

MIDNIGHT SYNDICATE

Interview
by Peter Iorillo

Something Wicked This Way Comes...

As I sit in the home of Joseph Vargo, gargoyles peer out from their shadowy resting places atop bookshelves and stone columns, while the walls are adorned with original oil paintings, candelabras, swords and artifacts from various ancient cultures — the perfect atmosphere for an interview with Midnight Syndicate, and that's what this band is all about — creating the perfect atmosphere.

With the release of *Born of the Night* in 1998, Midnight Syndicate established themselves in the realm of gothic music. Their usage of eerie sound effects and menacing disembodied vocals to accentuate their dark orchestrations proved to be a formula for success. The concept was as innovative as the music was haunting and gained them a growing network of fans worldwide. Their music is mentally stimulating. Certain pieces evoke the suspense of the calm before a storm while others take you into the very heart of the storm itself.

Composer and musician Edward Douglas formed the original inception of Midnight Syndicate, which released its self-titled debut CD in 1997. "I met Joseph Vargo later that year at a gallery showing of his paintings in Cleveland. Joseph is an extremely talented artist with a consistent dark quality to all of his work. I approached him and gave him a copy of my first CD."

Vargo recalls listening to the CD. "The songs went in a lot of directions at once, covering a broad range of musical styles from rap to country. Because it contained a mixture of so many different styles, the CD couldn't find an audience, but there were a few darker ambient tracks that really stood out to me."

"A few months later we talked about working on a project together." Douglas relates, "I wanted to create a CD so that when listeners closed their eyes, they would be transported to a movie of their own imagining." With Vargo's direction that movie became a dark horror film. "Joseph suggested we do a Halloween CD."

Vargo's concept entailed streamlining Midnight Syndicate's sound and focusing it to appeal to a gothic audience. Douglas put together some demo material and a few weeks later the two set up a meeting to listen to what he had come up with.

Vargo admits his expectations were surpassed, "I honestly didn't know what to expect, but the music was better than I had hoped for. I decided to finance and direct the project. Some of our initial ideas hit the cutting room floor, but the end result was a classier project than I had envisioned." Douglas was familiar with Gavin Goszka's music and brought him on board to contribute to the creative team. "Gavin's first few demos didn't exactly fit in with what I was trying to achieve." Vargo confesses, "I'm pretty demanding about certain things. I kept cracking the whip, saying make it slower, heavier, more ominous, less percussion, more bells and ghostly chorus! Since I was financing the



Photos by Christine Filipak

Edward Douglas, Joseph Vargo, and Gavin Goszka.

project, I had the final say."

Goszka recalls, "I put the *Born of the Night* calendar on my wall and wrote songs to capture the mood of the art."

"With each new demo, I heard Gavin's compositions growing darker and more serious," Vargo affirms. "I wanted the entire CD to create a foreboding mood like the best horror movie soundtracks do. John Carpenter's *Halloween* movie score was a major factor in making that film the suspenseful classic that it is."

The music may have been patterned after soundtrack composers such as Elfman and Carpenter, but in the process of creating *Born of the Night* a new sound was emerging — an original style that was distinctively Midnight Syndicate. "Our music is difficult to categorize," states Goszka.

"It's classical at its base, dark and ambient, but melody driven."

Since the band wasn't getting any airplay and had no plans to tour, the CD art and song titles were designed to appeal to the darker audience Midnight Syndicate was trying to reach. "We hammered out rough ideas and refined the details with every meeting," recalls Vargo. "The concept for *Born of the Night* was solidified once we decided on the cover art. The music would take you on a tour through the chambers and halls of a haunted, gothic castle."

"We wanted to give you a setting without a distinct story, leaving that to the listener's interpretation," says Douglas.

"I wrote some verses and poems, but they were never intended to be used as

lyrics," explains Vargo. "Instead, we used them in between tracks to remind the listener that something might be lurking in the shadows."

The setting of a gothic castle, however, restricted the use of certain modern-sounding instruments. The band utilized ghostly choirs, somber piano melodies, tolling bells, and cathedral pipe organs with Vargo providing the vocal chants, whispers and otherworldly narrations to achieve a sound that was gothic in the classic sense of the word.

For Douglas the most rewarding part of creating *Born of the Night* has been listener response. "We get letters and e-mails from fans who describe their visual interpretations of our music in almost poetic detail."

Vargo adds, "People use it to set the

In the dead of night
the Vesper tolls
to summon thrashed
and revenant souls,
The harvest moon
casts shadows dim,
born from the depths
of nightmares grim,
And conjured forth,
rise loathsome things
to seize the night
upon dark wings...



"Midnight Syndicate transports the listener to worlds of their own imagination." —Edward Douglas



"I wanted the entire CD to create a foreboding mood like the best horror movie soundtracks do." —Joseph Vargo



"Our music is difficult to categorize. It's classical at its base, dark and ambient, but melody driven." —Gavin Goszka

mood for everything from candlelit bubble baths to Halloween wedding ceremonies. You gotta love it."

