

THE MARS VOLTA

The genesis of The Mars Volta's new album *The Bedlam in Goliath* is one of the weirdest stories in the history of modern music, a tale of long-buried murder victims and their otherworldly influence, of strife and near collapse, of the long hard fight to push "the record that did not want to be born" out into the world. And I swear we'll get to all of that in a second.

But right now, before we drag any new passengers on the Volta Express into the lunacy of *The Bedlam in Goliath*, we've got to bring them up to speed. And so I present "A Very Brief History of The Mars Volta":

Back at the turn of the century guitarist/producer Omar Rodriguez-Lopez and lyricist/vocalist Cedric Bixler-Zavala decided to form a musical partnership called The Mars Volta. They grabbed a few other intrepid musicians and recorded *The Tremulant* EP, which was incredible and weird and proved these guys were trailblazing far from the paths tread by their prior band, *At the Drive-In*.

Then they released *De-Loused In The Comatorium*, an astonishing album that served as both an elegy for and celebration of their friend Julio Venegas (as told through the fictional character Cerpin Taxt whose life-and-death travails are chronicled via the songs). The album was huge in terms of exposure, influence, and raw momentum.

Next came *Frances the Mute*, an album with a central plot, based, sadly, on the loss of another friend (this time fellow musician and bandmate Jeremy Ward). An equally bizarre and powerful album. For this record and the remainder since, Omar has produced solo, dropping some of the pop sheen that Rick Rubin brought to the first album in favor of more experimental textures and structures. If *De-Loused...* was a dark album, this thing is obsidian. And also inspiring. And majestic.

Most recently they released *Amputecture*, their first album with no central concept (aside from stretching the boundaries of their prior musical achievements). Omar worked as a director/conductor/visionary, writing all the music and providing motivation, while Cedric stretched his vocals and lyrics around multi-tiered songs about things like modern witch-burnings, cultural oppression, and madness. The soaring intensity of the single *Viscera Eyes* alone is worth the admission.

The tours supporting each of these albums have proven that The Mars Volta is an endlessly ambitious group intent on turning a standard concert into something transformative that can best be described as an aural blitzkrieg. Saul Williams, no slouch when it comes to rocking a stage, once joked that he rushed through his opening sets just so he could watch the Volta sooner.

Point Being: If you don't have these albums, you need them. If you do have them then you know exactly what I'm talking about and you're anticipating *The Bedlam*

in Goliath more than any other record this year. And you know, as I do, that if the Volta comes to your town for a show that you *have to* be there or a little bit of your soul dies. That's a science fact.

Which brings us to the now, on the eve of the release of The Mars Volta's stunning new recording. Which brings us to The Story.

Perhaps it's best to insert a prologue for this tale stating that some (cynics, pragmatists, people who would like their life to be more boring) may instantly respond with rolled-eyes and disbelief. And that's okay. But others are willing to acknowledge that most metaphysics may just be the elements of physics our brains can't quite comprehend yet, and that there is a great power in words, and in belief.

Quotes from two Volta compatriots offer a relevant lead-in:

"The things you speak to can shape your world. Look at Biggie. 'Ready to Die.' Dead. Word."

— Saul Williams (again)

"This is the sound of what you don't know killing you. This is the sound of what you don't believe, still true. This is the sound of what you don't want, still in you."

—El-P

And so, all that being said, here is The Story (and various annotations):

Omar was in a curio shop in Jerusalem when he found the Soothsayer. It seemed to him an ideal gift for Cedric, this archaic Ouija-style "talking board." So it was then and there, in a city where the air swims with religious fervor, in a shop that might as well have carried monkey's paws and Mogwais, that Omar changed the fate of The Mars Volta forever.

Had he known at that moment that the board's history stretched far beyond its novelty appearance, that its very fibers were soaked through with something terribly other, that the choral death and desire of a multi-headed Goliath was waiting behind its gates... well, he might have left it at rest there on the dusty shelves.

The Upside of That Choice: No bad mojo unleashed. Erase the madness that followed. Erase the bizarre connection to a love/lust/murder triangle that threatened to spill out into the present every time the band let its fingers drift over the board.

