

SHADOW PLAY

X'HO AND ARCN TEMPL AVOID THE LIGHT

There's no way of writing a history of Singapore's cultural landscape without X'ho taking the limelight. Whether as a musician, author, club DJ, radio personality or filmmaker, the man has been tireless in airing countercultural and experimental sentiments in a voice that's all of angry, fearless, righteous and yet, kind. No idle rebellion, X's protest emerges out of a love for our nation – its people and its potential – which has seen him stick up for the underground and the underdog ever since he first stepped up to the mic at Rediffusion. His crusade continues up till this very day: this month marks the release of his collaborative effort with ARCN TEMPL (the pairing of The Observatory's Vivian Wang and Leslie Low), an album he calls Lucifugous. On it, the trio, alongside guests like Ara Ophidia, Bani Haykal and Dharma, have been working in the dark to bring form, shade and mood to X's original tracks (save for a cover of a song by Von). As expected, Lucifugous is not intended to be easy listening, but better yet, it's a black and grand spiritual force that gives vent to pain, anguish and eventual redemption. On the eve of its release, we spoke to Lucifugous' three main players to find out more about their play in the shadows.

What's been keeping all of you busy lately?

X': Busy living and finding happiness plus working freelance (like it's been all these years) as a DJ – both radio and club-work – and formulating new musical ideas with various like-minded musicians. I've already got two other albums in the works, one – actually an EP – already finished with Everafter, whom I've worked with a few years ago on that mini-album Baphomet Sacrum. And I've been traveling a fair bit this past year too – to Zurich, New York, Bangkok and Beijing – the last, my favourite new haunt.

Leslie: The Observatory are currently writing new material for our sixth album. As ARCN TEMPL, we are preparing for a short tour of the North American west coast. Besides that, I've also been involved with Piblokto, the brainchild of Alexius Cai, rehearsing for some upcoming performances as a duo.

Vivian: Life as a fulltime music artist is fulfilling on a deep personal level, but also very challenging in Singapore. Basic things like housing, living expenses and food all amount to quite a financial commitment. Rather than part-time or freelance work to lean on, our focus these past years has been to work completely in music and the arts, and see where that takes us. Whether we've succeeded, the jury is still out.

What was it that brought all you together? And what did you find you shared with each other, in terms of musical or aesthetic sensibilities?

X': This project actually started when I went to Les and Viv to get them to produce what I'd already written. They sat me down and recorded me with a basic click-track of beats and to the atmospheric soundscapes of Ara Ophidia I'd

chosen. Ara Ophidia (a Singapore indie-electronica musician) had sent me a bunch of tracks for me to use to get that dark, ghostly effect I was after. With Les, I trust his musical instincts like a second skin. I know I'd be comfortable with them on a musical level and that I know they would understand my musical ideas as well. Besides, I love what they do in The Observatory and ARCN TEMPL. What started initially as production work grew into an actual collaboration with them providing a lot of instrumental accompaniment to the vocals I had laid down in their little studio.

Vivian: X' is a huge inspiration, not just musically but in an ideological way as well. This is a guy who first raised questions about establishment and institution long before the advent of social media. X' was also the definitive guide to new music, well, at least for me. He always had his finger on the pulse from way back when Rediffusion was still de rigueur listening. He's practically a living icon to many of us, growing up to his radio programmes and marveling at the liberating energy of Zircon Lounge, which left such an impression on us. It's obvious to me that X' displays a deep empathic wrath towards ugly and draconian behaviour, which really conversely means he feels for people. He aligns himself with the

disenfranchised, and his rants are a way of standing up for real people and fellow human beings. There's an anonymous quote that seems appropriate to X', "The loneliest people are the kindest, the saddest smile the brightest, the most damaged people are the wisest. All because they don't wish to see anyone else suffer the way they do."

Do you remember the first thing you wrote together?

Leslie: Usually, Chris has his songs already written when we begin work. He already has an idea of how he wants to approach them. I think the first song he and I worked on was for Eric Khoo's 12 Storeys soundtrack. A song called "We're Always Halfway There". The vocal melody and lyrics were already written. I just had to lay in my parts and produce the thing. That was the first thing we worked on music together in a studio environment.

Why the decision to make a collaborative record?

X': It really wasn't planned to be a collaboration. Les and Viv were roped in to just produce. But when I heard the end result, I told them they should be credited as collaborators because of the actual amount of music they contributed.

Vivian: I think X' mooted the idea first. He is tight with Leslie and has been since the days of Humpback Oak. X' was instrumental in getting HO their first real break, which led to their first album release on Pony Canyon, a major label then in the '90s. With Lucifugous, it was really about the three of us wanting to do something together and really sort of improvising as we went along. The person who knew what he was doing most was X'. The arrangements and musical parts were spontaneously done. What we first accomplished together was the recording of vocals, and setting down some chord structures that would work with X's lyrics. If anything was considered important for Leslie and I, it would be we knew we had to do justice to X's lyrics. We wanted to make sure that the impact of his poetry could still be felt.

