

## Interview

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### We don't hide from vague: An interview with Revolutionary Army of the Infant Jesus

Rupert Loydell

Falmouth University

Rupert Loydell is a senior lecturer in the School of Writing and Journalism at Falmouth University, the editor of *Stride* magazine, a contributing editor to *International Times* and a widely published poet. He has written for academic journals such as *Punk & Post-Punk* (he is on its editorial board), *New Writing*, *Axon*, *Text*, *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, *Short Fiction in Theory & Practice*, *Revenant* and *The Journal of Visual Art Practice*, and contributed co-written chapters to *Brian Eno: Oblique Music* (Bloomsbury, 2016), *Critical Essays on Twin Peaks: The Return* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) and *Listen to the Sounds!* (Routledge, forthcoming).

Contact: School of Writing and Journalism, Falmouth University, Woodlane, Falmouth TR11 4RH, UK.

E-mail: [rupert.loydell@falmouth.ac.uk](mailto:rupert.loydell@falmouth.ac.uk)

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The Revolutionary Army of the Infant Jesus (RAIJ), an experimental music ensemble whose name is a reference to the terrorist group in Luis Buñuel's film *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), was conceived in Liverpool in 1985. Their first album, *The Gift of Tears*, was released in 1987, and 2020's *Songs of Yearning* is only the fourth album

they have released, although there have been a number of compilations and reissues over the years. Their music is made by a changing collective of members, and often includes trademark sounds such as aethereal vocals, chants, acoustic instrumentation, field recordings and ambient layers.

Trying to describe RAIJ's music has always been a problem, not so much because it's difficult or strange, just that there are so many things going on in the mix. In the main it's acoustic, drawing on eastern European folk and Orthodox church chants and bells, but it also occasionally rocks out, and *Nocturnes* (a bonus second CD included with *Songs of Yearning*) includes their first ever single, 'I Carry the Sun' (2020b), a catchy two-minute pop song with an amazing animated video by R. Brad Yarhouse (2020).

Like all RAIJ's music, it's enticing and approachable, offering mysterious vocals (often in a European language) and oblique lyrics, set within aural dreamscapes that mix ambient soundscapes, field recordings and emotional layering beneath the surface. Some of the band's allure is that layering, the sense the listener has of there being more to discover, the allure of occult or spiritual knowledge. On the few live excursions, RAIJ have played behind obscuring screens and veils, playing with literal imagery and props that add to the enigma.

In keeping with this enigmatic presence, this interview was conducted by e-mail, and questions were answered under the band's name rather than that of individuals.

**Rupert Loydell (RJ):** *So, the Songs of Yearning (2020a) recording sessions have yielded not one new album but two! What happened there?*

**RAIJ:** That was not the intended outcome. When we first started to work on *Songs of Yearning*, as is not unusual for us, we had no more than the slightest fragments of raw

material to work with. But as these initial ideas developed, it was clear that we were building what was potentially a substantial body of work. As *Songs of Yearning* started to cohere into a discrete project, a number of other pieces also emerged, which, when we started to compile them, were clearly exploring the same themes, having been developed and recorded at a similar time, but arguably from a different perspective. They were more fragile, intimate, reflective; sometimes reminiscent of a dream state and sometimes a beautifully clear state of consciousness and awareness. They seemed to be best described as night thoughts, visions, dreams – but there is also a clarity, consciousness and sometimes a tangible narrative to *Nocturnes* that we haven't really achieved elsewhere.

**RL:** *And a single, 'I Carry the Sun', a two-minute pop song with a groovy video (2020b).*

*How does that fit into the grand scheme of things for RAIJ? It's certainly an unexpected departure. As is R. Brad Yarhouse's animated video (2020) for the single, which is an absolute delight.*

**RAIJ:** We love Brad's work. He contacted us some time ago to offer his creative input into a project, and we waited some time before finding the right piece. 'I Carry the Sun', with its Yeats-inspired symbolism, seemed to offer itself readily for visual representation. It didn't easily fit with the other material for *Songs of Yearning*, and so we took it away from that body of work and started looking at it independently – and then the idea of releasing it as a single emerged. It seemed to fit that treatment perfectly, and so the grand scheme just got a bit less grand. It's an intimate, simple, subtle piece and we liked the idea of letting it stand on its own.

