

Lou Rogai of Lewis & Clarke

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Underneath This had the soulful experience of interviewing Lou Rogai of Lewis & Clarke. Before proceeding to the interview, please read more about Lewis & Clarke from the biography at <http://lewisandclarkemusic.com/about.htm> (<http://lewisandclarkemusic.com/about.htm>) :

Lewis & Clarke is the musical alias of Pennsylvania-based artist Lou Rogai, the voice and vision resonating through lush and brooding long form art-pop / avant-folk compositions that have become a signature sound. For close to a decade, Lewis & Clarke (also comprised of mainstays Ian and Shane O'Hara, and Anthony Lavdanski) has steadily and quietly built a devout following by releasing several acclaimed recordings while skirting mainstream currents. Rogai's slow-burning process is as much of a mission statement as an authentic stance in a corporate age. He makes music as an antidote, an unaffected experience. The moniker itself references the fellowship and correspondence between C. S. Lewis and Arthur C. Clarke rather than the 19th century explorers.

In the same way, Lewis & Clarke songs tend to shift depth of field and mood as unexpected layers of sound and lyrics unfold. Rogai has a strong history of collaborating with different artists and credited as producer / arranger / multi-instrumentalist on Leave Ruin the debut LP by Strand of Oaks, as well as having contributed to the Two Suns album by Bat For Lashes. Most recently, Rogai scored The Wreck, the short which premiered at Cannes 2014. Triumvirate is the highly anticipated new Lewis &

Clarke album, a double LP consisting of 75 minutes of music. It is being released in September 2014 by La Société Expéditionnaire, the record label founded by Rogai to help expose a wild and diverse scope of music.



Photo Credit: Dan Papa

Please describe your path to becoming a musician.

I grew up hearing interesting music from my parents. Classical music like Cyril Scott and Gershwin from my Mom and everything from Sandy Bull, Mahavishnu Orchestra, and Kraftwerk from my Dad. When we moved from Brooklyn to the Upper Delaware, that's where Northeastern PA borders Upstate NY, I was pretty isolated and kept myself occupied with instruments and nature, which was a new thing to me.

How did Lewis & Clarke form?

I was in several dysfunctional bands in the late nineties and realized I was better off without the drama and moving parts. I started writing and recording quieter songs on a Tascam 4 track. I realized that I could make all of these layers of sound come to life on my own terms and it grew from there.

Your music has been compared to that of Nick Drake and Brightblack Morning Light. Have these artists inspired you? Who and what else have been your most significant creative influences?

Nick Drake, yes...his style and craft. I was floored when I first heard a recording of him. His "thing" seemed very private, his music was very exposing of his interior, and difficult for him to present in the marketplace. There are influences along the path of any artist that act as mile-markers, he's one of them. The

“greats” I would include are Nick Cave, Scott Walker, Judee Sill, Terrence Malick, Frank Stella, Ram-Dass. On a realistic and direct level, it’s working with my smart friends that directly influence me.

How do your social identities inform your work?

I have a lot of different interests and try to avoid labels. I have my own ideas, but I try to be open-minded and I’d like for my music to speak emotionally and connect with people.

In what ways is your music feminist?

Personal beliefs are inevitably reflected in subconscious tones. I think you’ll hear and feel it in the music.

The cover art of most of your albums beautifully depicts nature as do some of your songs. How does the natural world influence the music that you make?

I am an admirer and friend of Erika Somogyi, she has provided cover art for the past three records. Her paintings really speak what I try to convey with music. I love wild and interesting landscapes, and our relationships to these places. I look to the visual metaphors around me and relate it to the work I’m making, urban or rural. I live in the heart of a National Park, with the Delaware River as the conduit.

Your style has been characterized in some many different ways, as post-folk, baroque folk, chamber pop, and avant pop to name several. What do you mean of these descriptors?

It’s become kind of a running joke to try and hyphenate different styles that might be appropriate.

One of my favorite songs by you is Doc Holliday was a Phony off your “Bright Light” EP. What is the meaning of this track?

I had a dream about him, probably because I was reading about him. In my dream he was confiding in me about his life choices. Although he was a legendary gentleman gunfighter, he was saying that he should have stuck with being a dentist. He said that sometimes he felt like a phony and he was playing his own myth like a chess match and that he understood what Holden Caulfield meant. Basically, a legendary historical figure vented to me in a dream, so I wrote about it.

Your 2007 album, *Blasts of Holy Birth*, was a concept album about creation. The concepts behind your latest work, “*Triumvirate*” have been personal. Please say more about that.

Blasts of Holy Birth has a certain naiveté and innocence to it, as I was expecting my son’s birth and all was lilted and wonderful. *Light Time* was about the immediate dissolution of my family in a nuclear sense, and *Triumvirate* has heavier arrangements and is about the long-term effects of a destructive or traumatic event. Ultimately coming to terms with our own hubris and rebuilding as a stronger person.

