

# VITAL SPIRIT - WRESTLING WITH THE TRADITIONAL BELIEF OF SPIRIT AS THE VITAL PRINCIPLE WITHIN ALL LIVING THINGS

Although a new entity in the flesh, Canadian, Vancouver based unorthodox Black Metal band Vital Spirit is a special collaboration between two scene veterans: Kyle Tavares (Seer, Wormwitch) and Israel Langlais (Wormwitch). Vital Spirit was conceived while the duo travelled North America during Wormwitch's 2018-19 tours, and consequently is influenced by the continent's landscape and history. *"In the Faith that Looks through Death"*, the band's first recording, is a remarkably accomplished work that breathes new life into Black Metal's tired 'n' often-trite corpse. *"Harrowing ballads imbued with the enduring spirit of the Americas"* is how the duo describes this four-song/17-minute work, and indeed will one find the windswept grandeur of the Wild West writ large across this potent 'n' poignant short-length. Kyle Tavares shares some insights into Vital Spirit's musical and lyrical universe. (JOKKE)



**Inspiration to form Vital Spirit arose during the 2018 and 2019 American tours of your other band Wormwitch. Which specific areas, encounters or events made such a big impression on you to decide to incorporate Spaghetti Western influences in your Black Metal music?**

The origins of Vital Spirit date back to the spring of 2017. I don't recall exactly what put me on a search for western influenced Black Metal, but I was surprised to find it in short supply. I came across some really great bands, but none that did it exactly the way I had in mind. Initially I envisioned incorporating the western influences into my other band's music, and over the next few years I wrote a number of riffs with a western vibe as potential Seer material. On tour, the long drives through untamed land gave some perspective on what the frontiersmen were venturing into, and what life might have been like for the indigenous people before their arrival. This set the stage for my deep dive into the history of the American West, which eventually led to the repurposing of the aforementioned material into *"In the Faith that Looks through Death"*. Essentially, I ended up trying my hand at creating the music I was searching for back in 2017, and Vital Spirit is the result.

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Although mixing Black Metal with Americana and Spaghetti Western sounds has been done before (e.g. Volahn, Devil With No Name, Cobalt, Black Twilight Circle, ...), I have never heard such a good blend as on your debut EP *"In the Faith that Looks through Death"*. How goes the writing process? Do you start from a Black Metal basis where you add these non-metal influences, or is it the other way around? Does this blending of music styles require another approach to writing music compared to your other bands?

Thank you for the kind words. Rather than alternate between Metal and Western parts, I hope to incorporate a Western sound into the riffs themselves. The writing process will typically begin with a riff written this way, and the rest of track develops from there. I don't find the process all that different from my other bands, once I have a starting point the process is very similar. I try to write songs that have peaks and valleys, and flow well. I don't often wrestle with my songs.

You list your musical influences as Ennio Morricone, Taake, Ulver, American country singer Marty Robbins, Dissection, Earth, Drudkh, Inquisition and Wovenhand. That's quite a big variety of musical genres and although I can relate to most of these references, I think there is much more room left to broaden your sound with country and folk elements, maybe also vocal-wise? Or will you always let the Metal factor dominate in Vital Spirit's sound?



I think there are many directions we could go, down Western and Metal pathways yet unexplored. I would love to include passages that very closely imitate Morricone with minimal metal elements, and there's certainly room to go less energetic and more atmospheric with the riffing as well. I purposefully chose to keep the vocals on *"In the Faith that Looks through Death"* relatively monotonous, but I'm not married to that approach on future releases. For the next album, I want to expand on what we did with the EP, but I don't want to go over the top experimental with it.