**RL:** *Both Songs of Yearning and Nocturnes (the limited-edition second album which accompanies the first) deal with longing and loss. Do you choose a concept or plan*

*ahead when you record, or is there an element of improvisation and seeing what happens when it is time to make new music together?*

**RAIJ:** Our work often takes a single starting or reference point, which triggers a more collective creative compositional process. We often use a very broad canvas, a wide spectrum of source material, which we then gradually refine through the use of, for example, different languages in our work as well as various conventional and improvised instruments, found sounds, other sources and cultural references. Our experience has been that, and this was very much the case here, a unifying notion or concept emerges once the project is well underway, and this then helps to direct the work we have done and the work left to do. For *Songs of Yearning*, the driving impetus was to explore the idea of loss from a very personal perspective and a yearning for truth, beauty, wisdom, reassurance, innocence.

*RL: Right from the beginning, 35 years ago, RAIJ has been an enigmatic ensemble, not very publicly visible as people, but also a band who drew on music from eastern Europe more than any mainstream western pop or rock and seemed happy to be reviewed as 'other' or 'mysterious'. Is being a cult what you set out to be or did that simply happen? I am assuming that being fairly anonymous as musicians implies that you would like listeners to concentrate on the music rather than anything else?*

**RAIJ:** Principally yes to the point about the music, no to the point about being any kind of cult. Not at all. Although we probably have to accept that we have some kind of 'cult' status in musical terms and that's OK. That said, we have not sought to be a part of, to represent or to influence any movements. Or to fit into any zeitgeist. We have never actively sought to do that and have often been surprised at how our work can be

categorized. We often create work very much in isolation from other, certainly contemporary, movements and genres. The dangerous and disturbing movement towards a more populist politics, of course, has its reflection in contemporary culture and we are concerned very much to position ourselves as far from that as possible. But yes, we are very happy to be considered mysterious or enigmatic, in the sense that our work is very much about valuing the idea of mystery, the profound, the unknown and the unfamiliar. This is one of the reasons why we have rarely tried to explain our work – or to contextualize or mediate it. We live in an age where information is obtrusive and overwhelming – there is little mystery left and we want to provide a space to protect and celebrate the value of profound mystery through our work.

**RL:** *You've never been afraid to use religious words or terms like 'soul', 'transfiguration', 'psalm', liturgy' and 'hymn' in your music, and certainly some of your music draws on orthodox (and Orthodox) religious music and ideas. There's a sense of the numinous or mystical at work. Could you talk about that spiritual side?*

**RAIJ:** Our objectives are simple – to find reference points to connect and share a common human experience, to celebrate the strength of the human spirit, to work against hostility in the world and to interrupt the powerful and incessant flow of consumerism. RAIJ is not explicitly a Christian project. The band name is, of course, from a secular film source. Individual members of RAIJ are drawn from different faiths and none. We are interested in exploring, amongst other things, a diverse range of influences from a largely European cultural perspective (looking more to the East than the West), and we have been inspired by many creative, cultural and spiritual influences and ideas from eastern orthodox religions, as well as Buddhism, Sufiism and others. So, spirituality is

not the defining characteristic of influence on our work, any more that European film or theatre may be. We have a very eclectic approach, a diverse palette, to constructing our aesthetic.

