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Dreamland

by Beat Circus

Cuneiform Records, Silver Spring, MD, 2008

CD, Cuneiform Rune 264, \$ 15

Distributor's website: www.cuneiformrecords.com.*Reviewed by Michael R. (Mike) Mosher**Saginaw Valley State University*

Artists and technologists should pay attention to the culture of a century ago. 1908 was a time of optimism. Hopes were buoyed by discoveries in the sciences, the spread of telephony and electric power to households, and innovation in transportation by automobile and aviation. It was a time of both immigration and unionization, both simultaneously reinforcing and opposing each other in radical labor struggles. There were efforts to extend the vote--even to women! In 1908 popular culture was burgeoning, rich, and delightful. Cinema had been around about twenty years, and newspapers were making use of the potential of the comic strips. As various American musics were making its way to the recording industry, there was evidence of what Greil Marcus called "old weird America". There were also public amusements available, less sanitized than the famous Disneyland of a half-century later. One of these phenomena was Coney Island's Dreamland amusement park, the inspiration for this very listenable album.

This project's mastermind Brian Carpenter must get sick of being compared to Tom Waits (as much as I do, in the vocal department). "Gyp the Blood" has a plink plonk beat that might be pounded out on a break drum from one of those newfangled horseless carriages, and some foghorn tuba. It's an amiable movie soundtrack; we should note that Ken Burns even made a Dreamland documentary. American banjos and immigrant keltz illuminate the piece, creepy as the early Disney cartoon "Cobweb Hotel". "The Gem Saloon" is also very much like Waits. "The Ghost of Emma Jean" is embroidered with vocals by Orion Rigel Domisse, certainly a good name for a medium. It evokes the Kinks, or Procol Harum's "Souvenir of London", yet the ambiguous lyrics leave us wondering if Emma Jean died, or simply vamoosed.

"Delerium Tremens" is modal and Asiatic, a good track to support a belly dancer; imagine Cab Calloway hi-de-ho-ing it at the Apollo Theater. The tune includes accordion, played by Alec Redfern from Cuneiform's stable of musical eccentrics. The song itself is Redfearnesque and complicated, well performed and heart pounding. "Lucid State" is a death fugue, with lyrics by poet Paul

Celan. "Hypnogogia" has the toy piano of a scary movie. And has the blessing of being short!

"Meet Me Tonight in Dreamland" is performed on solo piano, and "Dark Eyes" gives the listener a solo violin treatment of the Russian folksong "Dark Eyes". Achechonya! It's followed by the cartoony klez of "Slavochka. In "March of the Freaks", Carpenter bellows and chews the scenery like Jim Broadbent in the movie "Moulin Rouge". One imagines sideshow freaks shambling out, ambling around the circus ring and through the streets of Brooklyn. San Franciscans might recall Laughing Sal, Playland at the Beach, and that park's remnant at the Cliff House's Musée Mécanique, all California's fragments of its amusement park magic of a century ago.

Writer Mark Dery's book *The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium* compared the explosion of virtual realities at the dawn of the 1990s to the bluster and bloom of Coney Island in the early years of the twentieth century. Brian Carpenters' Beat Circus project *Dreamland* brings a bit of the creaky, freaky amusement park into our time, and our mundane lives.

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Contact LDR: ldr@leonardo.org

Contact Leonardo: isast@leonardo.info

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