

**Interview with Mark Riddik and Mike Riddik
The Soil Bleeds Black – January 2003**

Dagaz-Music - I am not an expert in medieval music but it is noticeable that you know a lot about it. What musical studies made you such an expert in those so difficult instruments and sonorities?

MARK: I'm not exactly an 'expert' in medieval music either. I've only been listening to traditional medieval music for about four years. Before I started to listen to traditional medieval music I was listening to neo-medieval artists like Sopor Aeternus, Ordo Equitum Solis, The Moon Lay Hidden Beneath A Cloud, and Ataraxia, to name a few. In fact, I prefer the neo-medieval artists more than the ensembles that perform traditional medieval songs; it seems that groups like Corvus Corax or Ataraxia, for example, can take a traditional medieval song and add so much more creative interpretation than a 'purist' ensemble. To me, this makes the music more exciting. To answer your question, my musical studies are very limited. The only musical training I've ever had was three months of bass guitar lessons fourteen years ago. I've never had any training beyond that and I can't read a single note. I am entirely self-taught. All of the traditional medieval songs that The Soil Bleeds Black has re-created have been learned by ear. It is very important for me to branch out and learn how to play new instruments as it challenges and motivates me to create more music. It is vital to our music and helps keep TSBB fresh and even unpredictable at times.

Dagaz-Music - Before this project did you have other musical projects? Even the first edition seems very mature.

MARK: Thank you for your kind words about our first album, "The Kingdom & its Fey." Yes, we were once involved in other musical projects before The Soil Bleeds Black. My twin brother, Mike, and I released a couple of demo tapes for a death metal project called Excrescent in the early 1990's. Mike also released a couple of demo tapes for an occult metal project called Yamatu (<http://www.infernalhorde.com/Yamatu/>) in the early 90's as well. A very limited edition Yamatu CD-R/Book, "Shurpu Araru," was published by Ultima Comparatio Productions in 2000 featuring old demo recordings + bonus material. It has since sold out. A couple of our old TSBB recordings had some metal influence in them; only two of our songs in this style were ever published and were featured on compilation cassettes years ago.

Dagaz-Music - As far as I know, your first CD is from 1995. What is now your feeling about your first release? At that date 'The Kingdom & its Fey' was a real surprise.

MARK: Yes, "The Kingdom & its Fey" was written and recorded between the years 1994-1996 and was actually published by Cruel Moon International in 1996. I am still very pleased with the packaging. Roger Karmanik did a fantastic job, especially with the gatefold double LP version. Roger also did a great job promoting the release, which helped to establish our name in the scene. We are still very honoured to have had the opportunity to work with Mr. Karmanik. As for the music on the album, I think some of the songs are still okay but I believe TSBB has progressed far beyond our debut album. All of the songs on "The Kingdom & its Fey" were created with a synthesizer and samples, and most of the tracks were instrumental. Our music is much different now as we incorporate mostly traditional instruments and we use vocal passages in almost every song.

Dagaz-Music - That kind of sonority and music feeling is quite European. How do you feel that relation with Europe?

MARK: I am ashamed to say I have never been to Europe. I believe my curiosities about a place I've never been has served as a sort of inspiration for TSBB. My interest in ancestry and medieval culture has directed my attention toward Europe. I am glad you can find a 'European' flavor in our music as we strive for that. I can only imagine what kind of profound influence Europe would have on me if I were to actually walk on its soil and visit its castles and other architectural wonders.

Dagaz-Music - Through your first releases and until 'Alchemie,' we note an exponential evolution. It seems that edition was the end of an era. How do you feel about that evolution?

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MARK: I am grateful that you have recognized the evolution of our sound. By the time we were recording our fourth album, “Alchemie,” we had become more skilled at our instruments and had also acquired an 8-track analog studio. Our first three albums were recorded on a 4-track studio that was very limiting. New recording equipment allowed TSBB to utilize more natural instruments and become even less dependent on synthetic instruments. We also sought to write songs with a solid structure, incorporating more vocal and chord arrangements. There were actually several songs written and recorded during this time period but we picked the songs that seemed to suit us best and published them on “Alchemie.”