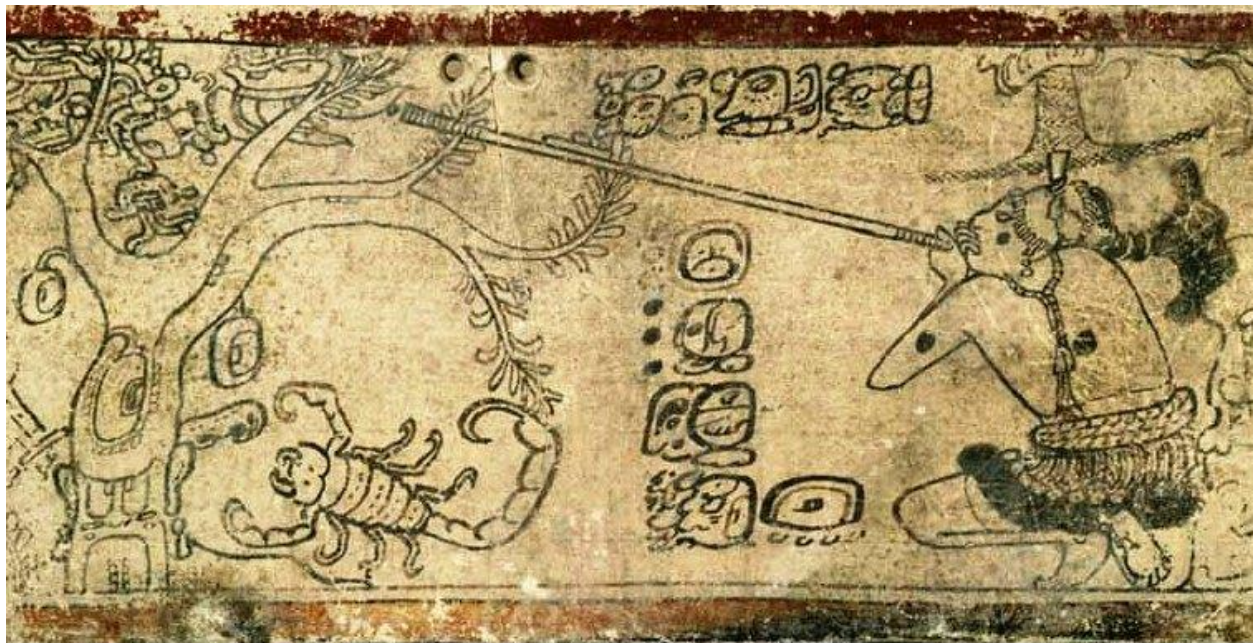
Most Metal aficionados probably got to know the work of the recently deceased Ennio Morricone through Metallica who open their live gigs since decades with *"The Ecstasy of Gold"*. When and how did you get to know the work of Morricone and what do you think are his best compositions?

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You nailed it! I saw Metallica in 2004 on the St. Anger tour, I was thirteen. My cousin later played *"The Ecstasy of Gold"* for me (likely downloaded on Napster) and that's when I remember hearing Morricone's name for the first time. Highlights for me include *"For a Few Dollars More"*, *"The Hellbenders"*, *"L'Arena"*, and *"The Surrender"*. *"The Thing"* soundtrack is another favourite. It was a little strange that he passed away while I was working on this release, as I was watching western films (including some he did the soundtracks for) nearly every night for weeks.

**Lyrically, you cover many interesting topics, so let's dive some deeper into it. The opening track *"Heart of sky"* mentions Vucub Caquix, a bird demon in Mayan culture pretending to be the sun and moon of the twilight world in between the former creation and the present one. The lyrics also mention Ix Chel, the aged jaguar goddess of midwifery and medicine in ancient Mayan culture. What is this song about and why did you ask an outsider to write the lyrics?**

The lyrics for *"Heart of Sky"* were written by my friend Damian Sandoval, who I met in school at age 10. He had immigrated to Canada from Mexico a few years prior, and provided a suburban Canadian kid like me with valuable perspective that altered my course significantly. We were close friends all through our teenage years and played music together up until about a decade ago, when we lost touch to some extent. I saw this project as a good moment to reconnect, as he is a talented wordsmith and very well versed in prehispanic mythology.



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In his words: *"These lyrics are about the gradual erasure of a world. They express the kind of collective despair that comes with the loss of a people's past. The violence of European colonization in the Americas was felt—and continues to be felt—not only through the catastrophic loss of life and physical subjugation experienced by the colonized, but also (and*

