousel and, as do many of the songs on this album, evokes the dark atmospheres that Pere

---

### DIVING FOR PEARLS – 30 YEARS OF FIRE RECORDS

2014 marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of illustrious London-based indie label Fire Records. A Series of special releases and events are planned, from reissues of classic albums and exciting new releases to gigs and art shows.

UK Press: Lucy Hurst – [lucy@firerecords.com](mailto:lucy@firerecords.com)  
UK Radio: Eva O'Rielly – [eva@firerecords.com](mailto:eva@firerecords.com)  
International Press & Radio: Alice Gros – [alice@firerecords.com](mailto:alice@firerecords.com)  
21a Maury Road, London, N16 7BP 02088069889



Ubu have excelled at conjuring. By comparison, 'Golden Surf II' takes no prisoners. Bursting with energy and determination, this rock is bowled hard and fast, with the exuberance and arrogance of young minds too old to question which way to go.

'Dr Faustus' conveys the flip side. It's the regret of a man doomed to only see what could have been, to know what *should* have been, the tale conveyed by carefully placed sonic abstractions recalling both Harry Partch and Milton Babbitt, while Thomas' unwavering narrative achieves fated inevitability.

The 'Strychnine Interludes' are five one-minute pieces built around shortwave interference, a deconstructed garage riff and secret Morse code transmissions. These are woven through the vinyl version of the album, underlining both the otherworldliness of the songs and the album's credentials as a song cycle.

The cd version of the album includes 'Brother Ray,' described as a twelve-minute prequel to Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*. This is Thomas engaging his most exuberant showmanship, as, with a series of voices, he evokes a Spoon River preacher, a Dust Bowl refugee and a shark, all in a tale set in a weave of American mythologies. Twelve minutes glide by as though they were a single concentrated moment. An epic track to reorientate the listener in one final ride, or an inevitable consequence of all that went before (and is still to come)? It's possible both are true. (Thomas has often said that the last song on an Ubu album is often a signpost to the direction of the next album.)

## BACKGROUND

"Before I began, I listened to *Pawn Hearts* (Van Der Graff Generator's 1971 classic) on endless repeat for nearly two weeks, every waking moment," Thomas explains. "Our music doesn't sound anything like it and it's likely no one will ever make the connection, but it's there."

Thomas being Thomas, and Ubu being Ubu - anyone who's been listening for the last four decades knows how unique and fearless a unit Ubu is - this take on Prog is inevitably eccentric.

Thomas expands on the theme. "Assume that Pere Ubu refocused rock music in the 70s," he explains. "Now, in the alternate universe that yields this new album, Pere Ubu refocused, instead, back in 1975, progressive music." In other words, it's like Punk never happened... Ubu-style.

*Carnival of Souls* was conceived in the midst of a gruelling tour schedule that accompanied the release of *Lady from Shanghai* in 2013. At one point, in a narrow window between European and UK concert dates, musicians, singly or in pairs, were spread through Thomas' flat working on different assignments; feverishly developing a live underscore for a screening of the 1962 movie that gives the new album its name. The performance, part of the London East End Film Festival, took place on the 13th July, 2013.

A 'shock troops' version of the band - the personnel of which has remained largely unchanged for the best part of two decades - went on the road in the UK and Europe during November to evolve those ideas into songs, improvising entirely new sets of music around core themes each night. If the tour was indeed in some way concerned with Ubu seeking to rewrite the rules of Prog, it seems that Thomas' Peter Hammill was being reimagined as George Clinton of Parliament/Funkadelic.

Yes, it *does* get a bit convoluted in Ubu World.

"After the Chinese Whispers Method, which was perfected for *Lady From Shanghai*," Thomas says, "I decided the next refinement would be to adapt what I conceived to be the George Clinton Method. Pere Ubu would become the white Funkadelic. And here's where you need to hold on tight - if you can see Peter Hammill becoming George Clinton, then you can see how, forty years on, Pere Ubu would become the white Funkadelic. It's about the band and how it's organised to work in a polymorphist sort of way."

