

AN INTERVIEW WITH . . .

Therapy?

Northern Ireland has produced a number of amazing musicians over the years, including favorites of mine such as Stiff Little Fingers, Ash, and – of course – Therapy? Andy Cairns (guitars/vocals) formed Therapy? with Fyfe Ewing (drums/vocals) in 1989, and has endured a few lineup changes and a series of shakeups in the general state of rock ‘n’ roll over the subsequent 20-some years but has never lost his faith in the band, nor has he lost any of his fire and passion for creating original and intense music. It’s now 2012, and Therapy? are rolling across Europe (and hopefully, soon will be taking their act back to the US) in support of a smashing new album called *A Brief Crack Of Light*. In my review of the album for *Mass Movement* 33, I stated that ‘Therapy? never disappoint, but they seem to be getting bigger, bolder, and better with each new album of the 21st century’. I meant it then and I mean it now. I recently was afforded the opportunity to chat with Andy Cairns about the new album and a whole lot more. Now, *Mass Movement* presents: Andy Cairns of Therapy?

Interview by Timothy ‘The Impaler’ Schwader



Mass Movement: Welcome to Mass Movement!

Therapy? [Andy Cairns]: Hi Mass Movement and hi Timothy! Great to talk to you, and thanks for your support.

MM: One of my compatriots charted with you for issue 25 in 2009, I believe it was – plenty has happened since then. Can you give us a bird's-eye overview of the past 3 years?

T?: Three years? Wow, time has flown since we last were in touch with MM. Well, since that time we've released a live album in Europe called 'We're Here To The End' and completed at least six European tours and three summers of festivals. In between then we managed to write and record our latest album, 'A Brief Crack Of Light', and are currently finishing off the 2012 summer festival circuit and looking at an eight week tour of Europe starting in October. On a personal note, in the last three years I've developed a taste for green tea and watched my football team, Chelsea, become the Champions of Europe. Oh, I also finally got to see 'Citizen Kane', a movie I'd heard so much about. It was worth the wait. My mind was suitably blown by the young Orson Welles and his hitlartin ambition.

MM: It's 2012. Your latest album is 'A Brief Crack Of Light'. I've got a bunch of questions about the album! First, though, your immediate off-the-top-of-your-head thoughts?

T?: Top of the head thoughts? I'm still in the period where everything about the record is so close and so intense. We're playing a lot of the record live

(sometimes all of it in the same show) and it's going down very well. I'm loving it and am still tweaking my performances to see what new life I can wring from the tunes in the concert environment.

MM: I've reviewed nearly every Therapy? release since 1998 in the pages of Mass Movement, and in my review of 'A Brief Crack Of Light' I wrote that you, as a band, 'seem to be getting bigger, bolder, and better with each new album of the 21st century'. I don't want to force a train of thought with an actual question here, so if you could just comment on whatever that brings to mind....

T?: I'm actually really glad you've noticed and am pleased as punch with the comment. As a band we constantly listen to lots of music all across the board and are always turning each other on to new bands/songs/sounds that we've come across. Excitement and discovery help run the creative engine, it keeps our rehearsals fresh and makes us look forward to rather than dread going out live. There are things on this record that could only have happened on this record. Some of the songs, FX, rhythms, songwriting approaches... hopefully we'll touch on these as the interview progresses.

MM: The album was initially released in the UK/Europe on Global Music Group's subsidiary Blast Records in February 2012. Now it is getting a North American release via MVD in September 2012. It's about time that Therapy? albums were readily available in the USA and Canada again! What can you tell us about MVD, and about getting back into the North American market directly?

T?: We're so grateful to be able to get our music out in North America again. It's been way too long. So many of our best memories from the 90's come from American trips. We admire and have been inspired by so many bands from the country, are in love with many of the cities and towns, and have met so many cool musicians, friends, and fans that it feels like a big part of us has been denied in the last ten years. MVD seem to be really straightforward to deal with, which, after twenty years in 'da business, is somewhat refreshing. We'd had talks with them a few years ago but that was while we were with a previous label. This time around our UK label, Blast, seem to have struck up a good relationship with them.

