

“ANSWERS FROM DEGAN ALLEN OF SUNSETTERS”

Kerrang! Magazine, July 2003 Issue

ORIGINS

Origins. Origins... Well, I have no relation to catamites or to Trojan history, my family's not even Greek or Turkish or anything remotely close to that region of our mutual culture. Frankly, I don't know my family's roots nor do I have any drive to find out. My parents were just teachers with a hippie streak, and that's why they in their infinite wisdom named their only child Ganymede.

Yeah, kids thought my name was weird. It didn't help that I was a straight A student, honor rolls, accolades, every kind of juvenile kitsch you can name I fulfilled it. I think I felt like I had to live up to my name, even though I didn't understand the Ganymede myth until I was in college. To my young mind, it was a prestigious legacy befitting of my parents' expectations (which were nowhere near as high in reality as they were in my thoughts). So I hit the books and did my work and had the most typical friends you could imagine. My teenage years saw no rebellions against authority nor particularly notable drug use. I think the most rebellious I got was when I bought Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* on CD after finals one year (when we had a record player, not a CD player). Yeah, that's not particularly rebellious. That's my point.

[pause]

I don't know what to tell you.

[pause]

As a group? It was '98, I was a senior in Georgia State, I was reading some textbook on differential equations in the commons area, and Remy comes up to me asking if I want to go see some band after lunch (I knew him pretty well by then; he got me into *Quake II* LAN games and I got him into Aphex Twin). I had nothing better to do.

They were called Basset Hounds at the time, a college band, and aside from Fin they were really tame. Paul was clearly the one who did all the writing, and as such their songs were bass-heavy. Didn't even have guitars beyond him. I think the gig I saw was Fin's debut on drums, actually. Elsie provided her atmospheric vocals too, which I digged. Come to think of it, I think they *were* just a three-piece in those days? Bass, drums, and vocals. Like the 90s rock equivalent to techno.

Now, Remy went to that gig because he was friends with Elsie, and both of us knew Paul (well, that's a strong word-- we were *aware of* him), but by the end of it he didn't seem too impressed by their.. take on music. Their demo was being circulated in the crowd, and I wound up paying a good ten bucks for it

'cause I actually liked what I heard. I was very into.. you could call it "mellow stuff" back then, anything I could put on in the background as I hit the books. I think Remy was into more melodic stuff. Anyway.

After the concert, Remy introduced me to Elsie and Elsie introduced us to Paul and Fin, Fin gave us some booze, and we had a talk-- I still remember this-- about rocket science. Bands are like that, despite their presentation they're really just passionate about random stuff.

[pause]

Much like I'm being right now, that's right. [laughter]

[pause]

This isn't some superhero origin story; we were a bunch of college acquaintances who liked each other's stuff and settled on a name together. Maybe try narrowing your questions? I've got time.

[pause]

[smiles] That's a good one. The name came from something Fin said while drunk as a skunk. I'd just finished laying the lead track for the Rise demo, so I grabbed a math book and crashed on his couch for a bit. He stumbles in from some party, his hands cut the *fuck* up, bits of glass still sticking out of his face, sees me on his couch, and nearly pisses himself. Says "What are you doing here? Come to watch me set the sun?" I think he meant he was going to sleep. It spent a while as an inside joke in the band, and somewhere it turned into our name: Sunsetters.

DROWNING UNDER THE INFLUENCE

The band didn't happen overnight. After our talk of rocket science, we went our separate ways for a while. Some of us kept up with schoolwork, some of us (like Fin and Elsie) dropped out. I wound up sharing two classes with Paul the next semester, and we got on well. He's.. sort of a hermit, but he's a productive hermit; if he likes you, you'll end up doing some sort of extracurricular activity together. He saw that I liked to mess with a guitar, and he encouraged me to do more with it.

The first song I wrote was "Smashed Bottle," which later wound up on the album under the name "Drowning Under the Influence." A simple thing, chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-verse-chorus I think? Paul had gotten me interested in punk rock at the time, and Fin was starting to cause some problems within our friend circles, so I got angry and jammed with my guitar one night until that song came out.

