

If the path toward enlightenment is strewn with personal hardship, then Mercury Rev's newly released album, *All Is Dream*, is a giant step in the beleaguered band's march toward the divine.

Just look at last year's gory stabbing in New Orleans.

During a break in recording *All Is Dream*, Grasshopper, guitarist for the cosmic-sounding group begun by accident among friends some thirteen years ago in upstate New York, headed to the annual *New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival*, and cycled to a local club to see a Cuban band.

"Me and my friend had rented bikes, which we'd locked around the corner from the club. When we left the club, we were unlocking the bikes, and we looked up to see one guy with a gun and another with a knife.

The guy with the gun took my friend's wallet; the guy with the knife took my wallet and stabbed me in the arm," says Grasshopper, who helps compose the band's distinctive, neo-psychedelic sound.

"We only had \$20 each, and here we were with these \$500 bikes we'd rented. They could have jumped on the bikes, but they took our wallets, cut me and ran."

The fleshy part of his elbow was deeply sliced through the muscle. "The blood was shooting out. I was really freaked out. Usually I get pretty squeamish with blood, but I somehow pulled it together, and we hailed a cab and they took me to the hospital," Grasshopper recalls.

He was lucky, doctors told him. "There's a big artery there, and the cut came within a few millimeters of it. It did cut the tendon to my pinky and the next finger. It didn't faze me so much at the time," he says. "But a month later, I had some pretty bad dreams."

Ten stitches and a week later, Grasshopper was back at the studio, his wounded arm in sling as he played a guitar solo on "Little Rhymes," a paean to personal survival techniques (including "little rhymes" and "little pills") that soars with ringing instrumentation and a driving beat.

The group suffered another serious blow a few months later, in the summer of 2000, when legendary record producer and movie composer Jack Nitzsche died a week before he was to begin working on the album. Nitzsche, who scored more than forty movies including *Performance*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and *An Officer and a Gentleman*, (for which he also shared the best-song Academy Award with his then-wife, Buffy Sainte-Marie, for "Love Lift Us Up Where We Belong"), was equally known for his contribution to Phil Spector's breakthrough "wall of sound" approach. The band reckoned he was the ideal producer for its ambitious, sweeping sound, which Grasshopper describes as "the soundtracks to the music in your head."

Nitzsche had loved their previous record, 1998's *Deserter's Songs*, a critically acclaimed re-emergence after several dark years when many fans presumed they'd disbanded, and he was delighted when they approached him with "Dark Is Rising," a stirring, orchestral whirl they envisioned as the first song for their latest album.

"We met him a year ago in August, and we played it for him," says Grasshopper. "We said, 'We're thinking of this being the opening song, we're thinking of it being film-ic, like with the beginning credits rolling, like a John Huston film with an aerial shot.'"

"He was a very mysterious, enigmatic character," Grasshopper says. "And he wanted to work on our new album. We liked him because he did a lot of sound track work, and had also worked with Phil Spector and the Stones, which is what we're into, mixing those genres. He called Jonathan (Donahue, the group's lyricist/vocalist) about a week later and said he was working on scoring parts on a few of the songs. Maybe a day or two later, his son called and said he passed away. We were pretty blown away."

As the band pushed forward, Grasshopper says, "We like to think his spirit was hanging around."

What Is Dream, What Is Reality? Mercury Rev's Spiritual Journey Into the Center of the Heart

By Elaine McArdle



All Is Dream certainly carries a Nietzsche-like specter. It is a mesmerizing, majestic album that easily can be imagined as a movie soundtrack. Its ten trippy songs — linked by Donahue's high, ethereal vocals — paint a sweet tableau of half-remembered dreams and colors and feelings.

"We wanted the whole album to be an epic soundtrack," Grasshopper says. "We think a lot in film imagery, and we thought of each song as a different scene. The album is a journey, like the hero's journey. It's not exactly a narrative but certain threads of the same themes run through it, either romantic themes or just trying to figure out, 'What is dream? What is reality? And somehow, can music be a dream?'"

