

The Holy Ghost Story

Purveyors of quality techno Holy Ghost talked to Tony Cooper about their new record deal and where they're taking their sound in the new millenium.

„I don't like the idea of this artificially-induced atmosphere in a club where everyone's off their heads and having a good time. What we want to say is ‚Na, it's not just about having a good time. It's about EXPERIENCING something. So you WILL fuckin' listen!“ (laughs).

Having a drink with Holy Ghost in The Salisbury, Haringey, brings back crazy memories of the Sunday ‚Rub' after-parties that used to take place there 5 years ago with some of the best underground DJs in London. The contrast of brew-ravaged pad-dies swaying to live Irish music in the public bar and the lost-it-on-Saturday- night ravers still going for it in the backroom never failed to amuse. That was a while back now and the place has undergone a facelift, unlike the clientel who are still, as they were then, one can of Super T short oblivion. Having said that, it still has a certain seedy charm and seems a fitting backdrop to interview a techno band who have been around for longer than most and like a drink. Original members Gary and Leon came from a background of playing in punk and new wave bands during the eighties and at the time, we're looking for something fresh and original. Emerging from the postacid malaise way back in 1989, they were quickly identified as having a different approach to making dance music, skillfully blending together the diverse mix of styles that they had each been into. They put together a studio and subsequently switched to using more samplers and sequencers, releasing a string of highly acclaimed singles on their own label Hand of God.

They were then joined in 1993 by vocalist Greg, responsible for the rambling, often poetic monologues that punctuate their stripped-down techno dynamics. Following this change in direction their real break came in 1996 when, after a short-lived dice with a major record label, they were signed to heavyweigh German techno imprint Tresor. The last three years have seen the release of several classic techno tunes, helping the band gain international recognition. They have recently cut a deal with another legendary German label Superstition, interested in some of the sounds they produce that arc perhaps less-suited to Tresor. They would appear to have reached a new point in the band's evolution, though in some ways their music has come full circle from the old days and they seem very comfortable with that. They come across as being friendly and open, yet serious and focussed about what they do. I suspect the question's been asked before, but I'm curious where the name came from. It does sound a bit... er... religious, but they laugh when I ask if they're a christian techno outfit.

Leon: „It just came from this guy we knew who'd been out in India and come back with idea of setting up a label called Holy Ghost inc. and doing the music he'd heard over there...“

Greg: „It wasn't really our choice. It was kind of thrust upon us by our financer, but we thought it was a good name and we kept it. The impications are quite good; ‚holy' on one hand and ‚ghost' on the other.“

Gary: „There's a church of the Holy Ghost that we get correspondence from now and again. It's quite funny - ‚What time is the Baptism?' - that sort of thing.“

Addition

Greg came into the band 5 or 6 years ago from an artistic background, initially to do something visual with Gary and Leon, but instead throwing ideas around and subsequently creating the character of Art Luk'm that has become such an integral part of the band's performance, shifting the emphasis on their records to include more of live element.

Leon: „We did an album called ‚The Mind Control Of Candy Jones' which was the first ‚Tresor' album and they wanted to change the name Holy Ghost - they didn't really liked it. So we were thinking about other names and were coming up with things related to the CIA. One of the tracks was called ‚Art Luk'm and Greg just grabbed hold of the character and thought he could really take it somewhere, so we used it to give the album presence and identity.“

Greg: „We always wanted to do something different and we weren't happy with just the standart knob-twiddling performance. We also felt vocals were too rock and roll in a way, so we were looking for something else. In between the tracks I did segments of what was like an interview with Art Luk'm.“

Gary: „Yeah, the character's this CIA guy who's fucked up on drugs. All that kind of shit. He's into conspiracies and he's a failed assassin. He goes back over all these things that went wrong, rambling through his fears and all other things that he's built up in the paranoid world that he's created.“

Greg: „He'll then slide from that paranoid stateto being someone who can write almost prose about something of his experiences. The whole thing of how his mind works is that one minute he'll be ranting about something and then he'll suddenly collect himself and the story slowly. Then, maybe he'll come out with lines like a verse or almost a rap. He slips between holding it together and losing it. When I was writing stuff, I was starting to think like him. I'd really get into that mode and he became like this schizophrenic. When I started to write, I found myself doing it he'd do it without even knowing. People have commented before when I've shown them the words that it doesn't sound my style and it's the same when I go on stage. I click into the character and feel I can say or do anything. We just keep pushing the boundaries on it. It's not like song, but more like spoken word. I suppose Captain Beefheart would be a comparison.“

The stage show is an important aspect of their performance with Greg going through several costume changes and utilising weird props to set the scene, include an electric chair, in which his character sits reminiscing and an ominous-looking figure in a mask that spews smoke into the crowd. „There's a theatr elemt to what we do and it's very human. Instead of flashing up scrachty graphics on huge screens we want to put on a real performance.“

Holy Ghost was always intended to be live-entertainment and their vision reached much further than the horizon of switches and knobs on their mixing desks. Their excellent entertainment on stage has taken them all over the world, so they don't play too much in England these days.