[pause]

Alcohol. Sex, drugs, and rock n' roll. Those kinds of problems, at least that's the official story. Something was going on with his personal life. There was this girl, and Fin has never been too good with women. It's not my story to tell, if that's okay.

[pause]

[uncomfortable sigh] Yeah. Don't print that.

[pause]

They're not mine. Someone else writes most of our lyrics. It's a decision we made early on. Most of us just want to write and play music. Only one of us, especially back then, was interested in concepts. I can tell you about Drowning, though. I came up with the idea.

After I'd recorded the demo from that night of anger and jamming, I showed it to [our lyricist] and [they] asked me about what went into making it, where that anger came from. I said to [them] more or less the same thing I'll tell you now:

I pictured a living room, a suburban family, a family that's happy only on TV, the mother nowhere to be found, the father sprawled out on his favourite chair (a bottle of beer in his hand, just staring at the static on the set in front of him), and a kid-- his kid-- hiding in the kitchen, hiding tears. The whole place filled not with fear but with something *bigger* than fear, a kind of broken empathy that circles like a bad wind, carrying every mind in unseen directions, leading souls into the abyss like some kind of social whirlpool. An ocean of emotion, impossible to fathom, normally kept at bay by natural comprehension-based mechanisms the brain uses to protect itself, here cracked and smashed, leaving only the spilling waves. And I picture the kid drowning in this emotion, the mother already drowned, the father about to dive headfirst, and in this moment he stops and, in seeing the static, is suddenly *aware* of everything. Everything about the undercurrent of their dynamics, all of it, totality. Not that awareness is enough. Once we stop thinking about this picture, once we leave the room, he's diving under, soon to drown.

[pause]

Yeah, that's what Tscherning's album cover is based on.

[pause]

Friend of Elsie and Paul's. I know they're pretty big in the art world now, probably bigger than us, but back in those days we were chummy. [Lyricist] told them about my little Drowning "picture," and within a week they came to us with that painting. Lovely thing, isn't it? Like a cave painting or something you'd find on an old church wall. They said it was "a God's-eye view of your suburban hell." I think that was one of the many elements that led to the album's name.

BURNING BOOKS

At some point, Remy was coming along to Paul and I's little music experiment sessions. Those two hit it off, would spend more time talking about literature than writing music. They spent a lot of time in libraries, and I think one time I was between classes, I stopped by the library to have my lunch, and Paul stopped me and asked if I had time to hear a demo. I shit you not, the two of them had written pretty much the final song as you hear it now. All I had to do was lay down some lead melodies and arpeggios. Fin wrote the drums, but even he found that easy, the song.. was clear, if that makes sense? You heard this thing, and you just *knew* what it was gonna sound like.

I've asked Remy a couple of times about the song, and apparently he wrote it while in a fierce depression. He started with the song's title and, somehow, wrote the chord progressions around that. Paul wrote the rhythms.

[pause]

Yeah, [the lyricist] told me a little bit about that. See, we had this professor that semester, a thin old man with a big bushy beard. No-nonsense, impatient but understanding, he looked at you through his massive spectacles, and you felt like he was looking *through* you. I think he's who [they were] thinking of. Played around with the character, of course-- made him ancient, possibly immortal. Our narrator has seen it all, *literally* seen it all. He knows all the lies we tell, and he has resolved never to interfere, only to watch and write his memoirs. Maybe he even knows what happens after death. It's not that he *wouldn't* tell us, just that he *can't*, we don't have the words for it. And he hates censorship, that's the one thing that drives him to live on.

I don't know [the lyricist]'s exact intentions, but I like to think one day the authorities found his memoirs and burned them up, and then the old man stabbed his own eyes out and swore himself to silence ever since.

[pause]

Our songs certainly aren't happy. We had our problems in those days, and we wrote in atmospheres none of us particularly want to go back to.

HIDDEN IN THE TREES / MEMENTO MORI

S. B. was another friend of Remy's. Wrote in his spare time, and Remy *loved* the stuff he wrote. One story he wrote was titled *Hidden in the Trees*. It was a thriller, about this guy who worked for dark gods and killed for them only to find himself hunted down by them, as these stories tend to go. Remy had been wanting to write a song about that for a long time; before we even knew we'd make an album, he was saying "I want that song to be on it."

