Out from Behind the Curtain

*The Dream We Carry*, The Revolutionary Army of the Infant Jesus (CD & LP, 9x9 Records)

Rupert Loydell (RL): So Andrew, it turns out we both know the music of RAIJ, in fact you alerted me to their new album, which I knew nothing about. I'm on my fourth play of the CD as I type this, but I confess it hasn't grabbed me like some of their previous work. I guess that what was once mysterious – the strange mix of Russian Orthodox liturgy, synthesizers, electronic instruments, strings, poetry and improvisation in the studio – is no longer so. In fact some of this album feels almost like a pastiche of themselves. You also admitted to similar feelings to start with, what has particularly struck you with further listening?

Andrew Taylor (AT): At first, I thought the album was a little polite, avoiding the mix that you mention. I’m a firm believer in allowing albums to settle, breathe after the initial encounter. With *The Dream We Carry,* I’d bought the CD on the Saturday and was hooked by Monday evening after a handful of listens. I think, as with all good music, it *has* to speak to the listener on more than one level. This album certainly does that. For example, the second track is sung in French (which I have a limited grasp of) yet grabs me, makes me question my responses.

Similarly, I like the diversity of the album. Some of the earlier work, as much as I love it, can feel a little formulaic at times. Of course, this might be intentional. This album feels different.

RL: In the early days RAIJ got compared to all sorts of other bands (and vice versa: one of the bands I was in was compared to them!) such Apocalyptic Folk bands as well as Psychic TV, the latter mostly, I suspect, because of their enigmatic stage presence, their appropriation of musical genres, and also a press hungry to misconstrue their 'spirituality' as occult and cultish.

What was your take on their earlier music? When I interviewed them for *Punk & Post-Punk* journal back in 2020 they were interested in finding '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', which is quite an aim, as is their statement (from the same interview) that

     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.

AT: I came to RAIJ through them being a Liverpool band and Liverpool in the 1980s was like a village in terms of music. Everybody knew each other in the musical world. I bought the CD of *Mirror* from Probe Records (whose label Probe Plus) had released it. It was around the time of the album release that I saw them live. That was certainly an experience!

What I loved about *Mirror* was the fact that it sounded like nothing I’d heard before. I grew up listening to jangly guitars and all that went with that. What was it that Tony Wilson said, and I’m paraphrasing here, that Liverpool bands had the mystique and coolest record collections and Manchester bands had the coolest guitars. One of Wilson’s final pieces of writing before he passed away was called ‘The Mersey’s Creative Tide.’ He was correct of course about the mystique. I feel that the RAIJ could only have come out of Liverpool at that time. We were a tolerant bunch (as fans) and we followed other bands such as Marshmallow Overcoat who were pushing the boundaries.

With the reference points that the RAIJ mentioned in the interview that you did with them, that was probably over my head at the time, I was probably more concerned with Roger McGuinn’s fringe. Since though, I’ve found the RAIJ aesthetic intriguing and alluring.

When did you first hear the band? And what did you make of them outside of those reference points that you mention?

RL: I think I came across them first at the Greenbelt Festival, where they played live, but we lived in Cheshire in from 1982-1987 and often visited Liverpool (including Probe) and Manchester (Picadilly Records) so it is possible I simply saw the album and bought it. We also had a great indie record shops in Crewe where we lived and in Exeter where we moved to. I bought the first album, *The Gift of Tears*, back then, although I am afraid I only own the CD reissue now as I cashed in on the rarity value of the original album.

What did I make of it? I was intrigued to find something that was in some ways experimental on the fringes of christian rock, intrigued by their mystical and religious titles and reference points, but it wasn't particularly musically outrageous or experimental. I'm afraid I am someone who listens to lots of improvised music, experimental and contemporary classical, jazz and post-punk, so RAIJ have always felt somewhat accessible and at times almost easy-listening.

I guess I found reference points to the likes of Codona and the Rock In Opposition bands like Etron Fou Leloublan and Absak Maboul, even Can's ethnic forgeries series of tracks. It was the band's points of reference were most intriguing, along with their anonymity. They used to play behind curtains and use projections a lot. I've always thought that you don't have to sell music (or anything else in fact) on image or personality or bullshit, so the slowly-growing acclaim of music fans and critics that built up over the years was to their credit.

