

TOMBS – THE FEAR THAT I WILL HAVE LIVED A MEANINGLESS LIFE MOTIVATES ME

With their brand new EP *“Monarchy of shadows”*, Brooklyn based Tombs prove they survived a somehow difficult period. What doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger, so band founder Mike Hill gathered a new line-up and inked a deal with Season Of Mist. We catch up with him to see what’s going on and what is about to happen for Tombs. (JOKKE)



Hi Mike. How are things going on at the moment in the Tombs camp?

It’s going well. We’re exited about the new EP, and we’re gearing up for this awesome US tour with Napalm Death, Aborted and Wvrm. Napalm Death are legends in my opinion and it’s an honor being able to hit the road with them. We’re going into the studio in May, when we get back from the tour, to record a new full-length. We’re keeping the creative onslaught going.

I’m very happy with *“Monarchy of shadows”* since it seems to be a return to the more aggressive approach of *“Winter hours”*, my personal favourite Tombs record. Was it a deliberate choice to return to the roots after having experimented with new wave and goth rock influences on *“The grand annihilation”*?

I think the record is just a reflection of what I’ve been feeling for the past few years. The time around *“The grand annihilation”* was a very difficult time for me and possibly the aggression arose from all of the frustration and anxiety I had with. It was a hard time and I think that motivated me to create hard music.

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I still feel like there is a lot of darkness on the record. Despite all of the aggression, I feel like the more gothic elements are still very much present. It's more subtle, not as obvious which is how I like to express myself. I suppose my long-term goal has been to meld extreme metal and the post-punk, gothic influences.

In 2018, all three other members (drummer Charlie Schmid, guitarist Evan Void and keyboardist Fade Kainer) left Tombs. Was this due to musical or personal reasons and was it difficult to find replacements?

I think those guys had other things they wanted to do. Being in band like this is difficult. There isn't a lot of money to go around and we were on the road a lot. It wasn't difficult to find replacements.

After many line-up changes, you remain the sole original member of Tombs. Does this mean that Tombs is some kind of dictatorial band run by you or are the other members also welcome to write music?

I can see how some people may view me as a dictator but it really has more to do with the quality of work that was brought to the table. You said it yourself, I'm the last man standing in this band which means that I have the most invested in it. It's a reflection of the work and effort I put into it over the last decade of my life. I have



standards of quality and every creative move the band makes has to live up to those standards, it's as simple as that. There isn't a lot of complexity when it comes to this. If you show up for practice and are on the same creative page, things will work out. If you don't want to work hard, this is not the place for you.

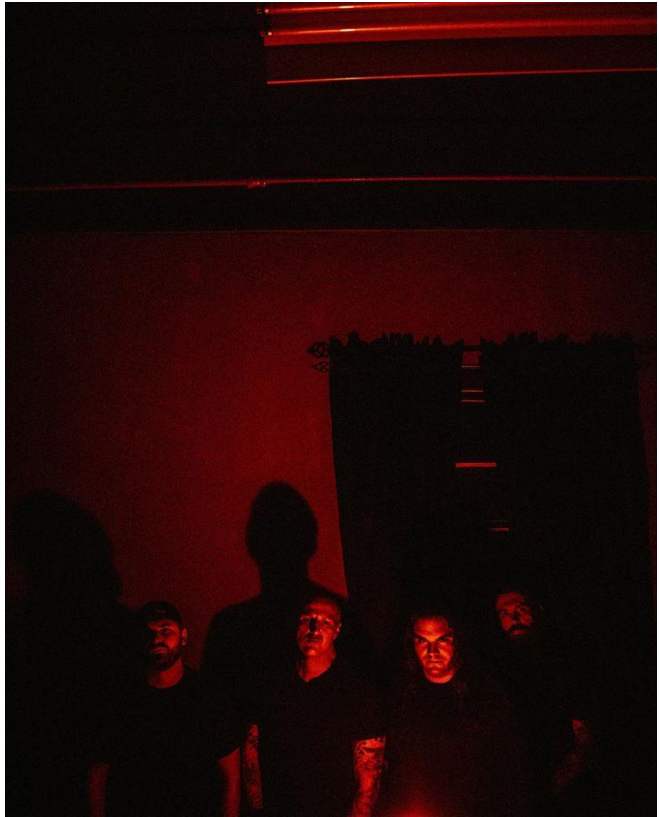
With that said, the current line up are great players and creative dynamos. Everyone contributes and feels like they are invested in the band. That was a huge shortcoming with *"The grand annihilation"* line-up. Those guys didn't take any ownership in anything. They showed up, figured that we were on a big label etc. and that everything was going to be easy. They were more concerned with having their picture taken than pushing it hard and grinding.

