



# INTERVIEW WITH JOSEPH VARGO OF NOX ARCANA



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## **INTERVIEW: NOX ARCANA (JOSEPH VARGO)**

By Marcus Pan

*Artist, occultist and musician Joseph Vargo gave me a chance to talk to him about some of his projects. From the theme-laced Halloween favorites of Midnight Syndicate to the orchestral scores of Nox Arcana, Joseph Vargo's music is widely known and has forever blasted away the old school Halloween "sound effects" CDs and replaced them with scores worthy of feature films. His work with horror fiction is likewise known as is his amazing artwork that has graced everything from books to CDs to one of the most beautifully crafted Tarot decks ever before seen. In this exclusive interview Joseph answers my questions about all this and more.*

**1) Nox Arcana and Midnight Syndicate, at my first impression of receiving work by both, was that the former was more of a side project of Joseph Vargo rather than a new band. Were you involved with their latest release this year, *The 13th Hour*, at all?**

Actually, the gothic incarnation of Midnight Syndicate was originally started as a side project of mine. I was approached by Ed Douglas at my art gallery in Cleveland in 1997. He had just released the first MS cd, but was having trouble finding an audience for its assorted styles of music. The cd went in a lot of different directions and contained rap songs, country music, easy-listening and new wave music. He told me how much he admired my art and asked if I'd like to work with him on a future project. I explained that my forte was in the gothic field, and that if he would be willing to drastically change his style, I could streamline his sound to appeal to a gothic audience. We began to work together and I agreed to produce his next cd through my company, Monolith Graphics. I directed the music, wrote the storyline and recited the creepy intros to the songs, created the cover art and new band logo and paid for the entire project. The new music was such a departure from his first cd that, for awhile, I was considering changing the name of the band so that it wouldn't be associated with Ed's initial effort, but eventually he stopped selling the first cd and now it remains a skeleton, buried deep in his closet.

Although I had been in several rock and metal bands throughout the years, I always had a love for dark soundtrack music. I had compiled my own soundtrack for my art gallery, comprised of music by John Carpenter, Danny Elfman, Wojciech Kilar, Enya and various others. The sound I was going for was a combination of the best of these artists. I worked with Ed for a while as director and producer to keep the new project along these lines. The cd was titled *Born of the Night*, after a series of art prints and calendars I



had previously produced. Gavin, the third contributor to the project came on board late in the game after most of the songs were already written.

Once the cd was finished, the hard part began. We had to try to market a band that never played out and got no radio play. My partner Christine Filipak, who photographed the band and did the album layout, designed several promotional campaigns to market the cd. Among the long list of things she did, she designed and assembled hundreds of original point-of-purchase displays for the band, and she negotiated a deal with the Hot Topic buyers so that all



musical styles and went in every musical direction possible with rap songs, country songs and easy listening music. Ed Douglas changed his style at my insistence in order to make his music more marketable, but they seem to have lost their direction once again and I think their music has suffered greatly with their last few releases. The music of Nox Arcana is exactly what I had originally envisioned. My partner, William Piotrowski and I work very closely together with each composition. It's a much more creative working environment. As for differences in the musical styles of our two bands, our songs are more melody-driven, some have lyrics, singing, chanting, and creepy little narrations, making them more than just background ambiance. We also incorporate a much wider range of instruments and vocalists and we also cover concepts that we have very deep interests in, giving detailed background stories for our themes. Each of the Nox Arcana cds comes with a 12-page booklet filled with artwork, lyrics and background stories about each specific concept that we cover.

**3) Nox Arcana releases have been coming out pretty steadily. Is there a reason for the prolific nature of this new project?**

We released our first album, *Darklore Manor* in 2003. Our second album, *Necronomicon*, was released in 2004. We put out two albums in 2005 with the releases of *Winter's Knight* and *Transylvania*, mainly because *Winter's Knight* was a slight departure from our horror-based themes, so we also gave our fans *Transylvania* to appease their darker desires. William is just as driven as I am and we never stop writing music. We put in about 60 to 80 hours a week in the studio when we are working on each new album. Currently we are about halfway through our next cd, *Carnival of Lost Souls*, but we already have some great tracks written for the following release.

**4) All of Nox Arcana's releases take on a theme: haunted mansions, Christmas, vampire myths and one of my favorites, the Necronomicon itself. Do you choose your themes first or do you begin writing a score and determine what it resembles in your mind?**

We select the themes in advance, based on our own personal interests. Once we have the theme set in stone, we begin outlining the type of music and instruments that will fit the concept and convey it to the listener. For example, to convey a Victorian theme on *Darklore Manor*, we utilized pianos, harpsichords, violins and pipe organs, whereas with *Necronomicon*, we achieved a more mystical feeling with sitars, flutes, primal drums and big creepy choirs. We have full concepts set for our next five releases, but because we've had the aforementioned problems with other bands copying our concepts in the past, I'm sworn to secrecy as to what dark themes our future albums will explore.

their stores would put stickers on their poster bins (which displayed several of my posters) advertising the *Born of The Night* cd. We did this again the next year to advertise the *Realm of Shadows* cd. We also began marketing the cds through local Halloween stores and attractions. I even custom built and hand-painted a huge illuminated trade show display to advertise the band at various events.

