

Entering The Mysterium

Lin Bensley in conversation with musician, author and incurable Canaries supporter, Peter Ulrich

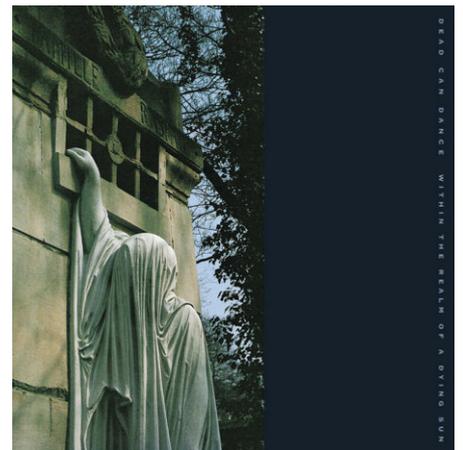
When Covid denied Peter Ulrich the distractions of attending music concerts and football matches, he decided to knuckle down and complete the book he had started some years before about his experiences as the former drummer with avant-garde goth band Dead Can Dance, and his own exploits in pursuit of a blessed musical Shangri-la. Logic dictated that he call the book *Drumming With Dead Can Dance & Parallel Adventures*, and it makes perfect sense once you delve between the covers.

We begin the interview with a guided tour around Ulrich's studio in the converted attic of his 16th-century former farmhouse on the outskirts of Dereham. While music-making has clearly been a lifelong passion, the enthusiasm that drove him to write his memoir is palpable from the outset. 'I loved the whole experience of

researching and writing the book,' says Ulrich. 'I drew on my diaries and the paperwork I'd retained from the early years when I acted as the band's tour manager. And in scouring the internet I was amazed by the wealth of information



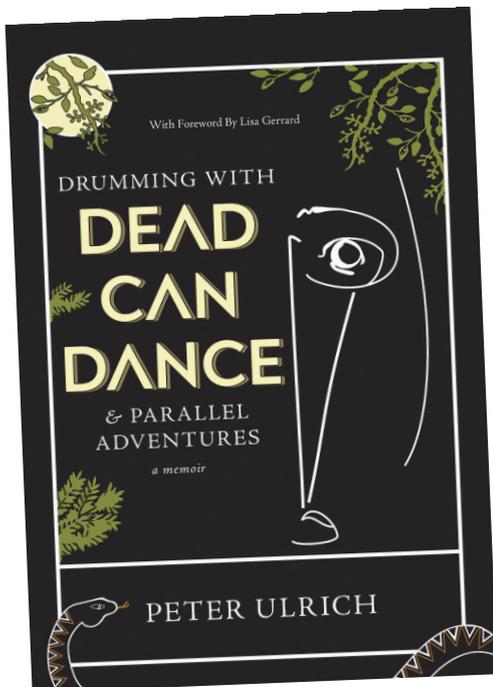
Early promo shot of DCD - L-R Scott Rodger, Jim Pinker, Lisa, Brendan and Peter. Courtesy of 4AD Records.



Dead Can Dance - *Within The Realm Of A Dying Sun* (1987)

I found that fans had uploaded: concert tickets, tour programmes, personal memories, and goodness knows what else, that all helped to build a picture.'

As an insider's view of the workings of what effectively became a polymorphous musical co-operative seeking to establish its own identity, the book makes for a highly engrossing read; charting the pitfalls and perils; the agony and ecstasy of the music



Drumming with Dead Can Dance & Parallel Adventures (Red Hen Press)

business, leavened with irrepressible good humour.

The chronicle begins in December 1982, when Ulrich, then working as press and publicity officer with a fringe theatre called Riverside Studios, receives a phone call from someone who introduces himself as Brendan Perry, who is seeking a drummer for his band Dead Can Dance. With the theatre about to go into administration, and all staff to be made redundant with immediate effect, Ulrich doesn't hesitate to reply in the affirmative.

Originally formed in Melbourne two years earlier, DCD's original line-up featured Perry (multi-instrumentalist and vocals), Lisa Gerrard (vocals, dulcimer, and percussion) Paul Erikson (bass) and Simon Monroe (drums). When the



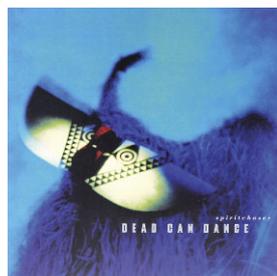
DCD rehearsing in early 1983. L-R=Lisa, Paul Erikson, Peter and Brendan. Photo by Jeffrey Earp.

INSERT: Promotional photo of Lisa and Brendan. Courtesy of 4AD Records.

band decided to move to England in pursuit of a record deal, Monroe chose to remain in Melbourne leaving the drum stool vacant, and word had been passed to Perry that Ulrich might be a suitable replacement.

Having gigged regularly on the local pub circuit with a soul/blues outfit called Mischief, Ulrich proved adept enough to pass the audition, and Perry and Gerrard were pleased to discover he shared their passion for the music of Joy Division and The Birthday Party, another Australian band who had recently signed to the independent 4AD Records label.

