

# Hip Gnosti

‘Widely unknown’ despite a twelve-year career, **COIL**’s time may well be coming. The enigmatic group are now regularly cited as an influence by the likes of Autechre. **JOHN EVERALL** talks John Balance and Peter Christopherson through a diverse and fascinating career in mystique-making. All artwork by Coil.

**A tendency to** be hermetic may confer certain benefits upon an artist, but also has its drawbacks. Coil are acutely aware of this dilemma. For a dozen years they have pursued a singular path; embracing the esoteric, the erotic, and the ecstatic: in the process creating a music which prefigures recent developments in electronica. However, Coil’s immense contribution to sonic innovation has to a large extent been overlooked. As their long-time ally Monte Cazazza would say: “They are widely unknown.” Yet, perhaps it is the subtle, unseen influences that determine the ever-shifting morphology of the sonic landscape. It’s my contention that Coil (along with Throbbing Gristle, more of whom later) have been as influential in shaping radical musical content as hip names to drop such as Can, Eno, Kraftwerk, Lee Perry or Stockhausen. A sizeable cult following seems scant reward for the creators of some of the most challenging music of the past two decades, yet John Balance seems unperturbed, almost nonchalant about this: “I don’t understand why people want popular acclaim. Our intention has always been to be true to ourselves, to remain pure, uncontaminated by the mainstream.”

Balance is one third of Coil (the other members being ex-TG conspirator Peter Christopherson aka Sleazy and recent addition Drew McDowall) and has strong views on this subject: “The people we respect do tend to work in isolation in order to remain pure. The Occult artist Austin Osman Spare is a good example. Spare didn’t accept monetary rewards or play the Art game. He’s not widely known, yet to me he’s a towering figure. Beyond William Blake, even.” These are the people Coil connect with; history’s shadowy presences and hidden catalysts: Spare, Tesla, the sado-Surrealistic Lautreamont. Musicians respected by Coil, again conform to this idea of the highly-idiosyncratic visionary figure: Beefheart, LaMonte Young along with close allies Nurse With Wound and occasional collaborator, Boyd Rice.

Given Coil’s wilful perversity, their outsider stance, perhaps it is surprising that they are now being cited as a major influence by the likes of Autechre. So how do they connect with recent developments in music? “Recent developments in music?”, Balance ponders. “I think they’ve connected with us, actually! For instance, Sleazy was using a series of car cassette machines linked to a keyboard, actually triggering samples. This was back in the late seventies with TG, he created a proto-sampling device. I think Czukay did something vaguely similar with Can, and of course there are other unacknowledged people who utilised sampling techniques prior to the development of the sampler as a specific commercial instrument.”

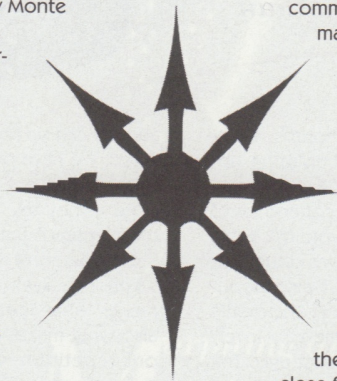
Over the past decade, the sampler has assumed the same sort of iconic significance as that once restored for the electric guitar. It is

the synecdoche of the current musical era. Yet mostly it is unimaginatively employed as the instrument of postmodernist musical pick ‘n’ mix. This is lamentable, given its potential as facilitator of magical possibilities, ie its ability to cut-up and mutate sections of reality à la William Burroughs. Coil are the only artists I can think of who’ve employed the sampler in this way. Balance concurs: “Coil does take sections of reality and twist them round. This process we term Sidereal Sound in homage to Spare. Around the mid-eighties at the time of *Scatology*, we were conscious of this process. We utilised an alchemy of sound, taking new sound and transmuting it. Now this has become an intuitive process with us. But obviously Burroughs’ ideas about cut-ups have always been an influence. We’ve known him for a long time, and he contributes to a track on our album *Backwards* which will come out on Trent Reznor’s Nothing label. We gave William certain key phrases to recite, really it is a magical incantation, it has a powerful shamanic aspect to it.”

Coil have always chosen their collaborators wisely; the list is impressive: alongside Burroughs, people they’ve worked with in the past include Jim Thirwell, Gavin Friday, Annie Anxiety, Boyd Rice (on the *Sickness Of Snakes* project) and Marc Almond. “I like people who push themselves to the limit, who are prepared to take risks; whether it be their mental or physical health or the possibility of commercial failure. Marc Almond has been one of our soul-mates through life. He pushes himself, he’s not afraid to make mistakes, and he’s a super-sensualist. Really, these are the sort of people I’m attracted to. Also somebody like Diamanda Galas, who I’m sure we’ll work with at some point. Again, a person who has a tremendous shamanic quality within her work.”