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What do you think is the most important way you've developed as a songwriter or musician in recent years?

I feel like my vocals have improved along with my lyric writing. I'm never going to be a great guitarist but I think that I can create an atmosphere. My guitar playing is never going to impress anyone; it's too punk for metal and too metal for punk, but for better or worse it's my main instrument. I put a lot of effort into it and for sure my technique is always improving but whenever I reach a new level, I see the long stairway leading upward that I have to overcome. It's never ending.

I think that the ideas I have for lyrics are broader and less personal in a lot of ways. I usually write in the third person because I'm trying to communicate bigger, more cosmic ideas. I've kind of grown bored with the "introspective" writing of some of my earlier work.



***"Monarchy of shadows"* is released as an EP, although the six tracks clock in at 35 minutes. Why didn't you write one or two songs more to release a new full-length?**

We did a shorter release simply because that's what we wanted to do. We're scheduled to go into the studio in a couple of months to record a new full-length. There is never a lack of ideas to work with, it's a matter of keeping the concepts at a high level.

The new EP is your first release for Season Of Mist after having worked with Metal Blade Records for the predecessor and Relapse Records for the first 3 records. What was the reason for leaving Metal Blade and how would you compare these 3 labels to each-other?

Metal Blade dropped us because we didn't sell enough records to justify putting out a follow up. That's the way of the world I suppose. Before we signed with Metal Blade, we had an opportunity to work with Season of Mist but we decided to try Metal Blade out in the hope that it would help raise the profile of the band, allow us to do things on a higher level and possibly enable us to do bigger tours. It didn't really work out as we were anticipating.

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Most of the cool things we did, such as playing Hellfest, Ozz Fest and the entire year of touring that we did can all be attributed to our manager, Mark Vieira. In retrospect, we probably should have taken the path with Season of Mist; they have great bands, the aesthetic of the label matches our aesthetic. It's also the right size for us. Metal Blade is like a huge corporation and we didn't really figure in with their master plan.

Relapse was great. Having a body of work on that label was a long-term goal for me at the time. I worked hard and achieved my goal. I continue to have a solid relationship with everyone at that label. Tombs had a great run with them but that chapter ended and it was time to move on to the next thing. Our stint with Metal Blade was like a small detour, a footnote. Coincidentally, I don't like the record we did for them; I think *"The grand annihilation"* is probably our weakest release.



Season of Mist has been great so far. I feel really engaged with them. They have an office in Philadelphia, here on the east coast; that means something to me for some reason even though the label is primarily known as a European label.

My experience with Relapse and Season of Mist is equal. Both labels are run by great people and have a great work ethic, which is probably the most important thing to me.

For the artwork of *"Monarchy of shadows"*, you worked with French renowned artist Valnoir (Metastazis). I have some of his art books and remember that he likes to have 100% freedom when creating art for bands. Was this also the case when you teamed up with him for the visual side of the EP or did you give him some guidelines based on texts and song titles?

I have the highest level of respect for Valnoir. He did the artwork for *"All empires fall"* a few years ago and he's also doing the artwork for the forthcoming LP that we're working on. I'm a huge fan of his work and admire his ability to capture the essence of his subjects. Everything he does looks different and unique; he has this uncanny ability to capture the spirit of the band, artist that he is working with. I fully trust his vision.

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What does the EP title “*Monarchy of shadows*” mean?

With the exception of “*Path of totality*”, which is an older song that we re-recorded, the lyrics on “*Monarchy of shadows*” work with the idea that any ideas of order and logic are illusions. We live in a world of chaos and entropy, it’s our data-chunking primate brain that tries to make sense of things. In the title song, I work with the idea of “*As above, so below*” which comes from various Hermetic teachings and sacred geometry. The material world resembles the astral plane which is vibrating in chaos or at least at a frequency that we can’t understand.



I believe that all of our beliefs, religious, spiritual and philosophical are reflections of our own egos and that the true nature of our reality is way beyond our comprehension. By all accounts, most of our reality is made up of undetectable dark matter and we live in a world of shadows.

Although the label promo sheet mentions six new tracks, the closing one is a re-recorded version of the “*Path of totality*” title track. Due to the heavy production, this version is even better than the original one. Why did you decide to re-record this song and add the words “*Midnight sun*” between brackets?

“*Path of totality*” has been on the setlist as the closer ever since it was written. It’s one of the older songs that I still really enjoy performing. I think Justin suggested we rerecord the track because we play it slightly different these days. It’s faster and there are some subtle tempo changes thrown in. The song has been with me for a long time, over many, many tours. In a way it’s a link between the present, past and future.

On a more practical level, I wasn’t satisfied with the original production and the new version sounds crushing, more in line with what I wanted.

In 2018, your own label Everything Went Black Media released the “*The stockton tapes*” containing demo versions of all ten songs from “*The grand annihilation*” record. Why did you choose to release these versions? Were you not satisfied with how they eventually turned out on the record?

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I'm a big fan of listening to band's demo recordings. Early versions of songs give an insight into the process of creating the music. I love the Rollins Band "*End of silence*" demos that came out on 2.13.61 a few years back. You can hear the adjustments made as the band dialed in. Also, there is always a story behind every record and I like to be part of that. I was hoping to share this process with anyone who is interested in that kind of thing. We recorded the demos at Chapel Black, the Black Anvil studio/rehearsal space. It was cool to work on the songs with friends, people that I trust.



Are there plans to tour for "*Monarchy of shadows*"? Are you coming over to Europe and more specifically Belgium and the Netherlands?

As said, we're heading out for a US tour with Napalm Death, Aborted and Wvrm. I'm not sure about Europe. We don't have an agent in Europe at the moment, but I would like to come over even if it's for a couple of fests. We haven't done a proper European tour in a few years.

Outside your band activities, you are also active as a writer for Noisey, Revolver, Bandcamp Daily and Decibel, you have the Everything Went Black podcast, you have your own Savage Gold coffee brand, you DJ at Gimme Radio and are interested in combat sports, horror movies and comics. Where do you keep finding the time for all these activities and do you need this variation to prevent from being bored in life?

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Thanks for paying attention. I like doing things and I'm not very good at maintaining personal relationships. I'm not the kind of guy that will call on the weekends to see what you're up to. I'm more likely to be reading, working on music or training martial arts. At this stage of my life, fear motivates me; the fear that I will have lived a meaningless life. I'm not going to have a family or any offspring so I want to make my mark in some other way.

What do you consider your biggest achievement(s) in life up until now and do you have any other ambitions left?

I feel like most of my accomplishments have been relatively trivial. These days anyone can make a record or put music out online. Music is a passion and I don't really consider it to be an accomplishment. I'd like to get more serious about writing. I feel like I have at least two or three books in me. I've lived a fairly interesting life and have some perspectives that might have some value to people.

Metal Matters is your weekly podcast where you do discussions about classic records, up-and-coming bands and interviews with your favorite artists. I really enjoyed the episode with the living and breathing music encyclopedia Ralph Schmidt (Ultha, ex-Planks), who is a longtime friend of yours and one of my musical heroes. It seems you have a huge shared love for darkwave and goth rock. Did you already hear some music of his new darkwave band Ropes Of Night?

Ralph is like a brother to me. I love and respect him so much. He's one of those rare people that I feel connected to; I feel like we are reflections of each other in some ways. We both love the same bands, we're both handsome devils and both love HP Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe. I have only heard about Ropes of Night. He hasn't shared it with me yet.



To end this interview, I wanted to tell you a fun anecdote from your tour with Planks back in the days. On your show in Wilrijk, Belgium, my band Timer played as support. I don't know if you remember, but it was quite hot that day and since you played soooooo fucking loud, everybody stood outside and watched you playing through a big glass window for an 'empty' venue. Do you remember this gig and are you as excited as I am about the (short) Planks resurrection that is planned for 2020?

Honestly, I do not remember but I am really excited about the Planks reunion!

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