MM: 'A Brief Crack Of Light' itself truly is a stunning album. I'd like to pick out a few tracks and get some feedback from you. Let's start with one that has a 'classic Therapy?' feel, if it's not inappropriate to say that there is such a thing, 'Stark Raving Sane'.

T?: Thanks very much, I'm pleased you like it. 'Stark Raving Sane'? That's interesting. That song was one of the quickest to write. An afternoon in a rehearsal hall put that one together and it almost didn't happen at all. We were rehearsing in Derby in England, we had been there all week and the weather was atrocious, the room cold, and we were all exhausted. I really wanted to leave early and take a few days off to get the old creative juices flowing again as I felt I'd peaked and was just going to be the grouch in the corner. Neil and Michael wanted to stay a bit longer and in a moment of frustration I just started playing what I thought was a dumb,

obnoxious riff. The jamming turned into something that just clicked and we ended up staying until the late evening when we put together a piece of music that I could take away and write lyrics for. The inspiration for the lyrics came from two sources: the title from a line in the play by Tom Stoppard 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead' and the theme from UK comedian Stewart Lee. The Stoppard play looks at the adventures of two minor characters from Shakespeare and their bantering on the nature of life and living; and Stewart Lee has a unique way of deconstructing comedy and entertainment, laying it on a table, dissecting it and putting it back together that really makes you think about the concept of comedy in the first place. This can apply to anyone and how they carry themselves in public life. We know how awful it is to feel under scrutiny from others in a day to day situation... and how often have we watched the behavior of ourselves and others, and all of a sudden a small movement – a vocal tic, a cultural mannerism – can amplify the human condition in all its absurdity? Among this it's easy to feel lost and hopeless but also at times willfully belligerent – hence the lyrics 'it's not my job to see the funny side but with a gun in your mouth it's difficult to sing in tune.'

MM: 'Living In The Shadow Of The Terrible Thing'. The album's first single in the UK/Europe – and also the first single in North America?

T?: 'Living In The Shadow Of The Terrible Thing' was a riff and a groove that had been around for ages. It's like a mix of Fugazi, Bomb The Bass ('Bug Powder Dust'), and 'Mirror In The Bathroom' by The Bear [aka The English Bear]. We would just lock

into the main riff and play it again and again because it felt so good. The title was something I'd written on a napkin in the middle of the night and I'd always presumed it came from the book I was reading at the time, 'The Poor Mouth,' by Irish writer Flann O'Brien. It's very like one of his quotes, however I can't find it anywhere so I must have jotted it down after thinking about his writing. Anyways, it got me on to the idea of our lives being defined by this full stop that we all face at the end, and how we fill the time in between and deal with the actions and reactions that occur during the duration of a life. The main thing, for me personally, is the need to press on. The line for me in the song is 'take away the future and the present collapses', which is pretty much how I think I'd feel if I lost the nous to press on regardless. The bass and drumming in this track are immense. They both really dig in and the sub oomph hits you right in the chest when it's played loud!

MM: 'Ecclesiastes'. Beautiful. Disturbing. Minimalistic. Complex. I referenced the band Boards Of Canada in my review.

T?: This was a weird one. It started out as a demo which I'd done at home. Initially just guitar and vocal so it was a wee bit Will Oldham, which didn't really fit comfortably with the rest of the stuff we were doing. I'd been listening to quite a lot of Darkstar, and they'd used Vocoder and made it sound like the loneliest robot in the galaxy, and that really clicked with me so I tried it on the chorus. Neil suggested going for an unusual gated drum sound that would almost combat the topline melody and make the vocal even more alienated and it

seemed to work. We've actually opened a show with this song recently and it completely polarized the audience – it took about 40 minutes for some of them to recover! It's interesting you should mention Boards Of Canada. My favorite tune of theirs is 'Basfree', and although they weren't a conscious influence at the time of writing the song, listening back to 'Basfree' now I can see a kindred spirit with the Darkstar tunes I was thinking of. This is what I love about music, the endless connections.