The Downside: No Soothsayer means The Bedlam in Goliath never would have existed. And it turns out that this demented spiritual black hole of a muse has driven The Mars Volta to produce a crowning moment in their already stellar career.

So if Omar hadn't given in to his curiosity and brought the Soothsayer home to Cedric then the band would probably have been happier, healthier, less haunted.

But you and I, Lucky Listener, we would have been robbed of one fucking *amazing* album.

More on that in a moment.

Back up to the last big tour. The Volta and the Red Hot Chili Peppers are tearing venues in half, retreating to their busses, rolling through the night. But instead of the normal Rock God routines the guys are sitting around Cedric's new Ouija board, which they've dubbed the Soothsayer. And they love it— it's the new post-show addiction.

The Soothsayer offers them names: Goliath, Mr. Mugs, Patience Worth, Tourniquet Man.

The Soothsayer offers them a story: It's always about a man, a woman, and her mother. About the lust floating between them. About seduction and infidelity. And

pain. And eventually, murder. Entrails and absence and curses and oblivion. Exactly the kind of spooky shit you'd want from your Ouija.

Now here comes the rub.

The Soothsayer starts asking the band what *they* have to offer. This connection that's set up runs both ways, and the invisible voices begin to speak of their appetites.

They threaten oblivion and dissolution, or offer it as seduction. The voices merge as Goliath, a metaphysical quagmire and unfed saint whose hunger to return to the real world grows more urgent with each connection.

There are proper ways to close this union, but The Mars Volta have never been anything if not adventurous. They stay in contact— even taking phrases from the board and inserting them as song lyrics— but never offer themselves as surrogates. And so the starving Goliath extends its influence.

Inexplicable equipment issues abound while on tour.

Conflict with the existing drummer escalates and results in a change of guard.

Ritual gives way to injury and Cedric is laid low by a randomly (and severely) gimped foot.

A completely reliable engineer's mental composure cracks, pushing him from the project. The tracks he leaves behind are desperately tangled.

Omar's music studio floods, threatening to send him right over the same precipice as the engineer.

Long-term album delays hit and people aren't sleeping well.

Nonsensical words and phrases the board had previously spoken begin to pop up in things like documentaries about mass suicide.

The Soothsayer keeps telling the same story but the details are becoming more brutal.

One day the label on the board peels back revealing pre-Aramaic lingo written across weird cone shapes.

It's bad mojo writ large, and things are crumbling quickly.

Worst of all, the board has shifted from pleas to demands.

To threats.

So they buried the fucking thing.

There are many ways to close a spiritual connection. Wear white for a whole year. Surround yourself with salt. Close a board and ask someone else to open it, thus transferring the ownership. Break the board into seven pieces and sprinkle it with holy water. Or bury it.

Omar wrapped the Soothsayer in cloth and found a proper place for it in the soil. Cedric asked that he never be made aware of its location.

And then their album found a new, more urgent purpose.

The Bedlam in Goliath is here to consecrate the grounds where the Soothsayer lies in wait. It's metaphor vs. metaphysics. Its story will be told to you and I, Lucky Listener, and we're the ones re-opening the board. Taking on the ownership.

Perhaps if Goliath is spread between us all its hunger will dissipate. Or, as it threatened, it could become our epidemic.

So there's the story, up to today, but it's not over. Because this thing is about to enter the hearts and minds of countless listeners. My hope is that the album will do

exactly as The Mars Volta have engineered it to do, and lift the unseen burden that hangs over them.

When they first sent me *The Bedlam in Goliath* and asked me to write this, I was nervous. What if the music itself was somehow cursed, a sort of audio Macbeth?

But after over one hundred listens I can tell you with confidence that I'd risk a little spiritual vengeance for this album.

From the opening surge of *Aberinkula* to the Brobdingnagian blast of *Goliath* to the frenzy and near escape of *Conjugal Burns*, *The Bedlam in Goliath* is the sound of a band transformed. The Volta have never been what any sane person would call restrained, but in the heat of this bedlam, in their teeth-baring cornered animal response to an invisible entropy, they've created a truly relentless musical juggernaut.