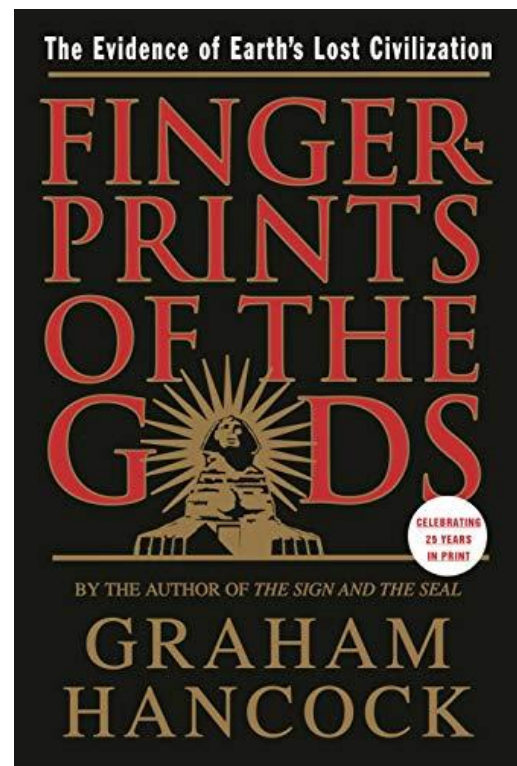


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*maybe more profoundly) through the destruction of historical and mythological records connecting entire civilizations to their collective pasts and world-views. These lyrics imagine a Mayan people grasping at memories of a glorious past as it fades into oblivion. It is a kind of lament against the amnesia of colonization. In the Popol Vuh (one of the few remaining collections of Mayan mythological stories) the Vucub Caquix is an arrogant trickster figure that tears off the arm of one of the story's Hero Twins. Here, he is imagined tearing off tongues, symbolizing the loss of language that came with centuries of colonial subjugation. Ixchel is used here as a stand-in for a spiritual mother, capable of healing a people orphaned from their ancestors, and thus, their place in the cosmic order."*

In Europe, we are not so familiar with the complex mythology of Maya culture. Did you know a lot about this culture and its myths before starting with Vital Spirit or is it something that has been intriguing you for a longer time? Any interesting literature you can recommend as a starting point for those who would like to delve deeper into Mayan culture?

My interest in ancient civilizations over the years has given me a decent overview of prehispanic Meso-america, but I plan to dive deeper once I've grasped the American Indian Wars, which will likely be the focus for the next Vital Spirit release. Graham Hancock is obviously a polarizing writer, but "alternative history" aside, I learned a great deal about prehispanic mythology from "*Fingerprints of the Gods*". Sitting on my shelf currently is "*1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*", which looks to be an interesting read. I believe it's focus is on culture rather than mythology.



The song "*Centaur*" refers to Francisco "Pancho" Villa, a Mexican revolutionary general and one of the most prominent figures of the Mexican Revolution. As the "Centaur from the North" he was considered a threat to property and order on both sides of the border, feared, and revered, as a modern Robin Hood. Despite the massive bloodshed, the Mexican Revolution is the most romanticized period in Mexican history. Especially Emiliano Zapata Salazar (Volahn's latest EP "*El Tigre del Sur*" is dedicated to this leading figure in the Mexican Revolution) and Pancho Villa have become famous. In Mexico they have almost attained mythical status. Numerous cities and states have been named after them and their actions have been made into films many times. In the US, Pancho Villa remains a controversial figure. This brings me to

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recent events happening in the US and all over the world. While the Black Lives Matter movement aims to bring an end to systemic racism, the removal of statues in the US, UK and Europe has drawn controversy and is also being extended to the removal of statues of revolutionaries and war figures. Many heroes of the past are considered dishonourable today. Should these relics be removed or preserved as mementos of history?



I think it's naive to believe that during this time of heightened polarization we would be able to compromise in a way that would appease everyone. People seem to respond more positively to controversial historical artifacts when they're displayed in museums, but it wouldn't surprise me if there are those who then claim the museums themselves to be problematic. Many will scoff at this suggestion, as I would have a couple years ago. There are certain effigies the majority of people are likely to support the removal or relocation of, but a radical minority will persist in tearing down the more popular statues. In both cases there is a conversation to be had on the tyranny of the majority, and further, the value of democracy. I am curious to know how the American statues of Lenin are holding up...

***"Ghost Dance"*** refers to a religious movement incorporated into numerous Native American belief systems. According to the teachings of the Northern Paiute spiritual leader Wovoka, proper practice of the dance would reunite the living with spirits of the dead, bring the spirits to fight on their behalf, end westward expansion, and bring peace, prosperity, and unity to Native American peoples throughout the region. The basis for the Ghost Dance is the circle dance, a traditional Native American dance. Is there room for spirituality and rituals of any kind in your daily life? Do you consider yourselves spiritual persons?