MM: 'The Buzzing'. I'm not doing this based on the tracklisting, obviously.

T?: 'The Buzzing' is my favorite tune on the new album. It started with me messing around with a swung, Greg Ginn type riff which I sent to Michael. Being a fan of black metal, Michael sent me back an MP3 of the riff with a more full-on drum track, which we then passed on to Neil, who took the beat and added propulsion. I had the title from an early stage, and it comes from Samuel Beckett's play 'Not I', in which consciousness is described as 'buzzing'. The tune is unable to rest, a bit like the 'phantom charterbox' of consciousness so we have the Black Flag riff into black metal tremolo picking into a free-jazz freak-out into a dub section – influenced heavily by Digital Mystikz – and ending in a Black Sabbath outro. It shouldn't work, but it all goes by in such a blur.

MM: 'Get Your Dead Hand Off My Shoulder'?

T?: I was reading 'Sinister Resonance' by David Toop, an amazing book. It was looking at the relationship between perception and situation, and

*"I'm still in love with music, I still believe in people, and I still have hope."
Andy Cairns, Therapy?*



how sound can suggest different atmospheres through images – looking at a painting of someone making noise can play a trick of making you imagine you're actually hearing that noise. At the time, I was suffering from insomnia. My mind was racing with particularly unwelcome thoughts and I would find myself out late for walks through deserted parts of towns and cities. It's also about trying to escape the shackles of personal history and move on. Often in the middle of the night, on your own, the landscape around you is silent but that silence takes on a music and a language all of its own: footsteps, breath, deafening memories, power lines humming. It all makes you realize that, until the grave, there really isn't any such thing as silence. The music came out of listening to dub influenced music and how some of those records play tricks with the stereo field. There's a lot of percussive guitar scraping – influenced by Andy Gill – and echo abuse. This one has been going down amazingly well live, which surprised us as it moves at quite a meditative pace.

MM: 'Before You, With You, After You.' This is my kind of love song.'

T?: The main riffs on this came after I'd been listening to a lot of Torche. There's a grand melancholy in their music that I can't quite put a finger on, but their melodies really resonate and they can turn sludge riffing into a thing of beauty. The lyrics, again, look at the need to go on, no matter what the circumstances. Often it can feel like we're alone in a primordial mud, being sucked down, trying to feel our way into an imaginary light. We brought back the Vocoder for the chorus as we thought it added a poignant and disembodied air

to the melody.

MM: I described 'Plague Bell' as having a 'vicious Prong meets Gang Of Four attack; which makes sense to me as a listener and as a longtime fan of all three bands involved (including, of course, Therapy?).

T?: Originally, I'd come up with a riff based on the synth stabs in a track called 'Bad' by electronic artists Kode 9 & LD [*check it out here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cYE1_b7DLg*] I took the rough riff into rehearsals with Neil. It was very heavily swung and very unlike Therapy? at all. When I started jamming it with him it took on a more urgent rock vibe and the guitar chords became more rigid, less syncopated. Eventually we added bits and pieces – a Black Flag influence here, a Fugazi touch there – until it became the beast it is today. Neil himself did mention Prong when we played it, funnily enough, and I'm chuffed with the Gang Of Four mention. This track deals with memory – a bit of a running theme through the album – and trying to move on from constant 'back in the day' nostalgia. The mind often plays tricks on itself; those rose-tinted spectacles are tinted for a reason.

MM: 'Ghost Trio.' Feels like a single to me.

T?: 'Ghost Trio' was an experiment to see how far we could get on one riff. One riff with one note in it. When Michael added the melodic bass line while we were jamming it, I was able to fit a melodic melody line over it and we were able to give it some kind of structure. The whole enterprise has an oddly psychedelic feel, and this took even more shape

when we added the lyrics, which were influenced by watching the unfolding events of the 'Arab Spring' on the studio television. The song talks about breaking the chains of history – see, told you there was a running theme! – something which I can relate to given my upbringing in the 80's in a politically unstable Northern Ireland. When this one kicks off live it really kicks off.

