

Black Light: The Ongoing Evolution of Anomalies

In a time when most guitarists' acumen is measured in notes per second, SONAR remains an anomaly.

First, there's its painstaking approach to dynamics and development, linking SONAR's post-progressive, post-rock, post-minimal music to fellow Swiss Nik Bärtsch, whose series of "Zen funk" ECM recordings have brought international attention to a Swiss scene that takes inspiration from disparate sources but shares an avoidance of excess virtuosity and complexity for its own sake, and a cautious approach to building mathematically conceived music that still moves the body, heart and soul.

"For me, it probably started with seeing Steve Reich and Musicians perform *Drumming* here in Zürich more than 30 years ago," says guitarist Stephan Thelen, SONAR's founder and primary composer. "There was this fantastic sense of the musicians inviting the audience to embark on a joint journey, glimpsing something much bigger than any of the individuals in the room. After the concert, I felt elated for days. I think it's sad that the concept of the 'star' is so important in our culture, but I see a growing number of musicians and groups interested in leaving that concept behind and letting the music be the star—probably the way it was in ancient times... or still is in countries like Bali or Indonesia."

There's no denying the instrumental acumen demonstrated by Thelen, fellow guitarist Bernhard Wagner, bassist Christian Kuntner and drummer Manuel Pasquinelli, but with SONAR it's rarely about drawing attention to any individual. Instead, as with 2012's *A Flaw of Nature* and 2014's *Static Motion*, *Black Light* continues to explore roads less travelled, its music unfolding patiently, with great care but also great inevitability.

"I think the '72-'74 era of Crimson produced some of the most powerful and fascinating music that I know—especially the instrumental parts," Thelen says. "*LTiA* has a very special kind of adventurous spirit which I think is not very far from what you hear on *Black Light*. A lot has to do with the odd time signatures and minor intervals (tritones, minor 2nds, and minor 7ths); but there is also a strong sense of group interplay on *LTiA*. Our track 'Black Light,' which was originally 'Black Light, Part Two,' also has some formal similarities with 'Larks Tongues in Aspic (Part II).'"

SONAR's music may have its precedents but rarely is it so subsumed in such a strong personal identity that it's only upon examination with a fine tooth comb that it's revealed. More than King Crimson and even more than Steve Reich, however, it's the now defunct partnership of Nik Bärtsch and Don Li—who innovated mixing minimal music with jazz and funk grooves early in the new millennium that, according to Thelen, "was really bold, adventurous, and exciting"—that had, perhaps, the biggest impact on SONAR; not so much a direct *musical* influence, but rather as "confirmation that to 'do as much as you can with as little material as possible' is really the most satisfying principle for a good composition."

But subsumed in SONAR's collective identity are other touchstones that will surprise most fans. The title track contains a solo from Wagner—a rare event for SONAR—that Thelen describes as "Duane Eddy meets Jackson Pollock." A curious analogy, as the idea of surf music being somehow a part of SONAR's sound seems so out of place...or, with Thelen born and raised in Santa Rosa, California, does it?

"There's a special spirit in the music of these '60s surf bands that's unique and hard to describe," says Thelen. "It probably has something to do with its spacey kind of atmosphere. There is also something clean and innocent—almost naive—that I find appealing. For instance, I can remember that as a small kid I really loved the

As SONAR continues to evolve, so, too, does its overall concept and musical philosophy—an enigmatic vision that truly sounds like nothing else out there. If *Black Light*'s music was conceived mathematically while at the same time aiming directly for the heart and soul, even SONAR's choice of title is never without significance or import. "The title, *Black Light*, is used in its literal sense—not as a synonym for ultraviolet light," says Thelen. "Like *Static Motion*, it's an oxymoron, but also a metaphor for something that is mysterious (black) and clear (light) at the same time. I never agreed with the common view that to understand something removes its mystery. I rather think that 'there is nothing more mysterious than clarity'—a quote from Paul Valéry that I wanted to express with the title of this album."

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As each successive SONAR album has represented evolution over what came before—"a very natural evolution," says Thelen, "mainly driven by playing together, trying out new ideas and keeping an open mind while still staying true to our original concepts"—so, too, does *Black Light* represent its own growth and distinct personality.

"The band's chemistry has constantly grown since our first rehearsal in November 2010," says Thelen. "In the beginning, we pretty much played the pieces as I composed them, but as time went by the others began to give their input—mainly ideas about modifying the arrangements and dropping unnecessary material. So, even if I am the main composer on *Black Light*, bringing it to life is still very much a group effort."

It's also SONAR's first album to be co-produced by an "outsider": David Bottrill, renowned engineer and/or producer of groundbreakers including Peter Gabriel, Jon Hassell, David Sylvian...and King Crimson, the legendary progressive/art rock outfit led by guitarist Robert Fripp, and a major touchstone for SONAR as a whole, but Thelen specifically.

"We are very glad that things worked out so well with David," says Thelen. "I think the album has its own unique personality, part of which was conceived in the compositions and part of which evolved according to group dynamics, beyond the control of any single individual."

As an inspiration for *Black Light*, Thelen specifically mentions King Crimson's 1973 classic, *Larks' Tongues in Aspic*, with three songs per side (on vinyl) and SONAR's ongoing exploration of the tritone system with which Fripp began experimenting on that record, albeit in a way that leaned towards the more conventional song form that SONAR seems to eschew. Still, somehow—in a strange and almost inexplicable way—the music on *Black Light* feels more like songs than anything that's come before.

String-a-Longs' 'Wheels.' There are also other not-so-obvious influences, like the dark ambient music of Mick Harris (Scorn), but I never consciously look for ways to embed these influences into our music: if it happens, then it happens on a subconscious level."

A perfect example of how Wagner's 'Eddy meets Pollock' solo occurred. "That wasn't originally planned," says Thelen, "rather, it happened in the studio. Originally the second part of a longer piece that consisted of a guitar riff that alternated between the guitars and an open groove/group interplay section in 11/8, the idea was that I would play some jazz-tinged guitar arpeggios and Bernhard would do his sound/reverb thing. In the studio, David [Bottrill], Christian and Manuel really liked Bernhard's contribution and suggested that I play less and give Bernhard more space. It's a good example of how things can change if you're willing to let accidents happen and lead you to a new place."

Going to new places seems to be SONAR's *modus operandi*, as its international visibility and attendant acclaim has grown, thanks to signing with Cuneiform for *Static Motion*. But even when a track like the closing "Critical Mass" is described by Thelen as "an attempt to capture Glenn Branca's atmosphere, but with more rhythmic complexity," it's still only a means of contextualizing SONAR's square-peg-in-a-round-hole approach.

"Music must get under your skin and have an emotional impact; otherwise it's worth nothing," Thelen asserts. "However, I don't believe that you have to 'turn off your mind' to fully enjoy music. In my experience, the best way to create complex music that is resonant on a gut level is to simply copy nature and use Darwin's 'survival of the fittest' theory. I often start a composition with a theoretical idea—for instance, 'how would it sound if I play a pattern in 5/8 against a similar pattern in 7/8?' If this idea also has an emotional impact, then it might survive; otherwise it will simply remain a theoretical exercise."