Although the band's four previous albums — 1991's debut *Yerself Is Steam*, 1993's *Boces*, 1995's *See You on the Other Side*, and *Deserter's Songs* — all met with critical success and created a devoted following in Europe, Japan and the U.S., the new album is "more focused, more confident" than its predecessors, Grasshopper says.

"On those records, we were chaotic. And there's still chaos in our lives or whatever, but we know when to reach base and when not to play. When you're younger, and we all had such great ideas, you want to put everything on all at once. Now, we're better at editing ourselves, at picking and choosing."

As unsettling as they were, the setbacks the group faced during the recording of *All Is Dream* were not going to deter them. After all, Buffalo, N.Y.-born Mercury Rev had survived a string of terrible blows in its thirteen-year existence — heavy substance abuse, alcoholism, fistfights, live shows where former vocalist David Baker would storm off-stage mid-song, and the subsequent loss of several original members.

And then there was that transatlantic flight where the troubled Baker — kicked out of the band in 1993 — tried to gouge out Grasshopper's eye with a spoon, in an incident that some

accounts blamed on Jonathan Donahue, the group's vocalist and guitarist.

"There was mistake with that," says Grasshopper. "Somehow it got distorted that it was Jonathan. But it was David Baker. He and I got into a fight, we had a scuffle, and we were banned from Virgin (Airways) for a little while. Then they sort of forgot about it after three or four years, and now we're on V2 Records, which is Richard Branson's (who also owns Virgin Airways), so we can fly the Virgin skies again."

How can a band with such an ethereal sound and such deep spiritual yearnings as voiced in their lyrics — they're all serious students of philosophy and religion, "which ties back into the *All Is Dream* theme," Grasshopper says — carry such a burdened history of trouble and violence?

Consider this irony: Mercury Rev was kicked off the 1993 Lollapalooza tour after being booted from the Denver show for excessive noise. The loudest band at Lollapalooza? That's a remarkable distinction for a loose-knit band of psychedelic yogis.

Grasshopper laughs. "We were loud. But we couldn't tell," he says.

"Part of the problem was, that year, they didn't pay for the sound desk to be out front. Our soundman was behind the stage, so he couldn't tell how loud it was coming out, and we were pretty loud anyway. The big problem there was, behind the stage there's this access road, and the mayor of Denver was passing by as we were playing. That's when the trouble started."

The authorities cut off electricity to the stage, and security guards forcibly removed Mercury Rev's soundman from the sound desk. "The mayor told the police we sounded like a bus idling out of control," Grasshopper laughs again. "At the time, that was really appropriate."

The group had just released its second album, the gorgeous, sprawling, undisciplined *Boces*, named after a juvenile detention facility in New York. "We were a lot more chaotic then," Grasshopper says. "We were orchestrating noise at that point. After some of those experiences, we got into orchestrating more orchestral sounds — we had done that, and we sort of grew up, and (we moved beyond) everything that went with that noise, like substance abuse."

What, no more drugs?

Grasshopper laughs. "To a certain extent, yeah."

But they haven't given up on chaos entirely. "There's traces of that through our albums. It's the same spirit of... we're just experimenting with sounds, trying to push ourselves to get different colors and sounds out of different instruments, which we still do. We tend to use the bow saw or pedal steel or violins or oboes now instead of plugging the guitar into a middle pedals... we still do that, but we used to do twenty tracks of that"

If the wild, punk-like incidents seem somewhat incongruous with the dreamy, searching music of Mercury Rev, it's important to remember that chaos is inherent in life — and it's been an unavoidable reality for Mercury Rev right from the start, Grasshopper says.

"Any sort of plan we made usually went very wrong, so we just sort of go with it now," he says. "One thing we're good at is going with the flow, because anything you plan goes wrong. There's



something about us, I guess. There's that line that Jonathan wrote, 'Those funny little plans that never work quite right.' And it's true. Whenever we made plans, the opposite happened."

"When we started, we thought we'd all be together, that it would be same band for ten years. But people have come and gone. And other things happened — just bad decisions we made early on, signing with labels and things that went bad."