MM: 'Why Turbulence? That groove seems pure Black Sabbath. The lyrics are pure Therapy?!

T?: I had the title 'Why Turbulence?' for quite a while. When systems go into turbulence, none of their normal laws apply. I had read that on his deathbed, the physicist Werner Heisenberg said that he had only one question for God: 'Why Turbulence?... I began to think about how people that have everything they need tie themselves in knots by concentrating instead on what they don't have and cause themselves no end of misery in the process. The tune itself is another of those slightly jazzy, riffy numbers that we've attempted over the years – 'Loser Cop' (on 'Babyreeth'), 'He's Not That Kind Of Girl' (on 'Suicide Pact – You First'), etcetera. When I was messing around with the riff, I was trying to imagine Duke Ellington played by Cop Shoot Cop or The Birthday Party.

MM: That just leaves 'Marlow', which in my review of the album I noted as having 'burrowed its way so deeply into my subconscious that I've woken up with it playing in my mind for three days straight now'. That still holds true every time I play the album, which is often.

THE BOWS

T?: Really? Wow, thanks for that – really flattered! ‘Marlow’ is a bizarre one. I was in Cambridge, in the city center, one afternoon when a bunch of African street musicians were playing. They were jamming around a drone – lots of percussion and vocal glossolalia. I was intrigued by the drumming, so I recorded about 5 minutes of it on my phone while I stood watching them. Back home, I looped the drums and started playing along and jamming with them and eventually came up with the harmonic riff that runs continuously through the track.

Over the course of the evening I had another few bits and pieces that fitted in nicely, but there was nowhere for vocals to go. I sent the three chunks to Michael, Neil, and Adam Sinclair (album engineer/co-producer). When we were in the studio, we recorded the three chunks separately but were still unsure what to do with them. Towards the end of the album session, Neil and Adam spent an evening arranging the parts into something resembling an instrumental track. After that was finished, I added a few processed vocal tracks and some sliced and stuttering guitar. This then became the track you hear on the album. It’s a very popular track with even people who don’t get the album citing it as a favorite. We’ve played it live a few times, but it needs work to get it right. Hopefully on this forthcoming tour we’ll nail it. The title is a name of a character in Joseph Conrad’s ‘Heart Of Darkness.’

MM: Can you talk about the lyrics on this album at all? I’m not asking for explanations or deeper meanings – just a general sense of the motivation and mood... where they came from and/or what kind of environment you were seeking to create for the listener on ‘A Brief Crack Of Light.’

T?: A lot of the themes seem to deal with memory, perception of memory, and how the past can be misremembered. Also trying to move onwards and shake off the binds of history, past mistakes and regrets. Initially, the themes of the album were to be dealing with absurdity in the modern world, but most of that ended up on tracks that didn’t make the album.

MM: And this one was produced by Andrew Sinclair, yeah? What would you like to say about Mr. Sinclair?

T?: Adam Sinclair is the in-house studio engineer at Blast Studios, which is owned by our label, Blast Records. He’s a young guy, a talented engineer and producer – and a talented working drummer to boot. He helped out and co-mixed our last album, ‘Crooked Timber.’ Being younger and from a different musical background from us, he’s able to approach the band with fresh ideas and not try and get us to sound like something we’re not or try and influence a more commercial direction. When we mention obscure references for sounds, he doesn’t blanche, he just gets on with it.

MM: You’ve worked with Andy Gill (Gang Of Four) as well. I’m just going to get doubly fan-boy on you. Gang. Of. Four. [speechlessness brought on by awe....] Stories?