The returning roster (Omar Rodriguez-Lopez on guitar and production, Cedric Bixler-Zavala on vocals and lyrics, Isaiah Ikey Owens on keys, Juan Alderete de la Pena on bass, Adrian Terrazas-Gonzalez on horns, Marcel Rodriguez-Lopez on percussion, Paul Hinojos on guitar and soundboard, Thomas "Holy Fucking Shit This New Guy is Incredible" Pridgen on drums, and Red Hot Chili Pepper/regular-Volta-album-contributor John Frusciante rounding out the guitar armada) have crafted a record that manages to contain the echoes of their considerable prior work and merge them with their uncompromising desire to carve out new territory in the musical landscape.

Wax Simulacra carries with it the energy of *De-Loused's This Apparatus Must Be Unearthed* and elevates the tone with frantic looped vocals and a swirling mix of horns and drum rolls. The mind-melting freak-out crescendos of tracks like *Frances the Mute's Cassandra Gemini* or *Amputecture's Viscera Eyes* have always given the Volta's albums and shows an air of transcendence, and there are moments on new tracks like *Goliath* and *Cavelettas* and *Ouroboros* that guarantee escalating listener paroxysms, if not *Scanners*-style exploding heads. The more relaxed new tracks, like *Ilyena* or *Tourniquet Man*, manage to encapsulate the strange lamentation of other Volta slow-burners while adding an eerie sense of menace. The entire Volta crew is pushing themselves further than ever before. And to anyone concerned about the arrival of a new drummer, rest at ease. *The Bedlam in Goliath* unveils Mr. Pridgen as a drum-pummeling berserker mainlining cheetah blood and snorting dusted mastodon bones, proving masterful with the elaborate and the explosive (and often melding both at the same time).

It's worth noting, amidst all of this rhapsodic praise, how Omar and a crew of dedicated musicians have managed to breathe thrumming life into what was almost a stillborn album. The audio that the first engineer (who, on an up note, is now on the mend and feeling much better) had left behind was close to unworkably snarled. In his absence it became a scramble to rebuild what the band knew they had been creating in the studio. Robert Carranza kicked in heavy on the engineering, sinking himself into the whole project with an added focus on the drum sonics. Lars Stalfors and Isaiah Abolin were also called in, and along with Omar they dodged daylight for too-long stretches and slaved to rework each track. Shawn Michael Sullivan and Claudius Mittendorfer did their best as editors to keep the band from having to start all over again. The ever-reliable Volta-mixer Rich Costey tried to keep things positive and helped Omar battle what he called *Goliath's* "quantum entanglement" (which even Rich saw evidenced by things like randomly disappearing drum tracks).

The depth of that entanglement becomes apparent when you realize that Omar, always at the center of these struggles, almost gave up on this record. The same Omar Rodriguez-Lopez that moved to Amsterdam and cut four solo albums while also working on Amputechture and a soundtrack for the Jorge Hernandez film *El Bufalo de la Noche*. The same guy that's probably working on a DVD, his own film, and 10 new albums right now. But at certain points during work on *Bedlam* his nearly incandescent creative force was on the verge of being snuffed out. And he was sure Goliath was behind the chaos. After his studio flooded, Omar even banned all mention of the Ouija board for fear that simply acknowledging its existence might bring down some fatal blow. Despite the disallowance, he remained haunted. He'd wake to fits of late night inspiration only to find that there was a power blackout (but only in his loft), or that the parts he'd crafted in the midnight hour would later vaporize. Production work became so nightmarish and Sisyphean that he'd occasionally check on the Soothsayer's burial site, to see if it had been exhumed and "reactivated."

Knowing about the immense challenges faced in the creation of *The Bedlam in Goliath* only elevates my appreciation for Omar's production. With this record he has laid out a blueprint for anyone else seeking to combine the complex with the primeval and make it all hit you where it counts. This is an album that's electric for both the 3:00 AM headphone listener and the guy doing 90 on the interstate with the windows down. This is an album with an immense level of control *and* experimentation on display; for every section with intricately panning gut-punching drums and shimmering horn sounds and scorching guitars there's another where you can sense a mischievous musical mind at play (e.g. the fuzzed out bass tones at the end of *Ilyena* or the real inserted recordings from Jerusalem or the sound of a live jack switching between demo and final versions on *Askepios*). As a filmic analog, picture Kubrick or Fincher working in tandem with Bunuel or Jodorowsky.

