

"Into A Well Of The Looking Glass" Love Spirals Downwards

by Aaron Johnston

I was always involved with the ethereal music scene, but never to a degree where it became a driving passion. The nature and tone of the music was, in essence, a very articulate reflection of who I was in self, but there were simply no bands I knew of pushing the sound beyond its gates, to a point of unavoidable adoration on my part. It wasn't simply a matter of finding the perfect band, but of finding the perfect window. Through time and dedication, any group can eventually release an album with the most delicately perfect instrumentation and ideally placed melancholic trim, but what good is it if there is no decisive emotional push behind it? This question was at the top of my head for many years, and was answered quickly when I sat down one evening to listen to a prodigal young instrumentalist named Ryan Lum conspire with an astonishingly angelic vocalist named Suzanne Perry under the name Love Spirals Downwards. Within a matter of minutes, the two alone managed to capture a well of feelings and affections wrought with a long yearning for excommunication and deliverance within me in a subtle and pure exorcism of the soul. I always thought this kind of experience was a bit too "new age" and philanthropic to be truly reveled by anyone living in the real world, but I was hastily disproved time and time again with each succeeding listen. I was, in all honesty, baffled by the two arms which were weaning me through the first stages of my spiritual and internal re-education. Ryan and Suzanne had me wrapped around their fingers plain and simple. Rather than feeling a sense of manipulation, I was a willing participant. Although it was the effort of two, the group worked almost in a doubled unison. I was traded off between Ryan's deep guitar and keyboard exchanges to Suzanne's beautiful vocal rapture time and again with little abandon and no feelings of actual travel. In essence it felt like I was being led along by a single hand with two separate bodies, two distinct minds thinking and reacting as one. With the perfection in sound and symmetry that flows so freely with each listening, one would expect the origination of Love Spirals Downwards to be one with an almost clandestine pull drawing the two together subconsciously as though driven by the very hand of fate itself. As reality unfolds, we find the roots of the seemingly magical union to be well grown around a more natural footing which found both members still devoid of what their imme-

diated future had to offer. "We met through a job, and we knew we were both doing music, but we hadn't really thought about doing a band thing at all. I guess we never really talked about it, it was more of a singing in the shower kind of thing," Perry reminisces of the days before Love Spirals Downwards became what we know today. Although the initial meeting was a little uneventful for the duo's musical career, a seed of romance was planted between the two which would see the growth of their creations some time later. "We were boyfriend/girlfriend for maybe a year or two before I had her sing for me with my music. I knew her two years and I never knew she sang that well!" Lum exclaims before Perry concludes, "We just decided to fool around with doing music but actually Ryan resisted me singing on his music for a while because he thought it would cause problems in our relationship." It has become all too apparent now that Ryan's early fears were for nothing, as the two now find themselves heading into their fourth year as Love Spirals Downwards and still amidst a relationship which shows little sign of collapse. With the subtle first steps out of the way, the music grew quickly from an infant sprout to an intricate stone tower intertwined with a spiraling staircase spinning rapidly through the clouds and beyond in only a short few months. Suzanne's voice scaled through unnatural tones effortlessly down Ryan's intricately etched paths of shaded beauty, and culminated in a sound long

forgotten from the youth of the so-called ethereal masters, the Cocteau Twins. With the ship set adrift and a creative flow directing it onward, the nuances of their relationship were paced to the natural rhythm of their music and the time soon came to open it all up for the world to see. With little knowledge of the ethereal music scene, the duo seemed almost lost for a beginning, but the ship would soon find port through a friendly suggestion from photographer Tom Pathe, pointing them in the direction of Sam Rosenthal's Projekt label. Projekt, who have long been hailed as the new blood in the old vein of elegance seemed to fit the music of Love Spirals Downwards like a key into its hole that would unlock the door not long after. "We sent several demo tapes and he [Sam] responded by writing us a nice letter back giving us his impressions of the three song demo. He sent us a black tape for a blue girl CD which was good because we didn't know anything about Projekt. To be honest, we just heard about it through our friend who does the photography for the album covers. He [Tom] went to art school with Susan Jennings who was Sam's photographer for a lot of Projekt's covers. We got to hear the [Projekt] sound and we thought it was compatible with what we do, so he told us to send in more music.