We *thought* the song itself was done pretty early on. Remy had this long, like, nine-minute foray into a few subgenres of metal. It worked for what it was meant to be, but one day Elsie came to us with some ideas of how we could play with the riffs (she does that, she likes to experiment on her keyboard with the stuff we make, it lets her contribute to the songwriting process in a more substantial way), and Fin was sober enough to come up with some jazzier rhythms.

Originally it was all one song, and the three-minute outro was more repetitive, a tribute to the crushing metal Paul and Remy loved at the time. The decision to split it and play with the outro came naturally. As we practised, we would add some variations ourselves, and we just kinda.. I dunno. We liked the idea of that outro being its own jam. The name came from the end of S. B.'s story. Latin, "remember that we die," I believe.

I think the lyrics are an expansion of Burning's voice. I remember [the lyricist] talking about that. The lyrics aren't meant to be a straight-up adaptation, just still applicable as one. It's as if the old man from Burning, or someone related to him, were giving a soliloquy at the end of his life as he's hunted down. It's definitely about closure, that much I remember strongly. The closure of memory, the closure of a life. About to die, watching all meaning fade away.

PERFECTION

This song has its origins in our first ever band meeting. I was a few weeks away from graduating, and by this point we knew we wanted to make music together, we even called ourselves The Sunsetters (would drop the "The" later), and Fin let us practise and record in his warehouse (where he lived, believe it or not). We met up for the first time that day, and we did Burning and Rise, but. Our meeting was cut short that time because of.. some news.

[pause]

It.. pertains to the subject from earlier, which I don't want to talk about.

[pause]

Yeah.

[pause]

[sigh] Okay. We'll call her Nobody. Nobody was a.. friend of Fin's. They spent a lot of time together. He wanted her to sit in on our band meetings. But at that first meeting, we got news that she...

[pause]

..yeah. And it didn't take a rocket scientist to see what had happened. Her mother was batshit. Fin had had many run-ins. Unstoppable force meets an immovable object. After that news, he very near.. did to her what she had done to..

[pause]

So yeah. "Perfection" was a hate letter to Nobody's mother. It was a turning point for us. Certainly for him. The song was originally way angrier, I dunno if you've heard the demo, but over time as grief found its place in his life, the song also simmered down. Paul would spend evenings working with him on it.

[pause]

That's right. [The lyricist] respected that.

IS THIS ALL?

Before I joined Paul in his music experiments, I had already been tinkering with my guitar. I had considered starting a band of my own, called My Amontillado.

[pause]

Not much of a story. I named my guitar "Amontillado." Like the wine. I didn't even drink wine. This was during a phase where I tried to play up my legal name's mythology a bit. I spent a lot of time reading up on Enlightenment-era poetry. I was clearly depressed. I don't believe I had a clear reason for it either? Do you *need* a reason to be depressed?

[pause]

Oh, right. "Is This All?" is a product of those times. I'd written a poem, I don't really want to go into what caused it, and I had a song that went with it. I was in talks with some other friends about doing something with that, but it didn't go anywhere. Instead, way later when we already had most of the Sunsetters album written, Paul brought up My Amontillado and asked if I could show the others some of the songs I'd written for it. There were a couple of others I showed that day, but this one got the best reaction. Remy came up with the idea to build into a distorted guitar climax (My Amontillado were not a heavy band at all). Other than that, we didn't change much.

[pause]

A Sunsetters *song*? That's a weird question. "Would I say the final product fits as a Sunsetters song?" Christ, you throw the softballs. Uh. Hm. Hrmmm.... Would I say... that the final product...

...yeah.

THE LAST SUNSET

So Elsie has a keyboard! [laughs] I'd mentioned that before. This song is hers. She didn't write too much in those days, it took her a couple albums to decide she wanted to focus on synths. I don't know the full story behind this song, but it's got a pseudomythical status amongst us.

[pause]

Because it came to her in a dream. Lyrics and all.

