

TAPE OP MAGAZINE

Jan Muchow of Czech band **Ecstasy of St. Theresa** and **Studio Balance** by Heather Mount

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This is an additional history of Jan Muchow and his band, Ecstasy of Saint Theresa. His recording history appears in Tape Op #27.

How did you start playing music?

When I was about 15 I played soccer, I actually thought I wanted to be like the new Diego Maradona or something. My older brother started to play acoustic guitar - like the old stuff, Paganini, stuff like this - I would come home from training, tired, and fall into bed, and since we shared a room he played there, it was like I would hear his playing while falling off into dreams. Maybe this is why I started to want to do music - I heard those notes and they opened something inside.

So you went on to play guitar?

That was the only instrument we had at home, so of course I asked my brother to show me a few chords. When I learned like two chords, I would make songs. Now I think I'd be a lot more careful about it, but then I was like shameless and just wrote whatever I could from the two chords. That's why I started a band then and we all knew like three chords - it didn't matter, we all just felt that we wanted to play together in a band.

How did that start then? Who were the others that you started with?

We started with friends from school. We were listening to bands like Smiths, Cure, Cocteau Twins, '80s indie stuff. We used to hang out in the Café Slavia, now it's not like it was in the '80s. It used to really be a place for artists and intellectuals and stuff.

That is known as Havel's favorite café.

Yeah, in the '20s and '30s it was historically the place in Prague where poets met. So in the '80s it was where young people came and met. Above the café is a film school. We started going there since it was like the closest place to school. We quickly found that there were always interesting people there to talk with. So

when the band started it was like three guys from school and one guy we knew from the café.

Hang on, what school?

I was studying film. You know, we have in the Czech Republic that when you are like 13, in the 7th class, you have to choose what you want to do for your life, which is very stupid. I wanted to go to sports school, but of course it was the time of Communists and there was only one sports school which was the school to play soccer. But, they unfortunately would take only 20 guys a year from the whole Republic, and of course these 20 would be like friends of somebody or sons of famous players, so I had little chance to go through. I tried, my exams were great, but they told me sorry, you made the exams but there were like 100 times more people trying to get into the school than they could take. And you couldn't take exams for more than one school, so there were only schools left which were not full, and in the end I had to go to this like, how do you call it in English, prumyslovka?

I guess like trade school.

Yeah, like a college where I could at least get some work after it, but there was no interest for me in it. In a way it was good that I stopped thinking about my future in this direction and had more time to spend at the Slavia café and start being like a so-called "artist".

Were there concerts there as well

No, and it was still in the Communist '80s, so there weren't many clubs or anything. People would often go to the café and just talk and talk and talk and not really do anything, and then after we also just talked and talked and talked so much to so many friends that we had a band, we were like, well, we actually have to do something! So, there was an old room where we had our instruments and stuff and we started playing.

This was around...

Around '86-'88, like slowly knowing what was a C-chord! Our first gig was in '88 and the first proper gig was in '89, the year the Revolution came.

Were you called EoST at this time?

No. At this time I was playing in like 3 bands at the same time - it was quite normal in the underground levels that people played in like 5 bands. I had one band that I was - how would you call it, like the leader? - I was singing, and this was quite a mistake!

It was called Nocturnal, after the Siouxsie and the Banshees album. I was also in a more Cocteau Twins-sounding band, and one more like Sonic Youth, rock-noise. In all three bands I played with this guy who we call Pudding. Together we decided that it didn't make sense to play in 3 different bands, none of which were playing exactly what we wanted to do. So we found a guy who played in two of the other bands, Peter, to play drums and we started EoST. We knew I wouldn't be the singer, yet we needed a singer. I heard a tape of a girl singing, which was given to my friend as a birthday present, just some songs she had recorded for him since she had no money to buy a gift. That's how we found Irena. This was in '90, and the first gig was in January 1991.

What was it like, playing live at that time?

There still weren't many places to play, just a few clubs. And some places thought that our band name was too honorable to play there! There were other really small clubs with really cheesy PAs, at least there was some chance to play in these. There was no newspaper yet which would cover this, there was only Melodia - which still exists, it's big pop now - every month it came out. We did an interview for them in April and it came out in September, which exactly shows how not-fast everything was going at this time! We knew we never had any chance to have like a recording deal or anything like that, so we saved up money and begged friends for money and managed to pay for studio time to press a record ourselves. We made 1000 pieces of vinyl. This was our first, an EP, *Pigment* - it was recorded in the summer and came out in September.

Wow...

Before then we played just a few gigs in Prague. It was mad - sometime in March, Radio 1 got started. We gave them a demo tape of a couple of songs. Our next - really our first official - gig was in April. And it was totally sold-out. When we played the very first time live in January, we were like, "No, this isn't really it." And we went back to the practice room and wrote new songs and played. It was this new material on demo that we had given to the radio. We played this April gig in Rock Café, which was opening at this time.

This was what year?

April, 1991. The fact that it was sold out was to us, like "no way." We thought it was really mad! I remember that we went into this place where there was some English band called like Megacity Four, and it was almost full, and we were thinking how

great it would be to play to so many people. So, when it happened, it seemed to us really out of the blue, and we had at our show more people than at their show. I guess we were at the right place at the right time or so.

That's nuts.