Duly enlisted as drummer and percussionist, band rehearsals began in earnest, and Ulrich soon came to realise what a formidable musical duo Perry and Gerrard really were. He could not help but admire Brendan's ability as a guitarist as much as an arranger, and someone who had accumulated an



Dead Can Dance - Spiritchaser (1996)



The Painted Caravan - TPUC (2013)

expansive knowledge of musical history that shaped his own artistic vision. Gerrard, having grown up in a multiracial community in Melbourne had also been exposed to a diverse mix of musical genres which played a part in her developing her own neoclassical singing style (often referred to as glossolalia), that added an ethereal potency to the bands intricate conjurations.

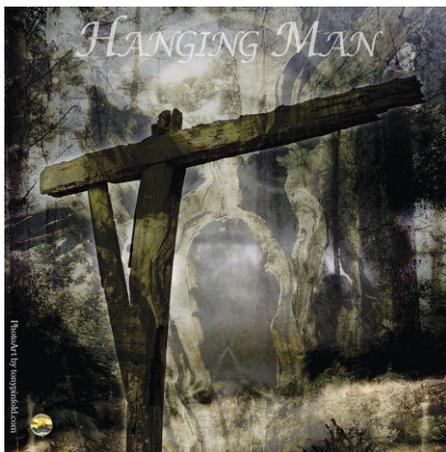
Ulrich, in between drumming duties also acted as the band's press agent and sent a four-track demo cassette to several of the most notable independent labels which elicited but one reply. Fortunately, that

solitary response came from Ivo Watts-Russell, the head of 4AD Records, and the man they most wanted to impress. Watts-Russell was firstly a music-lover and secondly a business man. His prime motive in founding 4AD was to allow himself the luxury of signing those artists whose work he loved, or as in the case of Dead Can Dance, showed a spark of promise.

Upon Watts-Russell agreeing to finance an album, the band was allocated two weeks in Blackwing Studios (a former church) in south London, then a regular recording venue for Depeche Mode and Yazoo. Being unaccustomed to the technical complexities of studio recording, the sessions proved fraught for all concerned, though the resulting eponymous debut album garnered enough positive reviews for Watts-Russell to extend the band's contract.

An EP entitled *Garden of Arcane Delights* followed a few months later, and secured their reputation as the orchestrators of a whole new sonic landscape that was neither ancient nor modern but timeless. And there were moments when their music had the power to touch the soul, as with their mesmeric anthem, *The Host Of Seraphim*, used in the documentary film, *Baraka*, to accompany a scene depicting a throng of desperate scavengers picking over a vast refuse tip in Tamil Nadu, India. The contrasting effect of celestial music as a backdrop to images of the direst poverty makes for uncomfortable viewing - where heaven meets hell here on earth!

Over the next eleven years, the band continued to sporadically tour the world, as well as record a further six albums, with Ulrich contributing to both *Within The Realms Of The Dying Sun* (1987) and *Spirit Chaser* (1996); their final offering,



A still from the video for *Hanging Man* -
Courtesy of City Canyons LLC

before personal differences compelled Perry and Gerrard to call it day.

During long periods of inactivity when the band was not recording or touring, Ulrich on occasion worked with the likes of Wolfgang Press and also This Mortal Coil - a musical collective formed by Watts-Russell - for whom he composed an instrumental piece, *At First, And Then*, while at the same time gradually assembling material that would eventually form the basis for his first solo album.

'I went over to Ireland to visit Brendan, who had built his own studio in Quivvy, and we were down the pub one night sinking a few pints of Guinness when he suddenly asked me if I had enough material to make an album and if so he invited me to make use of his studio. It was like offering me £10,000 worth of studio time, plus having Brendan to arrange and produce my songs. And I was very grateful that he contributed so



CIRCLE: Peter in his home studio in 2021. Photo: Nicola Arundell.

much in so many ways, to what eventually became my first album: *Pathways and Dawns* released in 1999.

Feeling the need to prove himself, Ulrich decided to write and arrange all material for his second album on his own. 'Inspired by the early Mediterranean music of an ensemble called Joglearesa, the first song I wrote for the album was *The True Cross*. The surviving remnant upon which Jesus is thought to have been crucified has hugely symbolic power for both Christians and Muslims and so I began to question whether the blood spilt upon the holy cross was that of a mortal prophet or a saviour god.'

Further suitable subject matter came to his attention through one medium or another. 'I had read a fascinating article by the editor of *Fortean Times* concerning a 17th-century tale about a witchbottle being used to free a woman from an evil curse. So I wrote a set of lyrics around that and it became *The Witchbottle of Suffolk*. I also chanced upon a book called *The Queen's Conjurer* that told the story of Dr John Dee, a physician in the court of Queen Elizabeth I, who also dabbled in alchemy and dark magic, which prompted me to write *The Scryer And The Shrewstone*.

'Although I had no intention of making a 'concept' album, I did want it to be 'themed' in the sense that each song explored a particular belief or mystery.'

During the course of recording, