

THE SECRET

THERAPEUTIC AND DESTRUCTIVE

I was very ecstatic when I finally heard that The Secret was crawling out of the abyss with a brand new EP called *"Lux tenebris"*, this after a very long period of silence. The Secret still blasts as a maniac, but one can also hear some new influences in their blackened sound. It was about time to contact Michael Bertoldini to talk about the resurrection of The Secret and his label activities with Argento Records. (JOKKE - ADDERGEBROED)



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Hi Michael! How is life going?

Life is great, it's been a crazy couple of months but I've been to some very cool places for work and with The Secret, I really can't complain. I love crazyness.

A couple of weeks ago you played your first show with The Secret in 3 years at Venezia Hardcore Fest. How did the show go and how did it feel to be finally back on stage after such a long period of absence?

The show has been a truly intense and amazing experience. For a long time I was convinced I would never perform again with The Secret and being back on stage playing this music felt somehow scary and liberating at the same time. Through the years, I reflected a lot about the opportunity to play with the band again, but I always had quite conflicting feelings about it. I think after 5 minutes into the set I really felt we were doing the right thing and the show felt a very organic, natural and almost necessary experience.

Your live performances are quite energetic. Do you have some kind of ritual that you do to generate extra adrenaline before performing? Is it difficult to transform into this frantic band as soon as you are on stage and start playing?

There is no particular pre-show ritual, but most of the times we start our performances with a quite extensive introduction that I feel functions as a physical and psychological tuning between the band members, our instruments, the space we're playing and the audience. At some point, things just start aligning and tension is ready to be released.

Will you be playing some shows in the Benelux?

I really hope so but there is nothing confirmed at the moment.

You just released a new EP called "*Lux Tenebris*" containing three brand new songs. This is your first recording since 2012's "*Agnus dei*". What happened after the release of that record and why did it take so long to hear from you guys again?

After "*Solve et coagula*" came out in 2010, the band started touring pretty much full time and touring didn't stop until late 2013. When "*Agnus dei*" came out we embarked on a few more tours and for a series of reasons things within the band started slowly but steadily deteriorating until the point we couldn't really collaborate together anymore. We all have very different personalities, goals and ambitions in life and I think this lack of alignment combined with being forced to spend too much time together on tour really eroded the personal and artistic bonds between us. Things came to an end after cancelling our appearance at Le Guess Who festival in November 2015. All the tension that built up during the years just erupted all at once and after that very moment, I really didn't see any potential in the band anymore. At that point, I think every one of us focused on other aspects and parts of our lives. I was already living and working in The Netherlands when we stopped playing, started a record label and playing with Verwoed, Lorenzo recorded and toured with his other band Hierophant, Marco and Tommaso focused on their work lives and families. I believe that probably this prolonged radio-silence helped us all develop and grow individually in a way that lead us to a new kind of balance. With time passing by we all felt that it would have been great to play as a band again so we here we are.

Have drummer Tommaso and singer Marco been doing something music related during the The Secrets' break-up?

I know they both occasionally rehearsed with other musicians and Marco did some guest appearances with Discomfort and Bologna Violenta, but I don't think they have actual side project.

I can clearly hear some new influences in the new songs. Not only is the guitar work more layered and textured, the songs also show a more dynamic approach by using doom riffs in between the very aggressive and fast parts for which The Secret is best known for. Was this a deliberate decision to write longer and more diverse songs? Were you tired of short and very fast songs?

I think every album we recorded has a different sound and edge, and "*Lux tenebris*" is no exception. Even though the two albums are quite different in my opinion, on both "*Solve et coagula*" and "*Agnus dei*" our goal was to trim everything unnecessary and to go straight for the throat. There is still a certain atmosphere on those records, but generally we isolated one single element/message per song and went full on with it. Dynamics are intentionally almost non-existent. "*Lux tenebris*" is still a quite monochromatic release, but the goal here was to create time and space in the songs to get fully immersed and sink very deep inside the music.

***"Lux tenebris"* means "light and darkness" in Latin. What do you mean with this seemingly contradictory title and is there a concept behind the three songs on the EP?**

I think *"light in darkness"* could be a more accurate translation. Conceptually the album deals a lot with duality and opposites like life and death, light and darkness, instinct and reason in more and less direct ways. I personally find the very essence of playing with this band therapeutic and destructive at the same time, like a pulse that is natural to follow even if rationally I'm aware it doesn't always make sense. I think the result could be defined as the fruit of these colliding elements.



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At the end of *"The sorrowful void"* we hear a dark and apocalyptic guitar melody. Is this an influence that got into the music due to you being part of the live line-up of Dutch black metal band Verwoed, which also incorporates these kind of melodies in its sound? Also *"Vertigo"* contains a very dark and asphyxiating mood and some dissonant elements that are often found in contemporary black metal bands.