Dagaz-Music - In the ‘Quintessence’ edition you approach the music in a very different way, maybe more folk. Why did this happen? What changed in TSBB’s concept? Even the graphic presentations are quite different.

MARK: Yes, “Quintessence” was another evolutionary step for our music. For this recording we used an 18-track digital studio, which is what we continue to use to this day. Having this fine piece of equipment added to our home studio, Dungeon 325, allowed us even more flexibility in the writing and recording process. Another important factor is that this is the only TSBB album that my twin brother, Mike, and I collaborated on for every song. On all of our other albums, the songs have been written individually. We decided that it would be good to do a themed album, just as we did with our third album “May the Blood of Many A Valiant Knight Be Avenged,” which was based upon The Tale of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. “Quintessence” is based on the five natural elements of earth, air, fire, water, and lastly quintessence (or the spirit). Since we wanted to create a song for each element we had to lengthen the time of each track to create a full-length album, a deviation from all of our previous albums. “Quintessence” certainly has a strong folk element as you have suggested but I believe we still have retained the neo-medieval style we are commonly known for. The graphic design and packaging for “Quintessence” is much more minimal than our other releases, just as you have pointed out. The cover art was created with text rather than the detailed artwork that graces most of our other album covers. “Quintessence” has a very clean and basic design but I feel it represents the music accurately.

Dagaz-Music - After that edition, ‘Mirror of the Middle Ages’ seems to be a slow return to the origin of The Soil Bleeds Black. Do you feel it that way?

MARK: Yes, I must agree with you. I think that “Mirror of the Middle Ages” is much more akin to “Alchemie” but with better sound quality, better execution, and more traditional instruments.

Dagaz-Music - Your last edition ‘Mirror of the Middle Ages’ was announced to be released by World Serpent and now it is announced to The Fossil Dungeon. What happened? Lately many World Serpent projects are changing to other labels.

MIKE: Indeed, we had originally planned to release “Mirror of the Middle Ages” in CD format on World Serpent. However, the music industry was moving very slowly throughout 2002 and this caused World Serpent to have to re-arrange their release schedules. As a result, our album continued to be delayed and we did not wish for the album to become “old” before it was even released. At the same time, my own label, The Fossil Dungeon, was growing. Thus, we felt it was a natural and logical transition to move TSBB onto our own label. Of course, we left World Serpent on good terms. We were very satisfied with their work and it was also an honour to become friends with them. We wish them the best, always!

Dagaz-Music - In the meanwhile you released ‘Lead Into Gold’ on Lichtbringer and a future release is projected for Old Europa Cafe. It seems that now that you are free from World Serpent you are more available to release more material.

MIKE: Yes, it might appear this way, but we honestly just found ourselves with a great deal of inspiration, and therefore a lot of completed material. Our work with Lichtbringer and Old Europa Café is giving us an opportunity to release some limited vinyls, one of our favorite musical formats, and also gives us the chance to work with other great people in the music scene.

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Dagaz-Music - How do you foresee the evolution of this project? What kind of work are you preparing now?

MARK: TSBB will continue to evolve in many ways. I hope to discover more instruments to include in our sound and to touch upon more topics and themes regarding the Middle Ages. There is still much more room for TSBB to progress and we plan to move on with this project for a very long time. Right now we are preparing some melodies for our next record release, "Three Living, Three Dead," for Old Europa Cafe. The next record will be available in a 10" vinyl format and will feature six new songs. I am also trying to arrange some guest appearances by other artists for this special release. In the meantime I am finishing up some songs for our collaborative project with Psychonaut 75, Hexentanz. We will be releasing a full-length CD for this project this year on our own label, The Fossil Dungeon.

Dagaz-Music - Do you have any plans to put TSBB on stage? For sure that would be a wonderful show.