Yeah, it was. I was in a bar one night right after the gig, and this guy next to me started talking to me asking me if I knew about this new band called Ecstasy of St Theresa, and I said, "No no no, I don't know it," so he started telling me, "Oh they are amazing" and stuff, blah blah blah. I thought this was a bit weird, so I started asking him, like what did they play? He didn't know, obviously someone had just told him something and, he was just trying to be "in" to talk about music and stuff. This was mad, really mad. As well at this time we played one gig at a church, St Sabat, which was amazing as well. People were standing around the castle trying to come in. We just did the gig because it was across the road from a bar we used to go to a lot. One day at this bar we got to talking to the guy that sort of takes care of the church, and his said, "Wait, you are called EoSt, you should play in our church!" We said, "Sure, that would be great." We did it as a benefit for the church, to raise money for them. Under Communism, there was no money to take care of churches. So, after the gig, they were amazed how many people came, and we were as well. Two days later also we played at Rock Café, which was also sold out. This was an unbelievable time, young people used to ask us for autographs on the street. We hadn't been on TV or in the papers or anything. Anything people knew about us was from Radio 1 and from gigs in Prague, and from word of mouth. There was one time we were in the paper, when our record was out.

Did you guys start looking for a label or manager or so, or'

Actually at this time we started to have a manager, this mad guy called Rene, who thought he would do it big. So he helped us to get a few gigs in the UK and Rotterdam, so that was the first time we played out of town. We didn't have any like promotion or anything in the UK, and the bands we played with played different music than we did, and we weren't playing like as a respected band or anything. The shows in Rotterdam were actually more successful than the ones in the UK. So the tour in some ways was a bit pointless. But when we got back the record was just back from the factory, right after we sold out all of the initial copies we pressed of the first *Pigment* EP. With the money we made from selling these, we recorded new tracks. A few weeks after we signed a deal for a new album.

With whom?

With Reflex records, which at the time was a new label. We thought it made some sense, because it was a cooperation with the magazine Reflex. We thought it would be good but at the end of the day they thought they would be signing some new top-seller artist, but we were doing experimental stuff. We were at the end of the year nominated "Newcomer of the Year", so they thought we'd sell loads and loads. When we came back from the studio with a recording which was all this weird noisy stuff they were quite surprised! This record was supposed to come out in February but it came out in late April '92.

This was which album?

Susurrate, which was rereleased in the USA in 1999, which is like a joke to me because I think it sounds so bad.

I love that record, it's the greatest noise.

Yeah, perhaps there is one really good thing about this record - there is no other record that the sound (quality) is quite as bad! No, seriously, we sent this album to John Peel - we had started to listen to more music and to read some magazines, so we knew very well who he was. Then we found one day that Peel was playing our songs on the BBC, on the air. So this mad guy Rene took some of our records to the UK and managed to get us a few dates in London in the end of '92. One day they called me from Reflex that some weird English guy had stopped by the office asking for us. That he was some DJ. I joked to them, "Yeah? Like it's John Peel right?" Actually, yes it was. I said, "You mean to tell me that John Peel was at your office asking for us?"

You mean, he'd come here to Prague?

Yes, yes, and they said, "He even tried to call you at home, but your mother said you were out." I asked them, do you know who John Peel is? They were like, no. We sent him a fax and he wrote back saying that he wanted to invite us to the UK to record a Peel Session.

Fantastic, and so this coincided with your tour plans?

Yes, so we told him we were coming to the UK for a few dates, and he said that's great because they probably couldn't have paid the ride. Finally he set the date of January '93, so in one week we played five gigs and did one Peel Session recording. At this time it was all going so well for us on those five gigs. On the third concert, a guy came up to us and said he really liked the show, that he had heard our music on the Peel show, that he'd

come again on Friday, and that he really was into the fact that we were from the Czech Republic. He was the owner of Go Disc Records, Andy McDonald, who did Paul Weller, then later Portishead, among others - we knew the label okay. He came to the show in Friday, which was actually a much better show, and then we got together to talk about maybe some deal or so.

A successful trip then.

Yes, it was really crazy for us. I mean, we went back to Prague a week later having recorded a Peel Session, played some good gigs, one of them was reviewed in Melody Maker and it was actually quite a nice review. After like a few weeks MTV called, and they wanted to do a Prague special and we were to be the main act. This was like a few weeks in the start of '94. It took a few weeks to negotiate a deal and we signed finally in like March or something. We thought the best start would be to buy off the BBC recordings we had done for John Peel, and we all liked the recordings. So they bought the recordings. Instead of calling it a "Peel Session" - we all thought it would be a stupid way to start a debut single in the UK - we just called it *Fluid Trance Centauri*, three words taken from each song from the recording. We also made a video clip for this. When the record came out it went to the top of the indie charts to number six, and after this we signed a deal with Go for five records. So that was like the start.

How did the name Ecstasy of St Theresa come up?

One day I was just going through everything in my home, writing down lots of ideas. After too long, I had to go meet the others, and we were like, we have to come up with something. We all had written down like ten names, but at the top of my list was Ecstasy of St Theresa. I suppose I had seen the name in art books, and we all were into the stories behind Saints, the sculptures in Rome' somehow it all came around in the name.

It definitely fits the music- somehow both the earlier stuff and the newer. Now you guys have a record deal with EMI Czech.

Yeah, they have a sub-label called Monitor, which has lots of interesting stuff.