More poignantly, Coil and Diamanda Galas have both been forced to deal with the tragedy of AIDS-related deaths in their work. No other artists have confronted this issue with such unflinching honesty. Coil’s lugubrious version of ‘Tainted Love’ gave that song a new and chilling meaning. *Horse Rotorvator*, released in 1986, further explored the theme of AIDS-related deaths and also the suicides of close friends: “We had a sudden spate of suicides around us and also AIDS-related deaths. ‘Tainted Love’ was a product of our indignation and anger at the way AIDS victims were being treated. We had a friend who was an artist, the person who did the cover art for ‘Tainted Love’, called Eddie Cairns. At the time he died there was a total AIDS panic. Really, it was insane. I think it was Hammersmith Council who dealt with Eddie’s body after his death. They sent men in bloody Dalek suits, wrapped the body in numerous sheets of plastic, and didn’t know how to deal with the body. This was the sort of attitude which really aroused my anger. With *Horse Rotorvator* we had gotten over our original anger and we were trying to explore death in a positive way, as something which everybody must confront. So as well as dealing with the deaths of people close to us, we were also dealing with things like the violent death of Pasolini.”

**Sex and death**, the twin gods Thanatos and Eros, are omnipresent in Coil’s work in the Eighties. However, the emphasis has now shifted, and Coil are pursuing music which has a healing function, addresses ecological issues, and explores arcane pre-Christian nature worship. At present they are composing a soundtrack to Derek Jarman’s *Journey To Avebury*, compiled from footage he shot in the late seventies at the time of making *In The Shadow Of The Sun*. “*Journey To Avebury* was important to us, to be able to contribute the soundtrack. The original film was only 3-4 minutes in length, speeded-up Super 8 footage, but after he died, I had a dream where he appeared asking for the film to be extended. So

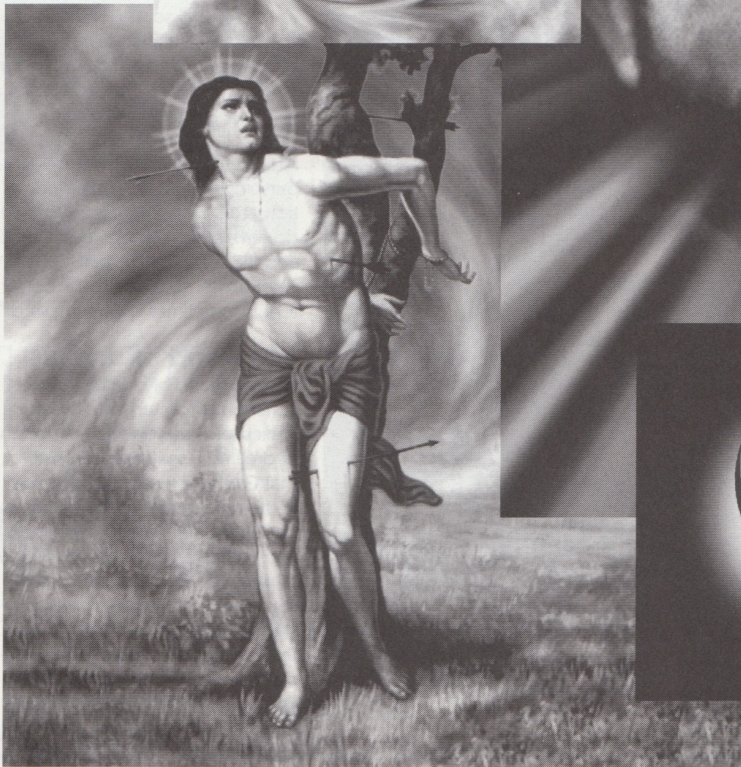
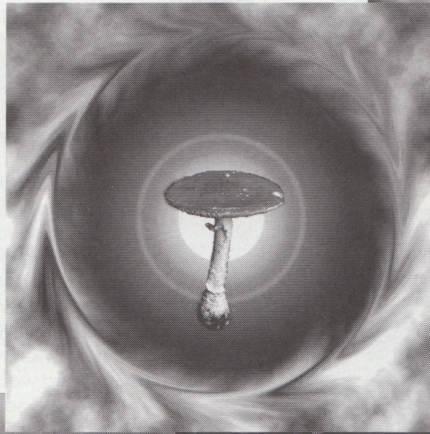




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now it is slowed down footage, roughly 10 minutes long. Also, we're making our own film, *Journey To Avebury 2*. Hopefully this will involve Julian Cope; we share a mutual interest in this area—serpent power, sacred sites, the healing properties of ancient standing stones."

Coil, thankfully, eschew the sort of woolly-mindedness which characterises over-credulous New Age types. Coil's motivation comes from a desire to explore nature and also that which lies behind nature. In dualistic terms, the Dionysian as opposed to the Apollonian: the redressing of the balance in a hyper-rationalistic culture. "Burroughs' dictum 'destroy all rational thought' is a good working model for a very balanced society."

