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Roderick Romero

Roderick Romero is the creative force behind Sky Cries Mary, the legendary trance-rock band from Seattle. Over a 20 year period, along with his wife Anisa, they have seen many ups and downs including a legal fight over song ownership and the break-up and recombination of the group. In 2009 Trail Records compiled the album "Space Between The Drops" which featured re-mastered versions of songs from the course of the band's career, and now Trail is again releasing another compilation album "Taking The Stage: Live 1997-2005"

RUST: Trail Records (trailrecords.net) is releasing a second album from you, this time a collection of live recordings... what does it mean to you personally, or perhaps egotistically that this label considers SCM worth two new re-issues?

RR: Well, actually the history of both of those releases goes back 20 years. Alex Tsalikhin who runs the label came to a show in '91 in New York City and after that started writing to us and kept in touch. It was pretty funny he was like "Oh, you need to come to Russia!!!" - because he's Russian - and we would get letters from him every once in a while. Then in 2008 I was at a Lou Reed show and he came up to me and we reconnected. When he told me which songs he wanted to do for "Space Between The Drops" it was exactly the songs that I would have picked so I felt that he had an understanding of the band and it worked out pretty well because the guy is just a ball of energy and really made the

project happen by his own motivation... and the help of Vlad Milavsky, his label partner.

RUST: Who are some of the people involved in the new album from a technical standpoint?

RR: George Dugan, the sound engineer at Trail Records did the remastering and Michael Cozzi, the band's guitarist probably produced about 3/4 of the album. He has his own studio (moscozzi.com) and Stone Gossard from Pearl Jam let us mix some tracks at his Litho Studio (studiolitho.com) and Krist Novoselic the bassist from Nirvana actually recorded us for two nights in the first place. Michael has really grown into being the band's producer in addition to our guitarist so between him, Alex and Krist the project got done.

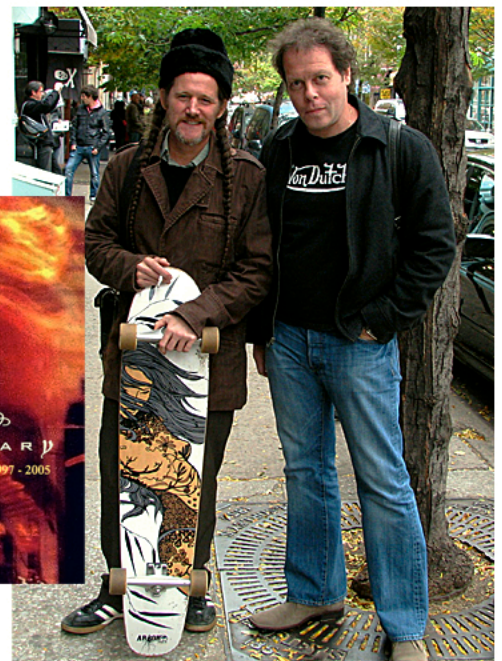
RUST: What kind of effort did the band make to capture live performances over the years? Was there a consistent method?

RR: You know, we really didn't make a consistent effort to record live stuff when we performed. We had a guy doing our light show and video and he did some recording and occasionally got a line off the board, and we did quite a lot of radio performances but those were usually not recorded very well - you know usually a junior engineer who didn't know what we were about to play. And our sound is very hard to record, there's a lot of richness and depth and then a lot of spaciousness - it's a challenge to capture that under the best circumstances. One thing that did help us was in 1994 we were the first band to play live on the internet and that got us some recognition which translated into the "Here and Now" live album we released in 2005.

RUST: How much material did you have to go through?

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Roderick Romero and
Trail Records'
Alex Tsalikhin



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RR: Well there was a ton of radio recordings, and the first two tracks on the album are from the Krist Novoselic sessions, but other than that there was not really a lot of material to go through.

RUST: For better or worse, Seattle was - and still is - associated with Grunge. SCM predates that moment of hype and has outlived most of the bands thrown into the spotlight. What are your thoughts about being associated with the city and not necessarily the movement?

RR: Well because I grew up in Seattle I was basically friends with all the guys who found their fame that way. I had either gone to grade school, high school or college with them, or we had worked together at one of the cafes so I have nothing but good feelings for them and that whole crazy time. And though our band didn't really fit into the "Grunge" sound the attention that the scene got there enabled us to get our record deal. One thing that was lucky was that by the time the whole scene broke in '91 we had already released three albums and our sound and band identity was established so we weren't pressured to sound different or to change our style to get that deal.

RUST: Your studio albums present complete thematic journeys. There's a lot of talk about the music world changing to a "single download" mentality. What are your thoughts on the value of traditional media vs. individual downloads?

RR: Gosh, you know it's funny you should ask that because Lou Reed and I have been talking about this a lot lately - shameless name-dropping aside we're good friends - and the real issue that bothers us is that the sound quality has dropped so much. It's not that we're anti-single and pro-album, the single has been around forever but what people are putting in their ears and how they are experiencing the music now is eliminating like 80% of the total sound. I mean, where is this going? What's the value of good music? And everybody is running around with ear buds which sound terrible and hurt your ears. What happened to listening to the sounds of the city, or the sounds of the country?

From a record business angle I'd say that the real change is that the labels now have no commitment to the artists. They might be willing to put out a song but they're not getting behind a band for a whole album or a tour. It used to be that labels were willing to give bands time to develop and they were promoted and supported along the way but not now. If your single doesn't sell it's over.

RUST: Some people perceive a heavy drug influence in your work, have there been situations about this you'd like to address?