[pause]

She had never heard of him. She didn't read poetry. Grew up in a trailer park.

[pause]

See, the song was originally called something else: "Unknowing." Once she found out about the Rutherford poem, she renamed it to match. I don't actually think she wants people to know she came up with those lyrics independently? It's why she didn't want vocals in the song.

[pause]

Uh. I can tell you what I think of the song! I think it's a nice break. The whole album has this flow, y'know? There's a lot of anger to it from start to finish, and this intangible sort of self-hatred, and that sorta comes to a head in "Is This All?" In "The Last Sunset," there's.. I want to say "mentions" of self-hatred, but it's more like seeing the after-effects of it. In the song itself, I feel like I'm done with anger, just feeling, watching the world around me, seeing what can be left to the mind once anger has passed.

[pause]

Exactly.

RISE OF HER RAIN

When I graduated from Georgia State, majoring in astroengineering, I thought I was at the start of some new chapter of my life. But pretty quickly I found that there's not much work for that profession. At the same time, Paul, Elsie, and Remy had been finishing up what turned out to only be the first draft of this epic. The first Rise was nothing like you hear now. It had the opening riff, and that's the only connection. Its movements went from grunge to.. washed-up mid-life crisis 90s rock. I think Paul was the only one who was happy with it? This was at the peak of Fin's binge drinking period too, so I guess I was the only one with time on his hands, the only one who could see Rise as an outsider.

I saw... horror, unfounded and true.

[pause]

No, I'm sorry, that was a terrible answer. I just really didn't like the first draft. A lot of things about it rubbed me the wrong way, or maybe I got my feelings about the song mixed up with my experiences of the time. I had a talk with Paul, I told him that I was thinking of quitting the band. He was patient and understanding about it, but he asked if I could sit in on a jam session, not take part, just.. watch.

[pause]

I hadn't noticed until that day the circles under his eyes, or that whenever Remy's on stage he looks like he's perpetually cloaked in shadow, or that Elsie takes wide berths away from anything modern while she's singing. When Fin arrived, I noticed his cautious vague answers, his defense always shaping around the veracity of his memories, and I noticed that he cleaned up a lot after everyone but himself and he never asked for much in return. On-stage, he is more playful, more confident, more alive.

I wondered if I might look different when under the audience's gaze.

I do, in fact. I get into the zone. When I'm playing a song I truly believe in, I stop being an observer and start being a.. a performer. We see people differently when they're performing something than when they're a part of our mundane lives. We're more likely to let our guards down and.. well, spot that we even had them up to begin with.

So I wondered if maybe I could do more in the band. These guys were my friends, and they did more for me than just playing some instruments in my proximity.

Then I got lost at sea. I was crab fishing, my boat drifted a little too far and then sprung a leak. I nearly died out there, and this was in the days before cell reception was more widespread. I had to swim to shore, at least five miles.

[pause]

It sure was. I'm lucky to be alive. I came up with the melody for Rise's third movement, Soliloquys for the Dying, out there. Haunting thing, a shifting call-and-response crawl (or "crawl-and-response") with multiple elements clashing with each other over time. And as soon as I got back to shore, I went back to Fin's warehouse, I found the band, and I showed them the melody, and we jammed for four hours straight. Eventually my creation turned into a dance number, and Elsie found ways to echo the melody throughout the rest of the song.

I haven't doubted the direction of my life since that day.

[pause]

Aside from that melody and some solos in the fourth movement, I couldn't tell you the intentions behind parts of the song. [The lyricist] is adamant that Rise is the album's climax, though. That was always planned. [They] had once told me that [they see] it as an expansion of Drowning.

[pause]

Oh, I completely agree, the lyrics on both songs seem to paint pretty clear pictures, unlike the rest of the album. I hadn't considered if that may have been intentional or not. I'll have to ask [them].

[pause]

Me? I'd have to look at the lyrics again.

[pause]

Off the top of my head? Like.. nothing makes sense, extremely so, to the point where it starts to feel comfortable. Refuge in the absurdity of self-loathing and despair, y'know? Like the song isn't so much a *climax* but a *response*.