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Part of the overarching concept for Vital Spirit is wrestling with the traditional belief of spirit as the vital principle within all living things, and the modern understanding of consciousness as the organization of energy in the brain. What did the indigenous peoples of the Americas think about the nature of reality? What happened when these cosmologies intersected with European beliefs? What does this mean in the context of the modern world? I'm not sure if I consider myself spiritual. Does my interest in these subjects make me spiritual? Currently, my most ritualistic practice takes place in the sauna, which in some small way approximates a sweat lodge. I'd like to think so anyway.



**You post many beautiful pictures about some of the lyrical themes on your Instagram account, but I would like to see more accompanying explanation of what the pictures and images is about, no?**

Typically, I will tag a location that can provide some insight into what/who the images are of. Further explanation would take considerable time and effort, which I would prefer to spend on lyrics, some of which concern the locations and people included in the photos.

**Your lyrics are inspired by the words of Wovoka, Patti Smith, Chilam Balam, Townes Van Zandt, and the corridos of the Mexican Revolution. The corrido is a popular narrative metrical tale and poetry that forms a ballad. The songs are often about oppression, history, daily life for criminals, and other socially relevant topics. It's still a popular form today in Mexico and was widely popular during the Mexican Revolutions of the 20th century. Modern artists have created a modern twist to the historical such as the narcocorridos (literally "drug-ballad"). The Mexican government has tried to ban them because of their explicit and controversial lyrics. However, the northern states of Mexico can still get access to these songs through US radio stations whose signal still reaches there. Narcocorridos have been growing in popularity in the US and they have been targeted for the American public. Also, in Rap and Metal music, lyrics are often explicit and cover violent and controversial topics. Is there a point to where you can draw the line regarding what is acceptable or not to sing about in music?**



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I oppose state censorship and firmly believe that no topic should be off limits. Individuals can choose to avoid music that includes topics they find distasteful. I plan to venture into the history of controversial individuals, but this doesn't necessarily mean I celebrate them or condone their actions. There was a time when this seemed to go without saying, but I think today its more dangerous to touch certain historical events without the approved ideological bend than it is to be superficially graphic or extreme.



**For the vinyl release of *"In the Faith that Looks through Death"* you will work with German label Vendetta Records but the tape version is being released on your own label Hidden Tribe Records. Will you also release material by other bands? What goals do you have with Hidden Tribe Records?**

For now, all of the releases we have planned for Hidden Tribe are bands I myself am involved in, but I'm not opposed to releasing music from other artists in the future. So far, I enjoy the process of running the label, and can see the role being a more substantial part of my life if it expands, but first priority is creating a home for my projects and those of my collaborators.

**Is there a story behind the beautiful artwork on the cover?**

The cover art is a Navajo sandpainting, which were originally painted during ceremonies such as the Nightway ceremony. This particular painting depicts the story of the Buffalo People: A holy man is led on a wild hunt of four buffalo—two male and two female—who eventually reveal themselves as Buffalo People sent to teach prayers and paintings for him to use during rituals. The holy man takes the two females as his wives, who turn out to be daughters of the chief, and wives of Buffalo Who Never Dies. The holy man kills Buffalo Who Never Dies in self-defense, and all but the two female Buffalo People die as a result. The holy man then uses magic to revive them, and returns Buffalo Who Never Dies' wives.

**Can we soon expect more music? Are you working on a full-length album?**

A full length feels like the next move, perhaps early next year.

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Vital Spirit operates as a duo. Are you looking into the possibility of adding (a) additional live member(s) to transform Vital Spirit into a live band?

Yes, our live lineup will include some familiar faces from the Seer/Wormwitch camp.

I recently stumbled upon Ifernach, a Canadian Black Metal one-man band from the land of Gespegewagi that integrates MI'KMAQ heritage into his music. I also watched the mini-documentary *"Metal from the Dirt: Inside the Navajo Reservation's DIY Heavy-Metal Scene"*. Are there any other Indigenous Black Metal bands you can recommend that sing about Native American culture?

Aside from the bands you've previously mentioned (who are all great), Pan-Amerikan Native Front, Maquahuitl, and Blue Hummingbird on the Left are some of my favourites. I've received a number of messages from individuals who have projects in the works, so we could be on the brink of an Indigenous metal boom. I'm all for it.

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