Actually, similar analogs could be extended to the whole of the album itself. The *Volta* have acknowledged the immense influence of surrealism and film on their work. In relation just to Jodorowsky, *The Bedlam in Goliath* manages to evoke the languid madness of *Fando y Lis*, the infidelity and murder and worship of *Santa Sangre*, the broad-spectrum religious imagery of *Holy Mountain*, the sheer guts-on-the-table awe of *El Topo*. Throw in the identity confusion head-fuckery of Lynch's strangest films, Werner Herzog's sense of obsession, a few dollops of *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*, and pinches of *The Exorcist* and *Don't Look Now* and you're starting to get the right idea.

On the lyrical front, you should be warned: This is an unsettling piece of work. You're welcome to take Cedric's vocals at surface level—he sounds incredible, his range broader than ever, his energy and emotion undeniable.

Or you can begin to translate. Cedric Bixler-Zavala, like fellow musical mavericks Bjork and Ghostface Killah, uses primarily English words but speaks his own lyrical language. If you examine the meaning behind his shrapnel-burst imagery, his obsessions with the grotesque and the profoundly sacred, you begin to realize he's created a complex associative tapestry that's designed with spider-web precision. And before you know it you're trapped.

The more you read the story he's laid out (an intricate meta-fictional narrative reminiscent of Danielewski's *House Of Leaves*, involving both the transgressions of the

past and the desire of the Goliath parasite to infest the Ouija-using host), the more you research his allusions and the history of the spirit board, the more uncanny connections you are bound to make. You start to recognize a tie between certain vocal effects and messages from the board. You wonder if focusing on this story too much might invite Goliath into *your* world. Soon you're jumping at shadows, shopping for salt and all-white outfits, surrounding yourself with graphs and counting words and letters and looking for codes, creating your own primordial cymatics using the album, feeling phantom tendrils in your bones. You begin to hope that all the positive elements Cedric covertly slid into the songs (a legion of religious references including snippets of Santeria-derived prayers, classic fables, the hidden name of a regal actress he holds in high regard, an underlying reverence for creation/menstruation, vague hints of redemption) really are helping to balance out and maybe even negate the darkness that has infested the album.

You're bound to have questions. What exactly transpired in the tragic triangle? Who was really in control and who were the victims? Was *anyone* innocent? How did they die and what happened to the bodies? How did they come to rest within the Soothsayer? If they return to our world, what will they do?

Those answers (and more) are in there, fused at every level to songs of equal complexity and gravity. And the closer you listen, the further you voyage into The Bedlam in Goliath, the more disquieting and compelling the Volta's brilliant audiocelluloid epic becomes.

This album is the sound of a band playing— magnificently— for its life. And it is a recording of such strange power that I believe the Goliath that haunts them will be forever struck down.

Word.

— Jeremy Robert Johnson, October 27th, 2007, Portland, Oregon

The Zayin Division— A Second Stage Burial

- I. I am the simian martyr's bullet-borne deliverance.
- II. Ideomotor effect. Forced cryptomnesia. Your shroud returns stale whispers. Ropes tighten at each limb.
- III. He half-woke to a wild leopard, to blood-pregnant air, the smell of his courted collapse. Laurel twigs crossed her hidden tools.
- IV. The holy glyph floats close, its gray light angles suffuse the bones now dust, flesh now jelly. Every cell shakes loose its viral code. *Supernus pacta sunt servanda.*
- V. Its hands swept through in the crooked mandible, the chemical lobotomy swung blind, the monoxide possessions. All of it annelid territory.
- VI. Sandover light shone symbiotic until you saw it swallow-shift. Your retractions granted final grace.
- VII. I will not follow your collapsing oblivion.

—JRJ, October 28th, 2007, Portland, Oregon (First print copy interment)