T?: To be honest, I’m quite the Gang Of Four fan-boy myself, and Andy Gill’s guitar playing was a huge influence on me – all those percussive, harmonic hits on T? records?! haha! – so I was nervous about meeting him. My initial phone call with him –

approaching him regarding working on ‘Crooked Timber’ – settled my nerves somewhat, as he was affable and very down to earth. A couple of days after starting work on the album we all decided to go for a few beers after a hard day’s work and then ended up later in the evening back in the band house, chatting. We had the iPod on in the background on shuffle and, rather embarrassingly, every 15 minutes or so, Gang Of Four would come on! But he laughed and took it in stride. Stories-wise, there’s nothing saucy or negative. He was a pleasure to work with, had a great taste in wine, and was incredibly open-minded about everything we wanted to do workwise. We hung out a little bit, but were on a tight time schedule. He was great at getting across what he wanted and was instrumental in making sure the guitars didn’t sound generic, the bass rattled, and the drums really kicked. One fan-boy thing that surprised me, though. We did a little bit of work in his own studios and I got to play his own Telecaster. I was shocked by how light the gauge of his strings were! I thought he would have ropes on his guitar given the nature of his attacking playing style, but like a true artist he achieves much through deft strokes.

MM: Therapy? is, in many ways, a sound in and of itself, but there is always room to shift and to grow. While ‘that’ guitar sound, for example, is present on ‘A Brief Crack Of Light’, there are other things going on. What I’m actually trying to set up here is a discussion of gear. Can you tell us about the guitars, amps, pedals, and any cool studio things you used here? Feel free to ramble on. Many of us are fascinated by this kind of thing.

T?: The majority of rhythm guitar was recorded using my 90's Gibson SG Standard through an old Marshall JCM 800 and a Framus Cobra. The more percussive and clean tones were done on my Framus AK 1974. There were a lot of Electro Harmonix pedals on the go, the Tube Zipper in 'Plague Bell,' a Pog on 'Living In The Shadow Of The Terrible Thing,' and a Graphic Fuzz on most of the album. The 'strutting guitar' on 'Marlow' was done with a Boss Slicer, and all the Vocoded and treated vocals on the record were done using the Electro Harmonix voice box. The majority of the tuning is Drop A sharp. For the drums, we used the same technique Andy Gill had shown us on 'Crooked Timber' – namely, record the cymbals separately from the rest of the kit. A copper mic was used a lot for backing vocals and for the main vocals on 'Ghost Trio.' Michael did all the bass in about 3 and a half days.

MM: Any chance you're going to lug all this fabulous gear over to the States again? I live in Austin now. I'll put you up for a week if you'd like to arrange a residency at Emo's. Maybe SXSW 2013? Something?!

T?: We would love nothing more! Hopefully, now that the record is getting a release, we will have a door open for us again. Let's hope things can work out, it's been waaaay too long and we're itching to get back.

MM: I'd be remiss if I didn't mention this. I was living in Norwich in the late '90s. I had my schedule all sussed out for OzzFest '98 – with plans to lounge about on the lawn with a sandwich and a cool beverage during Korn's set. I arrived at

Milton Keynes Bowl to discover that Therapy? had replaced Korn on the bill, so I was afforded no break – it was like Pitchshifter, Soulfly (with Benji Webb, couldn't miss Benji!), Slayer, Pantera, Therapy?, Foo Fighters, Black Sabbath... I needed an extra 3 days to recover from the madness. You kinda owe me! haha!

T?: Fair play to you, mate! Norwich isn't that far from where I live now, Cambridge. Sounds like you had a blast. We were pleased to be asked to play. We'd toured the States with Ozzy a couple of years before and had got to meet Sharon a few times – crazy to think now that's she's a celeb in her own right 'n all, but she used to work her ass off on Ozzy's behalf and go on the road – so when she called our manager and asked us to step in for Korn, we agreed straight away. Sounds like we owe you all right, if – or should I say WHEN – we get back to the States, the drinks are on us! Hey, you could even suggest – in advance, please – what tunes you'd like in the set if you make it to a show.

MM: Ireland has produced a wealth of amazing artists over the years. There are a few questions in here. How do you see yourselves in the grand scheme of Irish rock music? Can you tell us some of your favorite Irish bands, and what they mean to you? And can you get the word out on any current Irish acts that have yet to be widely discovered by the rest of the world?