**RL:** *Thankfully, RAIJ's music is a long way from church worship music (with its attempt to write 'relevant' hymns) and from any sense of evangelical coercion or declamation, yet one of your earliest gigs was at the Greenbelt Arts Festival, a fairly mainstream Christian event. In retrospect, was that a good place to launch RAIJ into the world? I suspect you were regarded there as much stranger and more experimental than you might have been elsewhere? In his review of After the End compilation ([RAIJ 2013](#)), [Jamie Lee Rake \(2013\)](#) suggested that*

*[w]hen the Revolutionary Army of the Infant Jesus reared its head up from the Liverpool indieground in the late '80s with *The Gift of Tears*, the critical lexicon to describe their sound didn't quite exist. At least, it didn't exist in the evangelical market where their mix of Roman Catholic and Eastern orthodox spiritual influences aroused a fringe of interest by dint of shared vocabulary and a sound that wasn't anywhere to be found in the cassette selection at the local Gift & Bible.*

*So, why were RAIJ anywhere near that 'evangelical market'? Or is that a misconception by Rake, possibly as a result of him living in the USA? (Although I note that you played again at Greenbelt in 2015.)*

**RAIJ:** If the effect of our work is akin to a religious experience, or a mindful or meditative one, then of course this is something that we respect and value. We have been recognized from both religious and secular perspectives. We played at Greenbelt simply because they invited us and – as it turned out – are really lovely people. It was true that there was no critical lexicon to describe what we were doing at the outset and this both

intrigued and excited but also, for a time, confounded us. The desire to categorize by many people and the media was so strong, and we found that we have been over the years categorized in many different ways – from contemporary minimalist classical, to folk, to spiritual, to industrial, to devotional, to mystical, to philological, to post rock, to art house. These categories are all fine, but none of them quite capture it and that is possibly one of the reasons why we keep doing what we do.

**RL:** *Rake goes on to note that RAIJ can now ‘be at least loosely associated with the apocalyptic folk movement and with acts such as Current 93, Death in June, Dead Can Dance, Caroliner and Wovenhand. But RAIJ resides even on the perimeter of that fold, not only for the imagery they invoke, but the mystery surrounding it’ (2013). These aren’t unfamiliar comparisons, but how do you feel about them? I mean Tibet’s C93 project is rooted in gnosticism and the occult whilst Death in June have had to shake off many accusations of right-wing affiliations. Dead Can Dance certainly seem to make sense in a musical way though, although I note that Rob Hughes managed to review the reissue of Mirror (RAIJ 1991, 2017) in Prog magazine! (Hughes 2017).*

**RAIJ:** When we made our first album, we spent over a year in a basement studio owned by a friend of the band, after having spent a couple of years working exclusively on live performance, and made the album that we wanted to make. We had a completely free rein from Probe Plus (the label that released our first two albums), and we were trying to convert our live experience to record. We were very much experimenting with making music informed by our theatrical and cinematic live work (whereas now I think our music-making is more consciously experimental and focused), but we emerged with an album and we had no idea if anyone would get it or be at all interested in it. Of course it

was a very different time in terms of communications, and although we picked up the odd review and the odd letter, we didn't really have any sense of how the work was being received. We knew that it was selling – a little in the UK but mainly in the USA, France and Germany – and it turned out, to our surprise, that we were soon to become the darlings of various very niche underground movements that we knew nothing about it. There were other bands that inevitably we found ourselves compared with although again we had no connection with them, or they with us.

**RL:** *You must be the only band I have come across that have done interviews for both The Church Times (Davies 2015) and Heathen Harvest! (Powell 2017). Powell suggests that RAIJ's music is 'religious, but it's not', adding that '[i]t's the music of contradiction, of warmth and solitude, of enlightenment and constraints' and suggests that the music 'engage[s] the listener with a sublimeness that radiates of the very essence'. That's quite different from the specificity that Davies extracts from RAIJ member Jon Egan, where he says 'Christianity is a shared position for the RAIJ, and beyond that there are different forms and shades of personal commitment. The shared position is that Christian ideas and experience are a vocabulary for the pursuit and rediscovery of the sacred.' If I said that all seems a bit vague and woolly, how would you counter?*

**RAIJ:** I think that the position in terms of Christianity, as I mentioned earlier, is not a constant one and hasn't been over the last 33 years. It is not a defining characteristic of the project. The above statement is vague. But, as you probably know, we don't hide from vague! One of the reasons we tended to shy away from interviews in the past was that we didn't want to give all the answers. We wanted to let the work speak for itself and

not to mediate it in any way. This is very true of our live work as much as our recorded material. We want the effect of our work to be profoundly subjective. If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, then that is also true of art, and the work has an essence which is not always – perhaps not ever – expressible other than in and of itself.

