

THE STORY OF ASHBURN COUNTY

Ashburn County does not really exist. Well... the city of Ashburn exists. It is set in the state of Georgia and it is well-known for having the greatest number of churches by inhabitants. At one point, there were forty-one churches for eighty eight inhabitants. So they said.... But the county of Ashburn is rather a projection of the mind, as when William Faulkner created *Yoknapatawpha*. It is just a mirror image of the place we grew up in, deep in Louisiana. We consider our work itself as some kind of folklore, since it is very much linked to the fact of living in a rural area of the South of the United States with our inheritance of Cajun culture. And religiosity and mysticism is just part of the place we live in.

Close to our homes, when we were kids, there was a local drive-in and it had a tremendous influence on our lives. There we saw a great quantity of cheap horror movies, mostly local productions set in the bayou with degenerate rednecks shooting at some creatures living in the muddy lakes or deformed killers lurking in the mountains. These films were called *Creature from Black Lake*, *Don't Go in the Woods* or *Terror in the Swamp*. That was in the eighties. These movies were bad but we liked watching them, and their soundtracks, mixing bluegrass with bizarre sounds from analog synthesizers, had a tremendous influence on us. Sometimes were also projected some European art-house and terror movies.

As we were talking about the influence of this type of movies on us, we decided to direct our own movie which would be a tribute to these independent hick films and their grotesque humor set in the midst of a terrifying nature. Our problem is that we had no cameras, no money, nothing. So we decided to work on the soundtrack of the film we would have done if we had the adequate equipment. We bought a digital handheld recording machine called Zoom H4N and, as the French musicians of musique concrete, we did some field recordings of instruments, agricultural machines or natural environment. Everything on *Scenes of Daily Life in the Rural South*, our first album that we did between 2011 and 2013, has been recorded with it: accordions, trombones, voices, synthesizers, etc. Then we sculpted the sounds on a computer. The narrated story itself is a combination of our memories of this genre of cinema and what we liked in it.

Of course, the harmonica, the Jew's harp, the flutes or Breton reeds remind the Cajun heritage but, as in these movies, we mixed it with industrial collage, droning synthesizers, old rhythm boxes, samples and mechanized sounds. The voices go from the lyrical to pure screams, from the liturgical to indistinct whispers. The composition process itself was really close to rituals as if the imaginary characters in this story were possessing us. It confronted us with ghosts of our own past and ghosts of the earth itself on which we have grown up and lived until now.

We used the same techniques of recordings in our following albums. *Ashen-faced* (2013-2014) was very much inspired by the photographs of Louisiana artist Clarence John Laughlin (notably *Our Festering Hands Ruin all...* which is also a song on this record) and the horror films made in the seventies by a filmmaker from Texas named S.F. Brownrigg (notably *Don't Look in the Basement*). In Laughlin's work, we see a lot of widows dressed in black wandering among the ruins of old houses, while in Brownrigg's work, the stories take place most of the time inside houses where madness and perversion dwell everywhere. This Gothic theme was very interesting for us, because in our music the objects are alive as much as the people. They have a spirit. Natural sounds and field recordings are part of the compositions as well as the other instruments.

Another important aspect was the relationship to an ever-present past and this idea of permanence, that past, present and future were one and the same thing. If our previous recording was very much influenced by landscapes and nature, this one is very different and much more claustrophobic. We focused on the legend of a haunted house named Shady Breeze and all the field recordings were done indoors. Even the storm was recorded behind closed shutters. To get this impression of ghostly atmosphere and haunted rooms, we decided to change a little bit our instrumentation and we used many classical instruments, and most notably the cello, mixed with our equipment of old analog synthesizers, rhythm boxes, and folk instruments (accordion, viola, flute, trombone, saxophone, etc.). Even more musicians were involved in these songs, including a metal percussionist, a children choir, an organist or a player of very primitive hand-made violin.

On *Freakshow*, recorded in 2015 and 2016, we wanted to get back to our childhood again and the universe of rural carnivals and fun fairs. The album was also developing as a narrative film, where we could meet all the eccentric people who were part of this reunion of freaks. Some were more joyful and grotesque, others were more other melancholics and dreamers. We tried to develop our

songwriting in a way that was a little bit different than before, where every song was more like the description of a photograph.

On the following one, *Lullabies and Nightmares*, recorded between 2019 and 2021, each song is like a nursery rhyme that would have gone wrong. Eerie and creepy, the music develops a strong visual atmosphere reminiscent of *Carnival of Souls*, the cult movie from the sixties. Full of hypnotic melancholy and ghost-like presences, the concept was also the result according to Leroy Delbert Quebedeaux, the mind behind it, of having re-read Edgar Allan Poe, having been drinking too much alcohol, being confronted to a devastating solitude and trying to imagine broad landscapes in order to escape madness. Behind the icy cold vocals, terrifying accordion notes and languid keyboards, a whole universe opens its doors, somewhere between the living and the dead, between dreams and reality, between memory and absence.

Over the years, a lot of fantasies have surrounded the musicians themselves with their strange Cajun names. Some Texas musicians have been recognized, offering their voices to the project, like Ernestina Forbis from experimental duo How I Quit Crack or Grady Roper from Attic Ted, a gothic country post-punk project from San Marcos, but also Jack Tinapple, singer, composer and saxophone-player from Australia, Stéphanie Commenay from French indie-rock band My Imaginary Loves or even the mysterious Télémaque Hache, also known as Isi Toro, who sang in the avant-garde band La Mort de l'Hippocampe.

All of this was very mysterious and people started to think of Ashburn County as a band in the vein of Ivo Watts Russell's This Mortal Coil, with a lot of different musicians gathered here around one single person, the strange Leroy Delbert Quebedeaux, who is no other than French writer, director, journalist and musician Maxime Lachaud, known notably for his work in the field of weird cinema, redneck movies and Southern Gothic literature. This project was a way for him to develop his obsessions in a more concrete way, using sounds instead of words.

It all started in 2011 with the deaths of close friends and the feeling of being surrounded by ghosts. At the time, the only way he found to express what his mind was going through was by doing some noise and by playing some instruments that belonged to some of the deceased. He then met Sadie Bee Palace, who is no other than Thierry Müller from famous experimental and synth-pop projects Ilitch and Ruth, Sebastian Boyce, also known as Le Moine, a great collector of analog synthesizers, and Odette Mayeaux, whose real name is Martine Lataste, a painter and accordion-player, who helped him shape his vision.

Many musicians participated to create the world of Ashburn County through the years : drummer Gabriel Hibert (Garett Heber), multi-instrumentist Philippe Dubernet (Ulysses Granville), pianist Marc Sarrazy, singers Alice Imbert and Helena Patricio, sax player Quentin Rollet (Rogatien Quenneville), ethnomusicologist Romain Mascagni, publisher Nils Bouaziz, doublebass player Nicolas Decoster (Willie Mae Carthoris), guitarist Fred Jagu (Amy Sue Flower) and so many more. The band has participated to several compilations (*Possessed!*, *Murderous Grounds*, *Codex 01* and *02*, *Musique Ambiante Française Vol.2*, etc.) and released albums on Beläten in Sweden, Black Horizons in North America, Enfant Terrible in the Netherlands, Hidden Crypt and La République des Granges in France.