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We sent in two more songs a couple of months later, and he offered to give us the first two tracks on the "From Across This Gray Land 3" compilation so we accepted, of course, and a month or two after that we sent another song or two, and he ended up asking us if we would like our own record." Lum remembers back to his initiation into the ranks of Projekt quite well. Perry, on the other hand, recalls a different tale to a small degree. "We later learned that it was Susan who originally liked our music. It was Susan who, I guess, really found it and said 'oh, listen to this'. I think she pushed more than Sam did and even pushed Sam into contacting us." Lum finishes, "The way it goes is he liked it but was fearful that we sounded too much like Cocteau Twins, and Susan convinced him otherwise."

With the introductions out of the way, Suzanne and Ryan compiled the submitted tracks, along with a number of new songs, in the release of their debut effort "Idylls" in 1992. Almost instantly, "Idylls" became one of Projekt's largest selling and most responded to records to date. Although this may be a perpetually argued point for years to come, "Idylls" was the decisive cog in the rejuvenation and ultimate rebirth of the ethereal dark-wave scene. If there was any doubt of this, it was most certainly erased when the group re-emerged once more to affirm this role not more than a year ago with their second album, "Ardor", which became not so much the follow-up to the massively successful "Idylls", but an entirely different novel itself. "Ardor" was from an outside perspective a much more centered and focused effort in its arrival. Where "Idylls" relied more on abstracts and a sense of unpredictability encased in a structured but not overly constricting atmosphere, "Ardor" capitalized and expanded on these attributes and added an extra amount of definition and tangibility. All this came not necessarily as a product of talent alone but rather through the new and instantaneous approaches the team had towards song writing. "All the bands I've been in before were live oriented, where we didn't necessarily play in front of people, but we rehearsed live to write songs and to hash them out together, and then we'd go and record them after. We kind of do it backwards, we never rehearse a song, we just make it up as we're recording. That's what Love Spirals Downwards is, we're a product of working in our studio," Lum defines one of many trademarks that produced "Idylls" and was carried through to the creation of "Ardor".

While this get up and go approach may have been a fuel for the fires of their success, it does expose one potentially disheartening draw back for the two when preparing to take their music into the live venue. "We've been doing a little rehearsing for maybe playing live, perhaps doing some acoustic stuff, and I'm finding it really difficult to even sing them because I can't get a breath or anything because I'm so used to layering and not having to worry about it. I was just flipping through the radio today and heard something like Pat Benetar, and remember saying, 'this song sounds like it was meant to be played live' and our stuff is written so not to be played live," Perry admits the problem, but

and then the vocals usually come in last near the end, and I'll fix up the drums and mix it down some time later," Lum reveals the completion of the first story in the escalating high rise in detail, as though he were a master carpenter erecting a majestic Victorian era church. Suzanne joins in immediately, capping the monument with the concluding steeple, "As far as vocals go, I'll usually listen to a completed, or near completed, instrumental and just start humming some catchy notes into the microphone, and find some that I like then do a rough recording of them and see how they sound. If I wait a day or two and see if the notes stick to me, I'll sometimes try to write some words or phonetics to them." As impressive as this creative process seems, in order to not cancel itself out, the two emphasize another underlying pattern which makes sure the gears of the machine do not become rusted with mindless repetition, proving that not every engine can run in the same gear forever. "If I just walk in the studio and don't change anything, it's going to wind up sounding the same. I have to make some changes in my equipment and my mind set. It's just too easy to fall into the same groove as the first album and make another that sounds like that and keep going forever." Lum explains the patterns he analyzed in ensuring that "Ardor" would not become "Idylls II" by any stretch of the imagination.