Though Douglas and Goszka are tight-lipped about how they achieve their impressive-sounding symphonic orchestrations, they both have extensive musical backgrounds. Douglas began taking piano lessons at an early age, then moved on to study percussion and bass guitar. "I played in a few rock bands, but got away from that to pursue writing and composing." He majored in film and TV production at John Carol University and eventually wrote and produced a direct-to-video horror movie called *The Dead Matter*. "I think I gravitate towards the dark," Douglas confirms, "Yes, I definitely have a darker side."

Goszka is a multi-talented musician as well and holds a music degree from Baldwin Wallace College. In addition to his involvement with Midnight Syndicate, he has also been busy with *Lore*, his ongoing solo project. Goszka lists cave exploring and amateur ghost hunting among his pastimes.

"One of the big draws for me is the thrill of exploring the unknown," Goszka professes. "You cast yourself into utter darkness, armed with only a headlamp, which tends to offer little security, and test your resolve by plunging deeper and deeper into the winding passages that splay out in spider-web fashion throughout the cold stone. It's amazing how alien the underground environment can be. Even with a map, it seems like you've stepped onto another planet. There's something very humbling about being in a place that was created millions of years ago."

Goszka recalls one memorable ghost-hunting event. "We had found an old cemetery one night along a dirt backroad, and had decided to stop to check the place out. It was October, and the air was filled with a thick fog that obscured everything, making it impossible to discern any detail on the tombstones and monuments. It was very much like a scene from a classic horror film complete with strange sounds and odd shapes drifting through the mists. All of this could



have been the product of an overly-active imagination, but then again..."

The success of *Born of the Night* inspired Midnight Syndicate to follow the same formula, spawning the follow-up release, *Realm of Shadows*.

"The creative process differed on *Realm*. Joseph's paintings, such as the haunting image of Noctem Aeternus, were still a strong influence on me," Douglas relates. "I drew other inspirations from the cinema and horror writers such as Stephen King."

Douglas cites his musical influences as soundtrack composers, John Williams, Hans Zimmer, Elliot Goldenthal, and of course John Carpenter. "Gavin and I are on the same wavelength," Douglas contends. "I haven't worked with any other artist where that is the case. We worked independently for six months writing new material, and in some instances, even my own wife couldn't tell who wrote what."

Goszka credits Danny Elfman and the heavy metal band, King Diamond as his musical influences, as well as inspirations derived from films such as *Ghost Story*, the original version of *The Haunting*, and classic B-horror movies. Goszka explains, "For *Born Of The Night*, I used Joseph's imagery to inspire me, but with *Realm* we were creating a different mood, so I relied more on my own imagination to capture the feeling of what this place would sound like. We wanted *Realm* to have less of a horror atmosphere about it."

"Yes," Vargo agrees, "whereas *Born of the Night* was more gothic and horrific, *Realm of Shadows* was more haunting."

The package design for *Realm of Shadows* was more elaborate with Vargo and graphic designer Christine Filipak creating the eerie village setting and old-world map of the area. It also included a storyline to provide the listener with a vague background. "The packaging is a prelude to the music," cites Goszka. "It sets the scene for the listener, but this time we've given them a few more visual cues, a few more ideas."

Vargo's busy schedule with Monolith Graphics did not allow his to offer as much creative input on the sound of *Realm of Shadows*. He painted the moody cover art, wrote the liner story and came up with the song titles, but his vocals were limited to the ominous, poetic narration on the opening track. "I was completely immersed with the *Tales From The Dark Tower* book project at the time, but I think Ed and Gavin came up with some real quality stuff."

Born of the Night and *Realm of Shadows* have netted impressive sales and met with critical acclaim, but alas, all good things must come to an end, as Vargo reveals, "We won't be working together on future projects." Douglas and Goszka will continue as Midnight Syndicate while Vargo promises his new project won't disappoint fans. "The music is classic dark orchestration, but will incorporate more vocals and take the concept to another level." Vargo looks back on his work with Midnight Syndicate with fond memories. "Both Gavin and Edward are very talented composers and musicians. Gavin's compositions have matured and become more elaborate with each CD.

They just keep getting better. Edward is a consummate mixture of right and left brain. He's a passionate musician with a resilient business drive."

The respect is mutual as Goszka adds, "Joseph's focus and sense of vision were invaluable. I don't know what the CDs would have looked like or sounded like without his direction."

Though the creative team seems to be heading down separate dark and twisting paths, fans shouldn't be surprised if there is more than a musical similarity between future projects. Vargo explains, "Edward and I were both working on an asylum-based theme when we decided to part ways. I developed my own ideas, conceptualizing an entire storyline set in a sanitarium."

Douglas confirms that the next offering from Midnight Syndicate will indeed utilize this concept. "The setting is a haunted Victorian asylum, but the images are still vague. It won't stray much from the formula, but will use actors to create some intense effects."

Before we wrapped things up, I couldn't resist asking the band, "Do you ever see Midnight Syndicate being played as 'elevator' music?" The three laugh, then Goszka says, "No. It's too ominous." Vargo smiles, then adds, "I think people would use the stairs."

For more information on Midnight Syndicate's future projects, visit:
www.entityprod.com

Gothic artwork and merchandise by Joseph Vargo is available at:
www.monolithgraphics.com