As far as their latest release is concerned, no, I was not directly involved, but it seems I was indirectly involved in a very big way. The storyline that MS has posted in their press releases and on their website seems to have been patterned directly after Nox Arcana's 2003 release, *Darklore Manor*. It appears that they are still looking to me for inspiration and creative ideas, however, whereas our cd and website contain a detailed story and back history of *Darklore Manor*, the MS release offers nothing of the sort. I also recently discovered that my profits from *Born of the Night* and *Realm of Shadows* have been used to pay for portions of advertising their new cds. Our attorney is currently working on setting everything straight.

**2) On the top, Nox Arcana and Midnight Syndicate are strikingly similar in music. What's the differences between the two bands and what lead you to form Nox Arcana?**

Yes, they are both in the same vein, a style that I had originally envisioned several years prior to working with MS. Anyone who has ever heard Midnight Syndicate's debut, self-titled release, can easily ascertain that they were a band without direction, and certainly not a gothic band by any stretch of the imagination. The album was a jumbled mish-mosh of



**5) How did you come about writing scores for the *Necronomicon* and was this just in passing or are you a Lovecraft fan? What's your favorite story from the myths if so?**

I'm a huge Lovecraft fan and I think that the Cthulhu Mythos is a great source of material. The album booklet art and liner notes of *Necronomicon* were designed to initiate those who were unfamiliar with Lovecraft's genius. Over the years, many writers took their own liberties with Lovecraft's concepts, but our album strictly adheres to Lovecraft's original vision of The Great Old Ones and The Elder Gods. The *Necronomicon* album is also marketed by Chaosium Games as a soundtrack to its *Call of Cthulhu* RPG, and has been their top-selling soundtrack since its release in 2004.

I have several favorite stories by H.P. Lovecraft. I can't narrow it down to just one, but my top five would have to be "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," "The Dunwich Horror," "The Hound," "The Haunter of the Dark," and of course "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward."

**6) Have you felt any backlash at all when you put out albums like *Transylvania* in as far as being called or considered cliché at all? I'd think it might be difficult to touch upon such a continuously visited subject without fearing that sort of thing especially within the goth subculture.**

Quite the opposite. Fads come and go, but *Dracula* is a classic. The novel and main character have been around for over 100 years, and now they're more popular than ever.

We have received stacks of letters from people who have applauded us for creating an album that adheres to Stoker's novel. Our *Transylvania* cd combines those classic elements of romance and horror. This wasn't just a random collection of spooky sounds and background music that was slapped together with no reverence for the source material. Our fans are quite discriminating and they know the difference between class and cliché. Also, I've amassed a large and loyal following throughout the years by painting vampires, gargoyles, ghosts and other creatures of the night. We always choose topics that are close to our hearts and our audience knows that when we tackle any subject matter, we take it very seriously and do our research. *Transylvania* has also been used to score the 1922 silent film, *Nosferatu*, which premiered on New Years' Eve.

**7) Aside from your music, I understand that you also delve into the occult. Tell us a bit about *The Gothic Tarot* and the imagery you chose for these cards.**

*The Gothic Tarot* contains many of my most popular images previously featured in calendars and posters as well as other paintings from my private collection. Several new works were created specifically for the deck. The original concept was to only create full illustrations for the 22 cards of the Major Arcana and to utilize repetitive design elements of the four suits to illustrate the Minor Arcana. However the more research I did into the symbolic representations of classic Tarot decks, I decided to commit to a full-scale project of creating individual illustrations for each of the 78 cards.





In some instances existing paintings were altered to fit the concept of a specific card, but in other cases new artwork had to be created to express the card's traditional meaning. I had seen other Tarot decks by popular fantasy artists that were simply a collection of random images unrelated to the meanings of the specific cards. These decks, though aesthetically pleasing on the surface, were completely impractical. I didn't want people to look at my deck and say, "Cool art, but this guy doesn't know a thing about the Tarot." I wanted people to be able to use the cards for their intended purpose.

Since there are so many decks in existence and each has its own subtle variations, there are some options in naming the suits. You have to decide wands or staffs, coins or pentacles. I chose to go with wands and pentacles because they best represented the Old World mysticism that I was striving to capture. The Rider-Waite deck is probably the most widely used deck of the modern day. The instructional text was researched and written by Arthur Edward Waite, and the black and white illustrations were drawn by Pamela Colman Smith, based on Waite's descriptions. This deck was fairly consistent with earlier Tarot decks like the Tarot of Marseilles and was the first one to illustrate the Minor Arcana with artistic depictions as opposed to symbolic designs. I used the Waite deck as a preliminary guide in order to stay true to the established divinatory meanings of the Tarot. I utilized vampires, gargoyles, ghosts and dark angels for my main characters in order to convey a gothic mood, and tried to incorporate the designs of the suits into the artwork whenever possible to make the work more cohesive. We've had great success marketing the deck throughout the world.