In both completed works of Love Spirals Downwards, we find an immense state of emotional freedom unleashed like shears cutting away at our every restraint, and even the thickest threads of human composure. Ryan's evanescent flow of sweet introversion breeds a rhythm of inner security and strength which displaces your mind and heart from everything you have ever known to be good or bad. With each gentle sweep of the guitar and every melodic keyboard passage comes a slow push through the gates of

perception into the realm of Suzanne's rich inviting voice, luring you away for a fleeting relapse of conscious and control. In the voice of Love Spirals Downwards, there are few words, and in some cases, there are no languages to decipher either. Suzanne delivers the reason, "I like to use different voices like a more powerful voice or a sweeter voice for different songs. I get really tired of singing with that same voice, and you see that with a lot of other bands, where they use that same voice over and over again and it's just over bearing. After a while everything does end up sounding the same. We get a mood for a song, and if I think it has an Italian or Latin mood to it, I'll try to almost mimic that language to evoke that sort of mood. The songs in



Photo by: Susan Jennings

seems unfazed by its weight.

Before any thoughts of remixes, live renditions, or any other extraneous uses for the songs of Love Spirals Downwards can come into play, special focus must be made on their initial creation, as it is the obvious first step in the evolutionary process of everything. Ryan and Suzanne have remained true to this rule with a consistent and proven process of writing that has remained the guiding hand behind the calculated structuring of all their works. "It's usually a building process, it's just different what I start building from. Sometimes it will be a drum sound, and I'll build on that, or it will be a keyboard or acoustic guitar part. It gets turned into a pretty full blown instrumental after a while,

that way, at least on "Idylls", are more thematic. I'd really get this picture and this mood and stick with that, but "Ardor" has been a bit different. I tried to do something different with "Ardor" where I thought I'd maybe write some words to it. There are definitely more actual words on "Ardor." The fact that Suzanne uses a language all her own much of the time shows the group's talent for ingenuity, and highlights a novelty which will more than likely see its fair share of imitation in the years to come.

As the air around this amazing duo grows thicker with each passing ingredient that is thrown into the mix, the reality that a rich history of musical training must be prominent in the past of each member arises. This is not true, as Ryan explains with subtle refrain, "In junior high and early high school I had maybe three or four years of guitar training, but I didn't really learn anything after the first year or so. I don't know why I kept going." Suzanne mirrors an equal absence of regiment in her style as well, "I've been in choirs and have had some voice class, but I have not had any formal long term training." Like many other predominantly self taught artists such as Jimi Hendrix, Ryan and Suzanne prove that natural talent is not something that can be taught in any school other than the mind of its owner.

Through the honesty and extreme sincerity found lingering dominantly throughout each

passage of Love Spirals Downwards' work, we the listener can't help but feel jealous of their gift of expression. If we could have what they hold and exorcise it to its full potential, I am quite sure most of us would carry it closer to our hearts than anything else. It is a very different story, however for Ryan and Suzanne as, to them, their music is but a singular facet to their complex lives. "It's an important part of me, but



it's a very isolated part I keep in one section, and there is very little cross over. I think that's nice for me because I don't have to talk about it all the time, and I don't identify with it. I don't want to make it sound like it's a hobby, because it's more than that, but it's definitely very isolated. Not focusing on it makes it very much an

escapist type activity. Through this I think about how I don't see myself as an artist or as a musician. It's not part of the essence of me that when I meet people, I talk first and foremost about me being an artist. I don't think about it as part of my identity. Since I don't think of myself as an artist, when I see things that are in my life, they impact me in a way where they impact my life and they don't really influence my music that much, at least not directly. My music is something where I walk in and I do it and it's not something I think about in my everyday life. I don't dwell on it or think this or that will be a great part for this song. When I'm in the studio it's sacred, but I don't carry that artist persona around with me at all."

Having now become better acquainted with the lives of Suzanne and Ryan, we should all take a second or two to think about our own existence and our own definition. Although they have accomplished a great deal in their short lives, it is not the message of their music for us to look upon, but rather for us to look within ourselves. There is nothing wrong with admiring Ryan's insightful tonal ventures or Suzanne's lush aural presence or even thanking them for their provisions, for they are admirable traits. What we must realize is that Love Spirals Downwards are a door, and we are all on the other side waiting to get through.