Black metal has always been one of the main influences in our music since the very beginning in early 2000's and I don't think playing with Verwoed really made an impact on what we play with The Secret, even though I probably understand what you want to say with that. Erik (who sings and writes all the music for Verwoed) is a super talented songwriter and he's really a master in arranging multilayered parts in his songs, still I feel his message is very different from what is conveyed with The Secret, there's a certain melancholia in his songs that is not expressed with this band. What is definitely different from our past couple albums is that this time I didn't follow any limitation to what concerns my guitar parts. In the previous records there is a very minimal usage of guitar overdubs and all the songs are composed with the aim to be performed with one guitar while on *"Lux tenebris"* I just felt like doing whatever I wanted to do and sometimes recorded 3 to 5 guitar lines at the same time.

Besides your role in Verwoed, you are also the owner of Argento Records. Which criteria need to be fulfilled by a band for you to sign them and what are your goals with the label?

It's very interesting because I've been asking myself the same question a lot lately. I started the label together with my girlfriend because I was really missing the feeling of being actively involved in a music related project. There's no set rule for my releases, but I always want to put my energy in bands that have clear ideas and deliver a bold message in their music. I also love working with people I personally know and respect. Working with Verwoed has been the start of a great friendship that goes beyond the music for example. Chris from Grime is one of my very best friends since we are 17 year old. I want to understand and connect.

Vinyl is still very hot, but this implicates long production delays, which sometimes means that the vinyl version of a record is being released several months after the CD-version. Don't you think that many people will already be forgotten about a record a few months later, due to the massive amount of music that is being released every month? On the other hand, this way a record can also have two moments to create some buzz.

I only buy vinyl because it's my favorite format, so I don't really think about this question that much. I never really release the LP version after digital or CD, I think it's just not fair. As a customer, if I like a record I always buy the LP version of it, doesn't matter if I listened to the digital first, having a real album in your hands is just a different (in my opinion cooler) feeling, the packaging itself adds the release of new layers of communication. I also like supporting the artists and the labels that still put energy, time, money and sweat in the crazy and hopeless world that is the underground music scene. Even though I use Spotify, Bandcamp, etc, I believe there's no comparison with the real thing. I don't want to sound overly nostalgic but some of my best life memories are connected to buying records and playing them, I hope the next generations will still have the chance to experience that as well.



What new releases can we expect from your label on a short term?

I'm about to co-release the new Mutilation Rites LP "*Chasm*" together with Gilead Media, the new Verwoed full-length "*De val*" should be out early this fall, the sophomore release from an Utrecht Black Metal project called Nevel and few more things are starting to take shape. The probably a very good death/black metal release in conspiracy with Sentient Ruin. I'd like to release way more music than I am actually releasing but I physically have no extra time to put into Argento.

You are since several years based in Amsterdam. How is life compared to living in Italy?

Life is very different in The Netherlands but I love it. I'm lucky enough to have the chance to go back to Italy quite often for work and I really enjoy visiting and keeping in touch with my friends, but Amsterdam is home and I never thought for a second of moving back. Italy is a tremendously beautiful, charming, diverse and complex country but through the years it became progressively more and more difficult to work and live there. I'm not sure if the current political situation is a reflection of what most citizens believe in or vice versa, but it does feel very uncomfortable to see that a lot of people are moving backwards and becoming more racist or trying to revamp pseudo-Christian values like "the traditional family" and bullshit like that. There is a widespread nostalgia of the 80's and 90's within my parents' generation, mostly due to the fact that the country never fully recovered from the financial crisis of the mid- 2000's, causing a quite an understandable lack of trust for traditional institutions. Beside politics and structures, there is a big difference in social dynamics and priorities in both countries. From what I experienced, Italians are more prone to give value to collective life and sharing emotions, while Dutch seem to be more interested in individual freedom, development and privacy. Both attitudes have pros and cons, i feel comfortable somewhere in the middle. Overall, I feel extremely privileged in having the chance to live in different places and get enriched by that.

The Secrets' new EP will be part of a special 20 years celebration series from your label Southern Lord. Can you tell me a little bit more about this?

The silver version of the EP is only available to subscribers or at our shows, the black version is also available from Southern Lord and Southern Lord Europe. The subscription series is a very cool collection of mostly out press material packaged in a very nice way, somehow reminiscent of the label's mid 2000's releases. The whole collection is super diverse and two releases are still to be announced. So far my favourite part of the series is probably the Sunn o))) "*REH III*" LP, early and über raw material from the band.

Are there also plans for a new The Secret full length and are you already writing new music?

We are indeed writing new music, there's actually a lot of material waiting to be developed and turned into actual songs. I'm not sure if we will record a full-length or another EP. I love EP's but labels don't, they're as expensive as full-lengths to press but have to be sold cheaper. I think it's too early now to make real plans, maybe we'll have the time of our lives playing again, or maybe we'll end up hating each other and stop talking. It's unpredictable but it in a way it makes things more fun. We'll see how things goes, but there's definitely the will to record new music.