**8) *Tales from the Dark Tower and Born of the Night* are books recently released featuring your writing and artwork. How did you find the authors and stories for the *Dark Tower* collection and how did you go about choosing which to include in the thirteen that appeared?**

*Tales from the Dark Tower* began when my writer friend James Pipik approached me with the idea to write a book of short stories based on my gothic art. I knew several other writers and offered each of them the opportunity to write a story for the book and gave the interested parties an image to work from. I worked on the main story with James, then outlined a series of stories and worked closely with the other writers to maintain continuity throughout the book. Christine Filipak and I wrote and co-wrote several of the stories ourselves, and as time went on, the responsibilities of editing this project fell upon us as well.

The 13 gothic tales of vampires, ghosts and other things that go bump in the night are set in and around a haunted gargoyle-encrusted castle known as the Dark Tower. Each of the stories stands alone, yet they all fit together, weaving



back and forth throughout the centuries to create the saga of the curse that overshadows the Dark Tower. The tales add a new dimension to the artwork, bringing some of my most sinister and haunting characters to life, so to speak. *Tales from the Dark Tower* is currently in its third printing and we are beginning work on the sequel, *Beyond the Dark Tower*.

As far as my art book, *Born of the Night*, is concerned, the book features over 100 of my most popular paintings as well as dozens of sketches and previously unpublished works. *Born of the Night* only contains about half of my work to date. A second art book will be released within the next few years that will feature a lot of my early fantasy paintings of sensuous women, dark warriors, dragons and other mythical creatures as well as my newest gothic pieces. I still have a large body of personal work that has never been published.

**9) Monolith Graphics has shunned many forms of distribution and has built up an impressive distribution network of its own. How did you go about convincing shops like Hot Topic to carry your work and why did you decide to go it alone in the first place?**

Many traditional distribution channels do not provide the personal attention or care to the customer, and the artist gets a very small portion of each sale. We heard about Hot Topic in 1997 when they opened a store in Cleveland, and just sent them some samples of my work. I had amassed a substantial portfolio of gothic artwork by then, and we were selling calendars, prints and t-shirts of my art at local stores and events, as well as through our mail-order catalog. The buyers at Hot Topic loved everything they saw and we've developed various gothic products with them over the years.

I work very hard at all aspects of my craft, but I feel very fortunate to have enjoyed the success that we've had with all our merchandise. I am a firm believer in the old saying that success is hard work meeting with opportunity. Many people who want to pursue careers as artists or writers think that they'll strike it rich with one big break. Inevitably they fail because they aren't determined to put all the effort into polishing their work, nor doing all the marketing to get their work out there. If publishing companies haven't ever seen your work, they're not going to come knocking at your door. You have to make all the contacts yourself, or hire an agent who you can trust to do it for you.

Occasionally we license some artwork out to other companies, but we've been burned by dishonest distributors in the past, so now we insist on writing our own contracts. Still, I feel that experience is the best teacher. It was a long, hard road, but looking back, I wouldn't have done it any other way. It gives you a real sense of accomplishment to know that you created something substantial by following your dreams and doing things your own way.

**10) You've done quite an impressive amount of media from music to books and art. Is there a favorite out of these, if any?**

That's a tough one. I'm very proud of all of my work. It's like asking someone with kids who their favorite child is. I love creating things from my own imagination, be it art, music or literature. Whereas writing is more of a hobby to me, I'm much more serious when it comes to my career as an artist and musician. Although I've been putting a lot more time into my music over the past few years, art has always been my primary passion.

**11) Of course the final question of most interviews is a "what's next" sort of line. In your case it can go down any number of trails. What can we expect from Joseph Vargo in 2006 and beyond?**



We are finishing up the next Nox Arcana cd, *Carnival of Lost Souls*, which will explore a creepy old-time carnival that harbors living nightmares and sinister secrets. We also have plans to shoot a video for the album. Recently, Nox Arcana's music was used exclusively to score the 1922 silent film classic, *Nosferatu*. The editing for this was done by horror movie host, Dr. Gangrene. The audio enhanced version of *Nosferatu* premiered on New Years' Eve on the WB Creature Feature. We are discussing the possibility of marketing a dvd of the film with our music. Eventually, we'll begin production on some original gothic horror movies as well. We also have a new line of posters that will be available through Spencers, and writing for the second Dark Tower book will begin later this year. In the meantime, I'll be busy creating new cover art for *Dark Realms magazine*. My dream project would be to build a gothic manor that would act as a weekend retreat where the guests would become involved in a live-action supernatural mystery. It may take a few years, but it'll happen someday.