The naiveté of the inexperienced? "I guess we probably were, but not as naïve as some," he says. "We had some sort of savvy. It's just that a lot of things fell apart along the way."

Mercury Rev wasn't so much born as that it sort of fell into being. In 1988, the original members, a group of friends living in Buffalo, N.Y. — Baker, Donahue, Grasshopper, Suzanne Thorpe (who played flute), David Fridmann (who no longer tours but continues to produce Rev's albums) and Jimmy Chambers (drums) — started by creating soundtracks for experimental films they and friends were producing. Meanwhile, Donahue began working as a roadie for the Flaming Lips, then played guitar on the Lips' 1990 album *In Priest Driven Ambulance*, which Fridmann co-produced.

During breaks from the Lips, Mercury Rev — origins of the name remain somewhat mysterious — recorded a demo that made its way to the Rough Trade label in England, which offered them a contract. And so, with the release of *Yerself is Steam* in 1991, the band found an instant following in England and Ireland. But at the same time, Rough Trade declared bankruptcy in the U.S., so the album wasn't distributed or marketed stateside until the following year through Columbia Records.

The band — which goes on an extended overseas tour this autumn before U.S. gigs between Thanksgiving and Christmas — has a strong fan base in Japan, France and Scandinavia, but it's in England and Ireland where they've earned gold records.

"I think it's because our first record came out there," says Grasshopper. "Rough Trade went out of business in the U.S. a week after our album came out here — which is another one of those little plans (that went awry). So we ended up playing in Europe, mostly in England and Ireland. I think those places are special to us because it's where we played our first shows and had success; they were writing about us in *NME* and *Melody Maker*."

"We always remember that we started there, and they remember that our first shows were there."

Their first shows were spectacular explosions of chaos. For one thing, the band had played together live only once before they made their London debut. And their next gig was the monumental Reading Festival. They had no set list. No one knew which song was next, nor how long they should play it; and then-vocalist Baker was drinking heavily and prone to temperamental outbursts that forced his ouster after the band's 1993 British tour alongside Spiritualized. Chambers, the drummer, left in 1996, and flutist Suzanne Thorpe departed around the same time.

For Mercury Rev, change was its only constant. But then, nothing is permanent, notes Grasshopper, who studies Buddhism, the Caballah, Sufism, and anything else that attracts his curious mind.

"It's not just me, but all of us," he says. "We like to sit around and talk about all that, and now it's the theory of relativity and string theory and science proving all these things that ancients taught in Hermetism, 'as above so below.' They're finding out everything is a vibration; matter is a vibration, so sound is related to music and to everything. If everything is material, then everything is a vibration."

"I'm not on a particular path," he says. "We're just trying to figure it all out and the connections between it all — Sufism, a lot of different stuff, the early Christian mystics, the desert mystics, the Gnostics. The apoc-

ryphal books were taken out of the Bible, and I just like reading all that, because a lot of established religions took mysticism out — so they could control people. Because if there's mysticism and you think that you can control your own will, then the church can't control the will, so then there's no power structure."

These spiritual musings are so clearly the center of Mercury Rev's lyrics and music that it's surprising other press accounts of the group make little mention of them.

"Me and Jonathan were talking about that," Grasshopper says. "And with the men journalists, they never want to talk about it. But whenever we do interviews with women, they pick up on that. A lot of times we start talking about it, here in the U.S. and in other Western countries, and we just get blank stares. Japan is the only place where a lot of the journalists were men and they openly didn't freak out about talking about spirituality."

When they meet with resistance, "We don't drop it, we still talk about it, but if they're not completely on the same page, we don't want to push it."

In other words, they're not trying to preach anything. "Exactly," he says. "It's in the music, the lyrics, the artwork, it's in different levels, if you want to get that from it."

And the difficulties they've faced over the band's history, was there any greater meaning in them? Did the stabbing incident in New Orleans reflect some past karmic debt that Grasshopper was working out?

Grasshopper says he doesn't look at it that way. But it did make him grateful for the good things in his life.

"I appreciate the use of my arm," he says. "My mother was like, 'That was pretty bad.' I looked at it more positively — I could have been killed." ■

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