I'm not sure about the Liverpool connection. To me, Liverpool was the Bunnymen, Teardrop Explodes and the unjustly neglected It's Immaterial. Well, if you ignore, as I try to, The Beatles and Cilla Black. (I didn't know Roger McGuinn's fringe lived in Liverpool.) It seemed to me that the 1980s were when ideas of spirituality returned to cultural discussion, and music opened up wide again, exploring and hybridising, which is why there were bands such as Eyeless in Gaza (one of my favourites) and Current 93 around, the latter making use of (or deconstructing) occult, gnostic and sacred texts, not to mention the likes of Blackhouse, who were a lo-fi christian industrial band in the States. (They managed to upset other bands with their faith, and the church and christian music industry wit their noise.) There is always new music and new methods of distributing it, but the 1980s saw the rise of cassette and zine culture, swops and trades and alternative distribution networks, facilitated by TEAC 4 and 8 track recorders. I guess all that kind of showed that the music industry was going to have to change although it wasn't until the invention of MP3s and online downloads that the mainstream music industry took any note.

Anyway, I liked the ambience RAIJ created, their subversion of both sacred and folk music, and – no doubt – liked the fact not many people had heard of them. The band's name, taken from a Bunuel film was pretentious and knowing too. They ticked all the boxes for me. The second album, *Mirror*, feels very much in a similar vein to me. Of course they disappeared for decades and then suddenly reappeared recording for an Exeter label. I only found out about that because I reviewed Mark Brend's book *Undercliff* and he turned out to also be in a band whose albums were released by the same record company. Do you think the more recent albums are different? I know the line-up has changed and they are less secretive about who they are.

AT: I was referring to the underground experimental scene in Liverpool in the 80s. Yeah, we had the bands you mentioned (and I agree with what you said about It's Immaterial – great band) but we also had that scene that was DIY which has long been the mainstay of music. I felt that RAIJ came from that. Perhaps it was the Probe connection too.

You mentioned the performances behind the curtain. When I saw them at the Flying Picket in Liverpool around the time of *Mirror* being released, it was an almost surreal experience. A female member of the band walked around the audience with ash and was putting crosses on people's foreheads. It was more like a happening than a gig. It was fantastic. I'd been used to bands like The La's playing there and then this quasi-religious event came along. Memorable to say the least. Oh and McGuinn's fringe is in the hearts and minds of every indie kid from 1980s Liverpool.

The mystery of RAIJ, the name and that gig, led to a long fascination with the music. Of course, when they remerged after that long hiatus (we spoke about them at the time, after your interview with the band) I was straight back on to them.

I feel that the music has stayed the same, yet somehow has evolved. You can't get away from the religious aspects, the thread that connects the albums that have been released more recently. The line-up changes are almost moot – some names remain the same and yet others are new to me. But yes, they have come out from behind the curtain and appeared on video and promo photos etc. I guess that was inevitable in the internet age and somewhat has diffused the mystique.

I mentioned to you earlier in an email about the new album. I've played it a few times again today and as I said, listening to track 6, 'Object of Desire', put me in mind of one of my favourite David Lynch quotes: 'Tenderness can be as abstract as insanity.' The song is seemingly sweet, yet with the title and the lyrics takes the listener some other place. Perhaps as with all music, it's a personal thing – circumstances can dictate how the music presents itself too. It's an album that is speaking to me in many ways at the moment.

How are you getting on with the new album now after your initial thoughts?

RL: It's certainly a grower. For me, it doesn't really demand attention until track 3, 'Among the Lost', which has that weird organ on it, underpinning and interrupting a melancholic piano. It's obviously a fragment from a gig or rehearsal, because of the casual applause at the end, and then 'Goodbye to Berlin' comes in, cello, keyboards and some soaring guitar. It reminds me of the tuneful end of krautrock, or a slowed down Stereloab, but there's also a sense of what I call 'ice rink music', because of what they used to play when I went skating in Richmond as a kid.

