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Interview With Nox Arcana

By Noah (AKA Jolly Pumpkin)

We interview Composer Joseph Vargo of **Nox Arcana** and learn about this two man composing team that has created some memorably haunting music over the past years.

Tell us a little about yourself and the music of Nox Arcana?

Nox Arcana consists of William Piotrowski and myself (Joseph Vargo). We compose and perform all of our own music, which we refer to as "Music from the Shadows." Our first album, *Darklore Manor*, was released in 2003, and we have released seven other gothic soundtrack cds since then. Our eerie melodies are mainly symphonic instrumental compositions, but we use a variety of styles and instruments as well as some vocals, choirs, chants and narratives. Our music provides a lush soundscape that encompasses all of the dark aspects of our chosen theme, be it a haunted mansion, gothic cathedral, Dracula's castle, a sinister carnival, or the ancient realm of swords and sorcery. Each of our CDs conveys a completely different gothic concept, making them the perfect mood-setter for any haunted attraction.

Where do you draw inspiration from to create some of the haunting music you offer?

Mainly from our own dark imaginations, however several of our albums have been based upon the works of classic horror writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, H.P. Lovecraft and Bram Stoker. Our *Transylvania* CD elaborated upon the novel *Dracula* by adding witches, werewolves and living gargoyles. *Necronomicon* was based on Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos, while *Shadow of the Raven* is a tribute to the classic horror stories of Poe. Our *Darklore Manor* album tells an original tale of a legendary haunted mansion with a cursed history, and *Carnival of Lost Souls* sets the scene of a creepy old traveling circus that features several diabolical acts. *Blood of the Dragon* is a medieval epic about ancient sorcerers, valiant knights and the infernal legions of darkness. We really like to flesh-out a concept, adding our own original twists on familiar gothic themes.

What has been your favorite CD to create and why?

It's impossible for me to pick one favorite. We have eight concept albums to date and they each capture a different mood, ranging from darkly romantic to creepy and horrific. Each Nox Arcana CD contains 21 tracks, so they all contain a great variety of atmospheric music. The CDs also come with an elaborate booklet that contains moody artwork and a brief story about the album. I create all the cover and interior art for the CD, and I love to immerse myself into whatever haunted theme we are exploring to capture its nightmarish denizens in my paintings.

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Why did you decide to come out with a Christmas type CD? Are you a huge fan of everything Christmas?

We wanted to carry the Halloween mood into the Christmas season, along the lines of Dickens' classic ghost story, *A Christmas Carol*. Our album *Winter's Knight* is based on a dark spirit that haunts the ruins of an ancient cathedral on the eve of the winter solstice. Although Halloween is my favorite holiday, I also enjoy the Christmas season, but it's gotten far too commercialized over the past decade. *Winter's Knight* tells a haunted tale about tranquility and reflecting on your own life as another year comes to an end. The album reached number eight on the Billboard holiday charts last season, which was a pleasant surprise to us, considering it's darker subject matter.



How would you compare Nox Arcana to other artists out there that create haunting music like yourself?

We work very hard to be the best at what we do. We offer Hollywood-quality soundtracks that are tailor-made for specific haunted themes. All of our music is melody-driven, but we also have lots of creepy background dirges that are very effective atmospheric pieces. In addition, we incorporate original sound effects, sinister chanting and wicked-sounding vocal introductions to some of the tracks. We also pay close attention to the details of our chosen theme and offer storylines and artwork to further explore the topic. A great deal of thought goes into each of our albums. We don't just slap together a bunch of spooky sounds. Truly understanding our subject matter and taking it seriously allows us to go far beyond all other bands of this genre.

I originally began creating haunting concept albums with a band called Midnight Syndicate in 1998. They were doing completely different styles of music back then. Their first album contained rap, country and easy-listening music. I wanted to create a gothic Halloween soundtrack and convinced them to drastically change their style to accommodate my ideas. I took all the risks and bankrolled the entire project. The two CDs I produced with them made them completely change their musical direction, but there were too many limitations working with them, so I left to form my own band. With Nox Arcana, I've been able to really expound upon my original concepts. There's no limit to what we can do.

Who are some of the haunts that have used your music as part of their rooms?

My voice-overs have been used in every major haunted house in the country, including Universal studios and Disney World. Busch Gardens created an entire haunted wedding scenario around several of the tracks from our Darklore Manor CD. Knott's Scary Farm uses our *Carnival of Lost Souls* for their dark circus theme. We have over 600 haunts in our database that all use our music to enhance their attractions and many of them sell the cds as well. We've also been approached by several filmmakers, including New Line Cinema, who want to use our music in their movies.

What would you say was your most popular piece of music?

That's hard to say. We get a lot of letters and emails that cite a wide variety of songs from all of our albums. We have over 150 songs on our combined albums and the music is so diverse that it really appeals to a very broad range of people. Darklore Manor has been our best-selling album to date, but ironically, our most-downloaded track has been our gothic rendition of "Carol of the Bells" from our *Winter's Knight* CD.



[Click here](#) to listen to a sample track!

How has being an artist and founder of Monolith Graphics helped the music of Nox Arcana?

It's been a great benefit. I had already established myself as a gothic fantasy artist in the mid 1990s, so it made it easier to introduce this style of gothic music to my fans in 1998. Also, as an independent publisher, I don't have to make any concessions with any of my ideas, nor do I have to deal with any pushy agents or record label executives. Most artists and musicians just love to create, but don't have a clue as to how to promote or market their work. As the owner of Monolith Graphics, I learned a lot of valuable lessons that are very useful in the business world, however, my main focus still remains on the creative aspects of my projects.

How have people responded to Nox Arcana while advertising at various conventions such as Midwest Haunters Convention?

The response has been great. Because of my hectic work schedule, I don't get out to many of the shows anymore. But it's always fun when I do. William takes our products on the road and the feedback has been terrific. We get so many compliments from our fans and the sales are always great. He had a fun time at the Midwest Haunters Convention and made a lot of new friends in the industry.

It's amazing that you are able to create movie quality music with only a two man staff. What is the process of creating a Nox Arcana CD?

We work on the all of the songwriting as a team. Once we decide upon the specific theme of the album, we begin writing melodies that will capture the essence of that theme. We both bring different ideas to the studio and develop the songs together from there. We try out various instruments and melody and key changes to flesh out the songs from their original skeletons. As composers, we're completely in tune with one another and we collaborate on every aspect of every song. Our basic melodies are composed on the piano, then we determine what instruments would best convey the feeling we are trying to relate. We utilize pipe-organs, harpsichords, violins, drums and tolling bells, then accent the compositions with ghostly choirs to capture the perfect haunted feel. Once the musical tracks are complete, we recorded the chanting, narrations and ghostly whispers, then add original sound effects.

While we're working on the music, I'm making notes for song titles, narratives and liner text, as well as plotting out the CD art. During the time the CD is being mixed and mastered, I'm also working on the cover art and booklet layout. It all comes together at the same time.

If you weren't involved in art or music, what would you be doing to fill up the time?

It would definitely be something creative. I also write horror fiction, so I would probably have several more books to my credit. As a hobby, I enjoy sculpting. I've made some gargoyles and skeletal figures that we sell at shows and on the Buzz-works website. I also throw these elaborate murder mystery-style theme parties for Halloween. Guests must explore every room of my home, solving puzzles, opening locked doors and uncovering buried secrets along the way. Past parties have included a sinister asylum, a witch's curse, a haunted museum, a martian invasion, an evil toymaker and a ritualistic blood cult, just to name a few. I'd love to create a live-action weekend retreat set in a haunted house with a different theme and mystery each year, and it just may happen someday.