T?: Northern Ireland is such a unique place in terms of music and culture in general. The recent peace process has facilitated an upspring in rehearsal venues, live venues, media, record companies, and

bands. My formative years were partly shaped by the glorious sound of Ulster Punk – bands such as Rudi, Stiff Little Fingers, The Undertones, The Starjets, and Protex. Recent bands that Therapy? are fans of include La Faro, Axis Of, and And So I Watch You From Afar. Robyn G Shields is a great, picaresque, singer/songwriter; Boxcutter makes unusual electronic music; and Mojo Fury, Fighting With Wire, and Jeplane Landing bring the noise.

MM: Therapy? has been at it since 1989. That's an amazing run for any band. Yet you seem to be getting stronger and more relevant with each passing year. 2003's 'High Anxiety' seemed to be a turning point in some ways, and remains the Therapy? album from the back catalog that I listen to the most. Please tell us that you're just getting warmed up!

T?: I'd like to think so! We're all still so in love with music that there doesn't appear to be an end in sight just yet. I think we're only really hitting our stride after having had a new lease of life in the noughties.

MM: Really, all of your 21st century albums are representative of a band in its prime. What motivates you? Where are the songs coming from? The energy, the passion?

T?: It's about keeping our ears open. Once you stop listening, you're finished, I think. So many peers of ours have switched off and only listen to what they think is a (misremembered) 'golden era' and don't bother to listen to other genres of music or new bands. I'm glad we're all so open-minded and are still listening. Nothing bears being slayed by a new discovery; recently I came across the amazing guitar freakery of Nu-Kle-Er Blast Suntan, the gorgeous songs of Arctic Flowers, the punishing beats of

represents the Therapy? fans in that area's particular highlights from our albums.

MM: Therapy? has a long history of stellar cover songs too, from Husker Du's 'Diane' to Misfits' 'Where Eagles Dare'. Any comments on doing covers, and whether or not that is still something that interests you as a band?

T?: Covers always started through messing around and jamming in rehearsals. These days, with 13 albums to make a set-list from, we don't get as much time to play covers. Pity, it's always a good way to switch off the intensity and have some fun. You've got me thinking now. Mmmm, what would be a good cover to do...?

Patient X

Therapy?

T?: My favorite musician of recent years is electronic artist Burial. It's hard to describe his music but it's part Lynch soundtrack, part ghost rave, all beautiful abstract sound. It brings me to tears. It's like having a haunted head – but being happy with it. The films of director Steve McQueen – 'Hunger' and also his most recent, 'Shame' – have really moved me a lot and made me think about how people inhabit this world and various ways they see and define the reasons why they are here.

MM: Any hopes, dreams, inspirations, fears, or conspiracies you'd like to share or address?

T?: Well, sorry about seeming to bang on about America again, but I really want to get back over to play and see more of the place. Fears? Well, here in the UK and Ireland the gap between the haves and the have-nots is widening at an alarming level. Something is needed to redress the balance before more damage is done to future generations.

MM: I can't thank you enough for your time. The floor is yours. Pimp the product!

T?: Folks, if you're reading this, my name is Andrew James Cairns. I'm a musician born and raised in Northern Ireland. I grew up and tried to have as normal a childhood as I could through the violent political unrest that has come to be known as 'the troubles'. This is reflected in the mongrel nature of the music that Therapy? plays. I'm still in love with music, I still believe in people, and I still have hope. If you haven't heard the band I play in called Therapy?, please take a few moments out of your hectic schedule to check us out. Our biggest-selling

album and the one with the catchiest tunes – if that's your Bag – is called 'Troublegum', but if you want to hear the sound of angry, young, and lost Ulster, may I suggest 1991's 'Babyteeth'. And keeping you bang up to date, our last two albums are fresh, full of ideas – Mingus influenced riffs! Stravinsky time signatures! Vocoder! – and they're called 'Crooked Timber' and 'A Brief Crack Of Light'.

MM: Thank you, Andy. You've been amazing.

T?: Take care and thank you so much for your support – it means a lot to us! Hopefully we will get to the States sooner rather than later and it would be great to see you when we do. All the best!



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