MARK: Not at the moment. We are strictly a studio project at this point. Although we have been invited to perform live many times, even in Europe, we have had to decline. Eugenia, our vocalist, lives several hours away in a different state. This would make it very hard for us to rehearse for a live show; it is hard enough already just to get together and record as we only see each other about three or four times a year. Our schedules are very busy so performing live is not an option at this time in our lives. Perhaps in the future?

Dagaz-Music - Besides TSBB, do you have other musical – or non-musical – projects?

MIKE: My primary "outside" project would be The Fossil Dungeon label, as it is nearly a full-time job outside of my regular daytime job. My brother and I also experiment with other forms of music. For example, our 15 Delights of Dionysus side-project has completed several releases over the years, regarding experimental and dark ambient sounds. Likewise, our recent Hexentanz side-project with members of Psychonaut 75 has kept us rather occupied. This is a project exploring the themes of witchcraft in the Middle Ages. It is the perfect blend between severe dark ambient-experimental-ritual and medieval sounds, using ritual invocations, traditional instrumentation, effects, EVP recordings, and human bones as sound sources. In respect to non-musical projects, I am currently writing an extensive book about magic entitled "Witchcraft: A Tradition and Technology of Magic." The book will likely be several hundred pages in length, after completion, and will explore the influence of magic over the development of human consciousness and culture from the Palaeolithic age all the way through contemporary times. It will also present a reasonable, logical, and "matter-of-fact" understanding about the metaphysics, epistemology, and metanormal attributes of incorporating magic into one's life. Not your "regular" book on magic. It gets right to the point.

MARK: I work full-time as a Graphic Artist but run my own business on the weekends called Murals By Mark. I specialize in mural painting and faux finishes for residential homes. I also somehow squeeze in time to design CD packages, logos and T-Shirts for various bands and also teach a few drawing classes for children every summer.

Dagaz-Music - Are you a music consumer? What kind of music are you buying nowadays?

MIKE: Yes, of course! We are purchasing and acquiring new music on almost a daily basis. I believe our collection now spans over 3,000 different titles and it is always growing.

Dagaz-Music - Is there any music project or band that you would like to comment for us to hear? Something that you find really good.

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MIKE: Lately, I have been listening to the “Never Fragile” MCD from the band Aenima, released by Equilibrium in Portugal. I would strongly recommend this release to all fans of gothic rock with heavenly voices. It has become one of the best releases I’ve ever heard and I must also mention that the band will release a full-length CD soon on America’s Middle Pillar label. Another project I would recommend is Kutna Horna from Argentina. They are a new group exploring a neo-folk sound. Their debut CD, “Will or Nothing,” is a beautiful congregation of acoustic guitars, percussive, and gentle melancholic waves of sound. Fans of World Serpent would really enjoy this release. Please try to look for it, as it was released on a small label, Twilight Records out of South America. My label carries both of these aforementioned releases in our mailorder catalog, so it can always be found through us.

MARK: The new Gae Bolg and the Church of Fand album has been talked about a lot lately. I aquired a copy and must recommend it as it is a fantastic release. I’ve also been listening to Italy’s The Frozen Autumn a lot. They are probably my favourite electro/darkwave band ever. They have a very 80’s feel which I really admire. Just beautiful! Other bands that have entered my CD player as of late include GOR, Corvus Corax, In Gowan Ring, Der Blutharsch, Novy Svet and Camerata Mediolanense.

Dagaz-Music - How do you explain that your music is appreciated by people used to hear the «real» stuff – not modern compositions «on the line of...», but real medieval music carefully recovered and lovingly recreated? How did you discover the «connection»?

MARK: I don’t think that we have received any criticism on our music from the medieval ‘purist’ realm as our music is not marketed to that crowd. Many reviewers from the ‘gothic’ genre, where our music is well known, have said that our latest album, “Mirror of the Middle Ages,” sounds very authentic. I can’t say whether or not these reviewers are experts in medieval music but I do appreciate their compliments. Perhaps a medieval ‘purist’ would disagree about our music, I don’t know?

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