Coil's anti-rationalistic stance, their desire to follow a Rimbaudian programme of systematic sensory derangement, inevitably exerts a profound influence on their music. Certain pieces are constructed

with the express intention of triggering altered states of consciousness. In effect, this constitutes a return to the original intent behind creating music, ie that music was originally a functional tool to transform one's mental state. *How To Destroy Angels* is a particularly good example of this process in action, constructed according to magical/Kabbalistic principles rather than explicitly musical ones, and described as 'ritual music for the accumulation of male sexual energy'. Even on a purely musical level, it's quite remarkable: the utilisation of gongs and bullroars, the slowly shifting textures which antedates the work of many artists on the *Isolationism* compilation by nearly a decade, yet boasts striking similarities to, say, Thomas Köner's material. Balance explains the motivation behind this piece: "It deals exclusively with male sexual energy because it's related to Mars. Not as the God of War, that is, of course, one aspect of Mars."



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But not the one we were primarily concerned with. Sleazy and myself, as two male homosexuals wanted to explore male sexual energy and exclusively male initiation rites. Although we now plan to follow up that particular record with a piece dealing with female mysteries, the lunar aspects, Isis and the sea. For this we will also use the appropriate instrumentation, for instance, the sistrum."

Balance and Christopherson's embracement of esoteric ideas and practices is the thread linking all the groups they've worked with, both individually or together: Throbbing Gristle, Psychic TV, Zos-Kia and Coil. The normally taciturn Christopherson expands on this: "The only level on which there is a continuity between TG, PTV and Coil is on a philosophical one. We pursue our own interests and ideas, and have never been concerned with the tastes of the mass public. TG is such a long time ago. It was very confrontational at the time, and also musically very original. I really don't know how influential TG has been, but there's been an analogue revival over the past

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—John Balance

five years, so maybe there will be a renewal of interest in TG."

Balance interjects: "TG were hugely influential! Possibly this is unacknowledged, but really, music journalists who find, say, Aphex Twin's noisier moments new and radical amaze me. TG and Boyd Rice were doing that over fifteen years ago and doing it better. I'm not knocking Richard James, I love his stuff, but things come full circle. His time has come and what he does he does very well. I just think at the time TG and Boyd were doing it, it had an enormous impact on certain people. TG had a greater impact on me than any other music I've ever encountered."

TG's confrontational stance and express desire to explore taboo subjects led to them being dubbed 'the wreckers of civilisation' on the front page of one tabloid newspaper after their infamous 'Pornography' show at the ICA in 1976. Although Coil don't court controversy in quite the same way, their Occult interests and resolutely anti-Christian stance (express on tracks like 'Godhead=Deathhead') surely causes a reaction. "Well, we are on the list of banned artists by Christian groups in America," states Balance, "along with people like Slayer and Boyd Rice. But that amuses me really. I mean we have used backmasking on records just to wind these people up. The whole idea of backwards messages is nonsense, really; the brain simply can't decode these messages."

Although it's strange that Christian groups are so obsessed with them, given the fact that there are so many Satanic Metal bands not disguising their lyrical content anyway. Another worrying development in the States is the 'erotic music' Bill. You know, people trying to ban music with erotic content. It won't happen and I am glad that a lot of big name artists have already voiced their opposition to this. We would add our voice, but we're not really in that position. It is stupid anyway, most popular music is based on sex. Really, there are two categories of music: mind-fuck and body-fuck! (laughs)"

The concept of music fucking your mind, inevitably, leads on to a discussion about Coil's hallucinogenically-deranged allies, the Butthole Surfers in a dream, before I'd actually physically heard their music," says Balance, "and what I heard was remarkably close to their actual sound. I think we collided with the Buttholes through hallucinogenics. Coil were originally going to be involved in the Jack Officers project with them." It is notable that Balance's interest in dreams meant he was pursuing oneiric musical composition years before Richard James. "I do have sonic content in dreams and this has played a part in Coil. Also, obviously, Coil's lyrical content is sometimes dream-inspired."

## The world of dreams

and the world of cinema share common characteristics (Orson Welles said "the cinema is a ribbon of dreams"), so it is no surprise that Coil have worked extensively in this area, providing soundtracks for Jarman's *Angelic Conversation* and contributing material to *Blue*, as well as composing the original soundtrack to *Hellraiser*, which was sadly and stupidly not used in the final film. Much of Coil's soundtrack work has been compiled onto a double CD, *The Sound Of Music*, to be released in May.

"We've collected the film music we've done, with the exception of *Angelic Conversation* which had a separate release. The complete *Hellraiser* theme is on this release, along with the other pieces for Derek Jarman. Also the full length version of 'Chaostrophy'."

Simultaneously, Coil release their first full-length album under their alter-ego ELpH, *Worship The Glitch*, on their purely electronic Eskaton label. "ELpH is where our music becomes detached from us as people. Where we can no longer recognise our presence in the music. There are many future projects planned for Eskaton, some involving Coil members, others from bands we've signed. There is a proposed collaboration with O from Sakho. Also, we may do something with Atom Heart. But Eskaton is separate from Coil. Coil has come full circle and we're returning to a lot of our original ideas and intentions. Ideas concerned with transmuting sound and warping reality. This is what we do best!"

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