[pause]

Thank you. That's it, isn't it? I'm starving.

REVERIE

What?

[pause]

Oh wait, this is *that* one, isn't it? Remy and Paul were with me as I tried to jam more material, and we turned it into a tribute to another one of Remy's writer friends, and we named the song after it. But that was a B-side; I'm pretty sure we left it off the album.

[pause]

Uh. Something like "The Eternal Revolution?"

[pause]

Eight.

[pause]

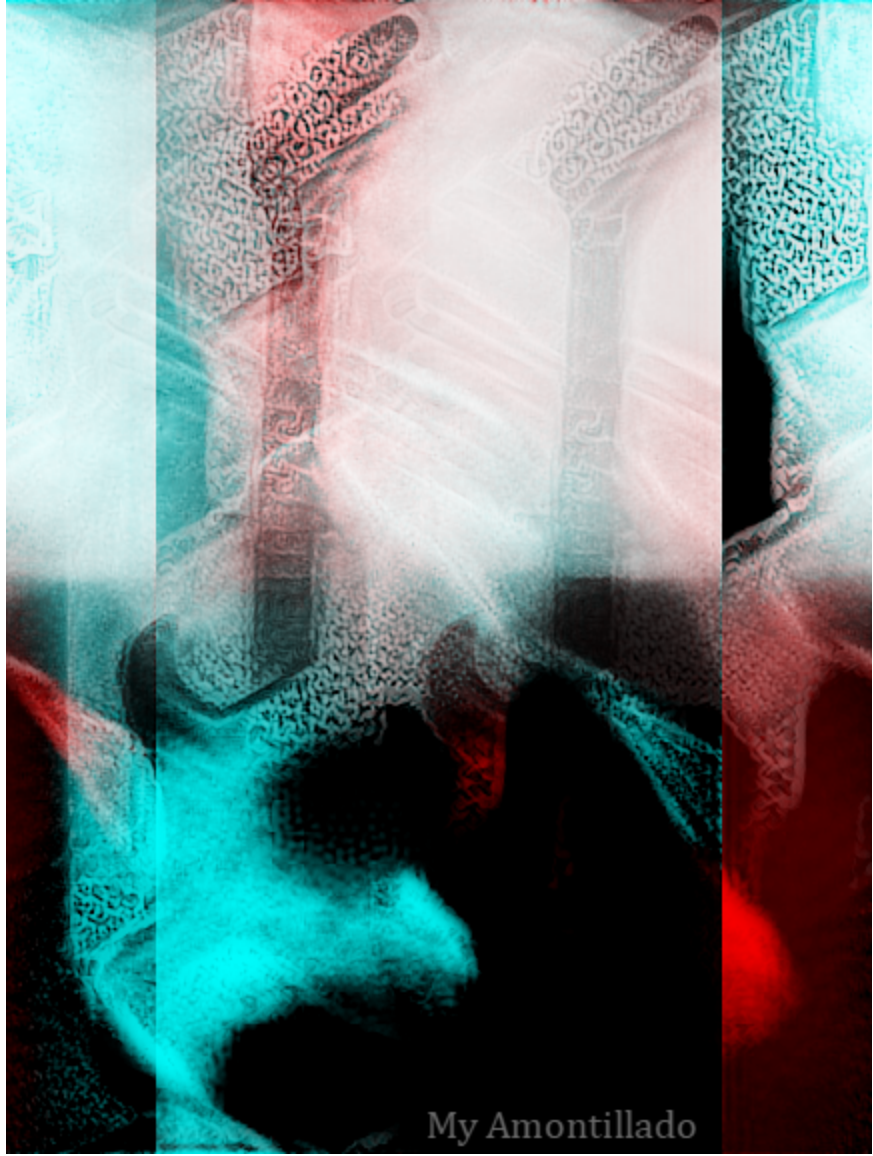
No, eight *tracks*. Seven songs, since Hidden and Memento count as one.

[pause]

You're being serious?

[pause]

I just. I swear I finalized the album. I don't know why I wouldn't know one of our own songs. Can you play it for me? Jog my memory.



My Amontillado