In setting out to make Lucifugous, was there a blueprint on where the sound should be headed?

X': I had originally envisioned the sound to be dark, experimental and rough, like a broken-down cassette-tape of ghostly musing. Like some primitive basement recording of songs I had made up in deep gloom as mantras for daily living, 'cos that's what the songs are about – daily mantras for maintaining sanity but with a very ghoulish undertone, as if dug from the shuttered crevices of a poisoned mind. Imagine a poltergeist-treasure-chest of life's hard-earned wisdom still infused with all the energy of pain, anguish and struggles that brought on the songs in the first place. So that's what I had in mind when I laid down my vocals with Ara Ophidia's synth-scapes. What Les and Viv did, in the end, was like polishing that treasure-chest into a gleaming tome with a gilded finish. I was quite blown away at the result that I had no second thoughts about letting go of the original plan for the album to sound rough and sonically decrepit. In other words, it went from my vision of a cassette-sounding lo-fi album to something worthy of preservation on vinyl, which the album is also released on now.

Leslie: There was an initial blueprint that Chris had in mind. Something a bit folkier, but wintery cold instead of sunny warm. As I started working on the tracks, the direction changed into a heavier, darker industrial feel. His previous releases had also been in the spoken word tradition, mixed with electronic atmospheres and occasionally dance elements, and more recently, songs in a folk vein. So I thought it is time for an album of songs again, backed by a band of musicians.

What were some challenges as well as highlights during the making of the record?

X': From my side of the experience, it was all about capturing a targeted mood for each of the songs. My vocals were sort of a theatrical endeavor projecting the right feeling, nuances and depth for the right inflection, like getting the right tone of lighting to achieve the best shadow-play. The music of the album is really like a kind of shadow-play of sounds. We didn't light candles and turn the studio into a secret ceremony (like we should), so we had to simply imagine the alternate reality the album is set in and simply went for the feel when we did it.

Leslie: The recordings were done in my makeshift studio at home. We laid down all the vocal tracks on top of Brennan's soundscapes. At the time, we were touring with The Observatory and recording a new album, so Lucifugous was left on the backburner for a year. The biggest challenge for me was juggling the long hours of recording and mixing, carried out mostly at nights and on weekends, between busy schedules. The highlights were also the additional musicians who contributed their parts to the songs, which breathed life into album.

Vivian: I think the challenge with any project is being creative without fear. I say this because Singapore can be a place where one feels fearful or easily discouraged. There's so much of oneself that's vested in the creative process. It's surrender of the most vulnerable kind. How do we present the songs but leave enough room for listeners to identify with the material? For me, it's also the

darker, more insidious side of Singapore life we choose to explore. This sometimes can be difficult if you spend so much time in this headspace. But one simply cannot ignore your muse. If this is the apocalyptic head you have to live with, you must follow inspiration wherever it takes you.

What do you reckon each of you brought to the creative process? And how would you describe the dynamic between the three of you?

Vivian: X' has a firm grasp of how he wants to deliver his lyrics vocally. It's then up to the three of us in our studio to establish tempo, mood, atmosphere, loose arrangement ideas and whatever else musically that comes to mind. I remember there's some crazy squealing and screaming that ended on the track "Her Soul's Demise", which I'm still a little uncomfortable listening to because it's so raw, obviously demented and painful sounding. That's how Lucifugous comes off; there are tender moments right alongside some really gnarly, aggressive parts. It's raw but somewhat poised and dignified still. The album runs the gamut from neo-folk to industrial to just plain weird.

X': There were no hitches at all when the three of us worked on it together, 'cos our minds were in total unity of one another; that's how I recall the experience. We'd exchange ideas and suggestions and the end result was always something we could unanimously agree on. Well, maybe except on the title track, where I'd preferred the Chinese lyrics to be recited by a native-speaking Chinese voice. But Les and Viv insisted that despite my awkward pronunciation, the voice should be mine and not a guest contributor's. Since they are my producers, I respected their choice and eventually conceded.

What did you take away from the making of Lucifugous?

Vivian: I think X' would answer this more eloquently. For me, making this album has been strangely therapeutic. It's an album to help one scream. If you identify with the seething resentment and anger towards things unjust, this album paints a pretty sinister picture. But it's also beautiful and poetic in a transcendental way; X' has a way with words. And what Les and I have tried to do is to harness the power of these words musically. It's not posturing a punk attitude. There is a very real sense of contemplation and longing beneath the gravity of oppression and regimentation described. The loss of soul is the key message.

And what are your own thoughts listening to the final product? X': It feels like the long-overdue album Zircon Lounge-fans have been waiting for after Regal Vigor. I dare say there's nothing else quite like it from Singapore.

What do you hope a listener takes away from Lucifugous? X': A smile and a ready mind to hum the songs as a way of surviving life's troubling factors, the kinds which "avoid light" – which is what the title refers to.

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