Some of the problem, for me, is it is too well-produced. I quite like a bit of lo-fi dirt in the mix, and I definitely long for some rock here. I've had enough at the moment of taped voices and declaimed poems over music, too. It's all a bit earnest and musical, affected even.

Like you, it's probably down to mood and what's going on at the moment. The rain in Cornwall and the fact I have put off preparation for teaching in the autumn, hasn't put me in the best of moods. It also feels like this new RAIJ album has interrupted my own previous musical trajectory, which was moving between 1980s New York (The Dance and Polyrock), The National's 'Sad Dads' music and Yves Tumor's *Praise a Lord Who Chews But Which Does Not Consume*, which is in its own way also a religiously themed album. It's full of funk and bright sounds though, carefully curated samples and rhythms. In fact it's one of the best things I have heard so far this year. I'm not getting any surprises from *The Dream We Carry So Far*.

I think I'll leave it to you to big it up for everyone and tell us why you love it so much.

AT: As you point out, the album gets off to a slow start. While appreciating the importance of track selection and ordering, in the case of *The Dream We Carry* there's a real sense of the opening couple of tracks setting the tone. 'Song for Lost Souls' is an instrumental (a favoured mode used by RAIJ and in this case is accompanied by a voice used to deliver the wordless melody) that begins with pizzicato and cello strings accompanied by a simple piano refrain.

'Les Fils de Etoiles' borrows its title from a piece of music by Erik Satie. It's another case of the mood being set. As I mentioned earlier, the fact that the lyrics are delivered in French, doesn't distract from the mood. It has the opposite effect.

'Among the Lost' has the feel of an outtake from Yann Tiersen's *Amelie* soundtrack. A seemingly lighter moment but works as part of the bigger picture.

'Remnants' feels as though it could have been lifted from the previous RAIJ albums, 'Songs of Yearning' and 'Nocturnes.' The production that you mentioned, Rupert, is to the fore here. It *is* a very clean and polished track, in fact, the whole album has a consistent sound in terms of its production.

Like all good poetry books, good albums have a heart to them – the core if you like. For me, this runs from the aforementioned 'Objects of Desire' through to 'Portrait of a Child.' These four tracks, though not displaying the immediateness of say, 'Shadowlands' from *Mirror* or 'I Carry the Sun' from *Nocturnes,* encapsulate the essence of the album: thoughtful, tender and beautiful. In the case of 'Portrait of a Child' in some ways reminiscent of 'Prayer' from *Songs of Yearning*, the track encapsulates the album.

'Equinox' is the most song-like of the tracks in terms of structure, production and certainly a contender (in old money) for a single.

'Voices' which I heard recently on Stuart Maconie's BBC 6 Music show The Freak Zone, with its haunting melody played on keyboard, underpinned by a vocal that sounds like it's from a 60s B-movie.

Album closer, 'Song of the Wandering Aengus' is W.B. Yeats' poem set to a suitably repetitive, melancholic melody. The voicing of the poem is rich and particularly suited to the 'song.' It's a favoured mode that seems to be getting on your nerves, Rupert!

Overall, this *is* an album that will grow on listeners (even if it hit me straightaway) and I suspect that those who might be new to RAIJ will take some time to get to grips with it. While I agree, that there are elements that are (over) familiar to us who already know RAIJ, this feels to me like the album that the band have been destined to make, a summing up of their career to date.

2024 has been a fantastic year for music so far. Albums by Bill Ryder-Jones, Kelly Moran, Beth Gibbons and Epic45 have been real highlights and then we're blessed with *The Dream We Carry.* This is an album that is worth repeated listens unless, like me, it hits hard from the off. It's certainly up there as a contender for album of the year.

Remarkable, mysterious and beautiful.

 Rupert Loydell & Andrew Taylor

DISCOGRAPHY

*The Gift of Tears*, 1987

*Mirror*, 1991

*After the End*, box set, 2013

*Beauty Will Save the World*, 2015

*Songs of Yearning* + *Nocturnes*, 2020

*The Dream We Carry*, 2024