RR: Well during the early years of the band there was a lot of drug use. That's the way things were back then, especially in 89-91. Now Anisa never did any and neither did Gordon and I was into organics like mushrooms and I smoked a lot of pot but I never

even tried any chemicals. It's funny, basically the whole band was high but we were all on different things at different times. We were never doing the same stuff at the same time and I think we would have sounded different if we were all coked up or all tripping but this chemical diversity definitely was a factor in our sound. I haven't done anything in years but it was definitely a part of what made us sound the way we did.

RUST: Is there a particular band out right now that you like?

RR: You know I've actually been shut away from the scene for a few years but I really have to say that Arcade Fire has impressed me not only in their music but in the way they handle their business. Johnny Dubowski (jonnylives.com) is really awesome but mostly I'm into the instrumental improv scene. There's a place called Nublu (nublu.net) very night is different. You never know who is going to show up and play or what it's going to be like but I love to go there and just soak up the music. I like to sit in the back and write lyrics to go with the music and it's unlike anywhere else I have ever been.

RUST: Is there a particular album from years ago that you have gained appreciation for over the years that you would recommend to people?

RR: Actually there is a band that David Byrne was influential in breaking called Os Mutantes. They're described as a Brazilian psychedelic rock band and to me

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they sound like a Brazilian SCM. They've been around since the 70's and actually toured last year.

RUST: You're living near New York City now, was it work or family that prompted the move away from Seattle

RR: Well Anisa was accepted to the Graduate Program for Art at NYU and we actually moved here just seven days before 9/11 which was really a weird time to be new to the area. At first we figured we'd maybe spend a year or two here while she got her degree but we liked it and we stayed.

RUST: For 13 years you have been dedicated to Romero Studios (romerostudios.com) which is doing some very interesting things with sustainable architecture. What are some types of projects you have done?

RR: Well, I've become known as the "Treehouse Guy" and I've built treehouses around world. That's how it started but I've branched out into landscapes, sculptural work and a lot of teaching and classes, but everything I do comes from the idea of sustainability. It all started in 1997 when a friend was having an art festival on a 100 acre farm and she asked me if I had any ideas and I jokingly said that I would build a treehouse in this gigantic maple and she was like "Oh great, let's do it." When she said that I really didn't have a plan - but we built it - and then someone else asked me to build one for them, then another, than another and I kind of woke up one day and realized that this was something I could do for a living.

But I shouldn't say it's just me. Anisa really runs the business and she does a lot to take my sketches and to take them into autocad or to create fine architectural illustrations for clients to look at so we truly work together.

RUST: How does your personal life philosophy affect your hands-on work now?

RR: You know everything I do comes from the Hindu concept of Ahimsa which relates to doing the least harm and contributing to the happiness of others. That's why we only use reclaimed lumber and why I do things like educate, travel and work on projects like the one acre community garden near where I live.

RUST: You do other charity and volunteer work?

RR: Where I live we have community gardens and I have done some landscaping there as well as teach classes to kids as young as kindergarten all the way to college students. Actually I just finished a 14 week college level class and we just had some second graders here who picked fruit for first time. You have to realize most of these kids have never even been on a farm, they don't have a concept of picking fruit or working with plants. It's really rewarding. They were amazed they could actually pick their own fruit and eat it - they were all like "Ooooooh, it tastes soooo good!"

RUST: Can you compare the reward of being a musician to the reward of designing physical environments? Is there perhaps an age-appropriateness to each?

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Anisa Romero, Juano, Roderick Romero

Roderick Romero

RR: There's never really been a separation for me. I have always been a gardener, always been an artist and when I was a musician I gardened and music is still a big part of my life. SCM has put out twelve albums over 21 years so it's not like there was a transition from being a musician to treehouse builder... plus I have lots of other projects so there's not really a division.

RUST: You have had several celebrity clients. Is there any one in particular that you felt a similar eco-orientation or kindredness to?

RR: Oh, yeah, the time I had with Val Kilmer was absolutely surreal - it was a total blast. We just got along on so many levels and we'd stay up until three in the morning just cracking each other up. I mean, philosophically I have never met anybody that I felt was so much like a brother to me. He's just a great guy and the time I spent with him was just awesome.

RUST: What was your favorite design to work on?

RR: That's hard to choose but I'd say that the Lantern House in Topanga, California was probably it. From a design and architectural standpoint I would have to say that I hit my peak there, but probably my most favorite project was when I went to Morocco. A friend had asked me to come to Tangiers and to teach a one month class to street kids about how they could get off the streets and live in the trees and it was the experience of a lifetime. I basically cried every day. I brought my two best carpenters with me and Wooway films (wooway.uing.net) did a documentary film for PBS called the Tangier Treehouse Project. You really need to see that film, it's amazing, and for me it was such an emotional experience... I'll never forget it.

RUST: So, how do you feel now? What's going on next in your life?

RR: Oh, I feel great. I mean, I have to admit that I wake up nervous and anxious most days. It can be stressful placing a large lumber order, and running a business takes a lot of, well, not just work, but thought and I'm constantly thinking "Did I take care of this - did I forget that?" And I'm about to leave for a five week treehouse project in Mexico and the day after I get back there's another big project in Connecticut. Plus the new live album is out and people are ordering it and I've got my side project of Smoke Shack Okiestra to think about. I have a to-do list with about 60 items on it and every day I cross stuff off that gets done or I circle it if it gets delayed so there's a lot of just details to try to keep track of. But enjoy what I do and I'm happy with my family. It gets busy some times - well, most of the time but I wouldn't have it any other way.