**RL:** *Egan also talks about beauty with [Davies \(2015\)](#), noting that Beauty Will Save the World [the title of RAIJ's 2015 album] is a quotation from Dostoevsky's The Idiot ([1874](#): 1) but that 'it also paraphrases an idea from Simone Weil, who proclaimed beauty to be the experimental proof of the incarnation'. Beauty doesn't feature much in contemporary experimental music, yet RAIJ's music is often strikingly beautiful. Is beauty a RAIJ strategy or manifesto?*

**RAIJ:** It's both. It's also a philosophy and an assignment. The pursuit of beauty is always the starting point and often the end point for our work. As Weil described, beauty is one of only two things that have the capacity to pierce the human heart, the other being affliction.

**RL:** *In previous pieces for Punk & Post-Punk I've discussed how Jesus Music didn't (thankfully in my humble opinion) survive as a marketable genre in the UK as it did in the USA ([Loydell 2018](#), [2019a](#), [2019b](#)). Instead, bands such as Writz and After the Fire strove to simply make music that was informed by their faith but was not totally dependent upon it or any evangelical underpinning. U2 and others, including Dylan and Van Morrison, were later able to discuss faith and spirituality in their work. Do you feel this openness continues to this day? If spirituality, faith and belief are no longer taboo, what now is?*

**RAIJ:** Taboo is always slightly subjective, but it seems that poverty has become taboo in our current culture – as are the values of unity, justice, society, fraternity and equality.

Arguably, we are all seeking moments of transcendence and that is what we try to create or facilitate through our work. We don't explicitly discuss faith and spirituality in our work. These are elements that are there but they're not the subject matter.

*RL: And because this is for Punk & Post-Punk, I wondered if you felt that any musical openness that may have helped facilitate RAIJ's ability to record Mirror for Probe Records back in 1991 was in any way due to punk upsetting and changing the music business or people's attitudes about making or listening to music?*

**RAIJ:** To an extent, yes, there was a sense that there were no boundaries to what we could do, and attitudes were much broader in 1991 because of the impact of punk music and culture on the mainstream. It was clear that suddenly there were bands drawing on a wide range of influences. Young Marble Giants, for example, emerged as a kind of post-punk folk outfit, then there's post-punk funk like A Certain Ratio, post-punk blues, post-punk jazz, and so yes, this created a much wider spectrum I think for us to explore what was proclaimed as our 'genre-bending' work.

*RL: As I write this, I imagine you are also 'working from home' or self-isolating, and unable to even think about touring, but can you reveal if you plan to playing live again, or reveal any future plans the band might have?*

**RAIJ:** We have been working as a regular collective over the last five years or so both on the last album (*Beauty*) and the current releases. We have found a fantastic creative momentum through the current group – some of whom were not born when the first album came out – working on the project, and this is generating more material than we

ever have done before. We have also found a hugely productive creative collaboration with Occultation Recordings and specifically with Nick Halliwell who has produced these two new albums and brought a refreshed creative energy and focus to our work. We were planning to play live in Europe in the autumn, and this may or may not happen, but new material is already in place for our next recording projects. So things continue, very much so.

We are also finding that the current circumstances that we, and everyone else in the world, seem to be in at present have created a different kind of resonance for the album. The yearning that we were exploring in the album has become a more universally experienced emotional response – a yearning for community, for truth, for human contact. Much of the feedback that we have had suggests that our work is finding a place in this new social context and that is of great value to us and this will also inform how our work evolves over time.

**RL:** *Thank you for your time, and good luck with the new album.*

**RAIJ:** Thank you so much for your interest in our work. It is a great joy to us.

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## Note

[1] The actual quote is 'The beautiful is the experimental proof that the incarnation is possible' (Weil 1984, 2013: 440).

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