A Mystery Train of ideas was leaving the station.

"I wanted to work with a balance of digital and analog sound and technique, confusing the boundaries," Thomas says. "I had the notion of turning the band into an imaginary synthesizer; a machine comprised of human beings - the Kraftwerk notion, but integrating the passion and chaos of Suicide - while, of course, still maintaining a Midwest groove-rock focus."

The beauty of Thomas' model lays in the way it heightens rather than homogenises the contribution of individual group members. This is a machine that affords scope for ill-tempered turbulence and unpredictability, producing music that is

often tense and dangerous. On the road during that November tour, the frayed nerves of the group, under pressure to reinvent the wheel night after night, could be discerned in the way they would switch from a whisper to a scream at any given moment, provoking each other, egging each other on and occasionally erupting as if in violent rebuke. But these acts of apparent recalcitrance paradoxically strengthened Ubu's collective sense of purpose and an extraordinary work resulted. (The tour was called 'Visions of the Moon' and a recording of the Dublin show is posted on the band's download audio website, hearpen.com.)

Once back in the studio, Thomas set about assembling and sculpting the album. Overseeing recordings of definitive versions of songs that had gradually coalesced over the course of the tour, as well as working with live recordings of often fully improvised pieces, he partnered with individual band members, in rotation, to forge an album of poise and power. Considering that much of the music has its origins as a soundtrack for a cult horror movie, the tone is often foreboding. Certainly it's possible to see the album as a masterclass in dislocation and a study of navigation through tides of darkness.

"Characters in the stories are not tormented by any sense of isolation and dislocation," Thomas says. "They are strangers in a strange land determined to get on with their own lives the best they can. The lead in the movie is *trying* to 'just get on with it,' even when it's clear to her that she fits into neither the world of the living nor the world of the dead. Which is about the most extreme example of 'not fitting in' as can be conceived."

Thomas' continued effort to embrace new techniques and 'fix things' - including, according to one of his tour monologues, Reality itself - has been well documented. Consider the injunction to 'Stand Still' from the *Lady from Shanghai*, the project purposed to 'fix' Dance.

So, what does *Carnival of Souls* set out to fix?

Thomas replies. "Haven't you been paying attention?"

Notes:

1. Stephen Hague, producer of four songs on, and executive producer of, *Cloudland* (1989), mixed 'Golden Surf II.' He has also produced New Order, Pet Shop Boys, Robbie Robertson, Peter Gabriel and bunches of others.
2. The newest member of the Pere Ubu collective is Darryl Boon (clarinet), a resident of Hove, England. He is an ardent proponent of Dixieland and sometimes plays in jazz pickup groups in Brighton.
3. The vinyl and cd releases are slightly different. 'Brother Ray' is to be found on the cd but not on the vinyl. The time restraints of quality vinyl production would not allow for it. The 'Strychnine Interludes' are included in the vinyl release but not the cd. Fire Records includes a free audio download code as part of the purchase price of either medium, which will include all tracks. [FIRE NEEDS TO CONFIRM]
4. Guitarist Keith Moliné conceived of and executed on computer the 'Strychnine Interludes.' The five pieces are each based in turn on the five successive notes of the guitar riff played at the head of 'Road to Utah.' Motifs from a number of the songs appear out of shortwave interference as emulations of radio call signs. Unidentified speech fragments derive from David Thomas reading his monologue 'Last of the Mohicans.' 'Strychnine 5' has Morse code spelling out an urgent, if arcane, coded message.
5. *Carnival of Souls* is the band's 18th studio album. The Fire catalog numbers are FIRECD358 for the cd and FIRELP358 for the lp.

Pere Ubu is:

David Thomas - vocals, XioSynth

Keith Moliné - guitar

Robert Wheeler - EML Electrocomp 101, Theremin, iPad

Gagarin - digital electronica

Darryl Boon - clarinet

Michele Temple - bass guitar

Steve Mehlman - drums, percussion, Roland Drum Pad, backing vocals