Gary: „In Britain, for this kind of music, there's only 20 or so venues and some of them aren't really wor4th doing because they're too small. Techno has always been perceived as being more heavy and subversive, as opposed to trance which puts across more overtly escapist mood. I can understand it, when clubbers want something uplifting. It's sometimes hard to get people on board and get people into the vibe, because of the nature of its character.“

Leon: „When we play live, it's a mixture of a lot different things really. there are loads of different styles and the bass is always different between the tracks.“

Greg: „Sometimes it's good to test stuff live first, instead of mixing it down as soon as you've made it. If you live with it a bit first and see how an audience reacts, you can find more ni it and get a better feel.“

Greg: „Most of our gigs are outside England and we've played three times in Malta , for instance this year, which has been great . We used to associate it with OAPs & coach trips , but they're mad on techno over there.“

Leon: Yeah, it's like the techno Ibiza now and the parties are amazing. They don't have preconceptions how dance music was in the eighties or nineties and it's like playing to a fresh audience. As far as some people are concerned, techno seems to have had its day in London.“

Greg: „Yeah, I think it was one day last year! People over here have gotten a bit anal- what they read is what they think they should be doing. ‚Oh do you think we should go to this club? Should we be seen there? I don't like the idea of this artificially-induced atmosphere in a club where everyone's off their heads and having a good time, it's about EXPERIENCING something. So you WILL fuckinn' listen! (laughs) You feed them some beautiful music, like a kind of sweetener, and then you give them something to wake up a little bit. It's the whole thing of connecting with people. Not to preach to them, but to take them to more places. People take it too seriously, but there should be more humour in it, more irony, more horror in it, it should be more multi-dimensional. Trance is like one emotion and is a bit too predictable and that is where I feel we come in.“

With imminent release on Superstition, they're broadening the style of their output whilst continuing to supply deeper, minimal beats to Tresor, Superstition was one of the few labels that consistently managed to sign quality dance acts throughout the nineties, with many momarable releases by L.S.G., Marmion, Humate, Paragliders ect. For a freeform act like Holy Ghost it gives them the oppurtunity to explore other styles.

Gary: „We've never been pure techno, pure trance or whatever, our sound has been somewhere in between and maybe that's worked against us in a way. We never fitted very well into a particular category and basically we're just too long in the tooth to stick to one sound. It's like we must have learnt a bit more than that in the last eleven years.“

Leon: „We kind of got more into techno with Tresor, probably a lot more so than we had been in the past. When we signed to them, they were they right sort of label we needed at the time. We'd been listening to a lot of their releases and we liked them. We thought we'd go that way, but when it wore a bit thin we started to try and step out of it and that's where we are now. it was a question of time how limiting ‚pure' techno can be. Coming from the background we had, with music that was full of colour, we were suddenly locked into this very purist sound which we did for a couple of years and then stopped.“

Re-Birth

Leon: „What was a natural process for us became unnatural and we'd always have this problem thinking, ‚We like this, but the label won't, or the other way round and, as a result, we started going against what we were supposed to do. we did a load of stuff and they liked half of it, which was brilliant, but other bits didn't really fit in with what they were doing.“

Gray: „So we gave them this album, which was supposed to be our third album with them and it was like an album of two halves. We'd given them some minimal stuff, on the one hand and then on the other, some more colourful stuff. On the whole, it's better if you don't try and pre-empt what people want, and they did actually take one strange track we'd thoughgt they wouldn't. If you get into that mood it make things so difficult. It's about understanding that wer have a sound that changes - it's not one particular solid style.“

Leon: „Most labels want you to deliver a ceraatin sound because they've got a market. Things seem to be little different with Superstition. To be honest, we hadn't heard of them before they asked ud to remix L.S.G. So we sent them some of our stuff and they came back to us saying they thought it sounded fresh as fuck. They were really positive and coming from that angle we thought we could write some stuff for them.“

Gary: „We played the label more of the wacky stuff and they loved it. They realised that it was a bit like we'd sounded in the past, and that we'd come round to it again. We can't make music for just one company, with one idea. At the end of the day, we'd just found another outlet which was interested in some of the more off-the-wall stuff we're good at. It's worked out well, as now we've got outlets for both the styles we're into.“

The album, because of its nature, came over as crossbread - Tresor have said they'd like one half of it and Superstition have said they were interested in the other. so we ended up splitting it two ways.“ Both labels want full studio albums from the band now and Tresor are talking about putting out a live album too, as ‚Live E.P' sold so well. They've also just had a track from the Candy Jones album used in a big Hollywood action movie called ‚Simon says'. With further releases in the pipeline, including an E.P with Oliver Way on his label and a track on Carl Cox's label Ulitimatium, Holy Ghost look set to fully realise their genre-defying potential in the new millenium.