About 5 years have elapsed between this album and the previous. What were those years like? How have they been inspirational?

I was faced with some interesting obstacles that challenged my sanity. I can only say that my son needed me more than the world needed me to be on tour, so it was an obvious choice for me to stay home and provide him with a strong foundation and rebuild our family. That’s what I did, personally and musically. I’m content with my choices. I wrote about the entire process, found the metaphors and that became *Triumvirate*. Looking back, I’m thankful for the opportunity to have my ass handed to me. I recommend it, it’s a reality check.

For the new album, you have been able to both use newer (i.e., Kickstarter) and more traditional (i.e., vinyl, a companion book) technology. What has this blending been like?

It’s a good example of new doors opening as others close. Our label distributor folded and we no longer had an LP pressing budget. The recording was finished and we went with Kickstarter as a way to gauge interest and act as pre-order. It worked out well, we exceeded our goal. Some folks don’t have turntables and still want a physical and tactile artifact of some sort so we are hand-pressing a short run of lyric books that come with downloads. The cool thing is that the whole thing has attracted the attention of a new distributor who are excited about the project and the entire label. It’s great to have freedom, but scary to be out there on your own without the backing of a larger entity. Crowd-sourcing this LP proved to me that there are true fans who want to be a part of this and we truly do live in an age of artist empowerment.



Was the decision for Triumvirate to be a double album made from the start or did that evolve as the songs were being created?

It definitely evolved. There were a lot of ideas forming simultaneously and it all works together to form one piece of music. I didn't want to separate the songs and send them off on their own. They belong together.

"Map of a Maze," (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItBbinOoULc>) the short film about the making of Triumvirate chronicles many types of geographic places. How were they inspiring of the music?

That's the environment where I live, work and play. It also gets pretty weird around here in the winter.

The first track of your new album dreamily begins the journey of the album. What inspired "Eve's Wing?"

Eve's Wing is named after the broken arm of my dear friend and musical teammate, Eve Miller (most notably of Rachel's). I witnessed her challenges. Imagine you are a touring career cellist and you break your arm at a rest area in the middle of nowhere. She now has a most appropriate and beautiful tattoo of a Phoenix on that arm.

“Black Cloud” is haunting. What is the story behind that song?

Maybe you’ve felt like you haven’t been able to achieve something that you know you’re capable of, but forces beyond your control are holding you back. Maybe that includes self-sabotage. Other forces are getting off seeing you become frustrated, perhaps out of jealousy or spite. These things can cause cancer of the soul. Instead of ending angrily, the last line in the song just asks a simple question.

I sense both hope and longing in:



Lewis & Clarke
Triumvirate

8:26

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Can you say more about the emotions conveyed in that song?

There’s a sweep to the whole record and each song is a different point along the arc of a pendulum. That pendulum is the process itself. I really can’t elaborate more on those emotions, that’s why I put them into music.

The following lyrics of “Children of the Sun”, “When the thunder spoke smiles in its praise/Oh, the words were cold, flattering and fake,” are among the most poetic I have heard in a song. What inspired those?

That was something I wrote down and found later. I was thinking about how we seek validation from outside sources, and what it’s like to receive a surface compliment that has no real

substance behind it.

The child reading on “Two Trees” provides the album an even more soulful feel. How did you decide to include this?

This is a cool coincidence. That’s my son Julian, who was in the first grade at the time. He came home from school with a reader called “The Oak Tree and the Fir Tree”. It was weird because this idea had been on my mind a lot. Trees must be pliable and bend in order to weather a storm. Even if a tree has the appearance of being stout, if it’s brittle on the inside it will snap. I was thinking about this a lot and it was coming up a lot in I-Ching readings, and there are several lyrical references to this on the record. So anyway, I recorded him with my phone while he was reading to me. Having just learned to read full paragraphs, his hesitations are beautiful and he has good expressive punctuation. It was a moment.

The record is due in September. On what other projects are you working?

I’m releasing an EP-length soundtrack that I scored for The Wreck, a short film by Kevin Haus who directed A Map of A Maze. It just premiered at Cannes and received “Best Art Short” at Manhattan Film Festival. It’s a compact bit of music that I’m really proud of. We also just had an incredible experience recording a song with Brian McTear for Weathervane Music’s Shaking Through series. His level of knowledge and positivity was above and beyond, along with the entire crew. “The Silver Sea” is the name of the track and will release shortly after Triumvirate drops.

What advice do you have for aspiring musicians?

Be real, don’t give up, and do it yourself. Be mindful of staying positive and true.

Sem: Thanks so much!

Thank you Sem, it’s been a pleasure and I’m honored to be asked about my music in such thoughtful detail.

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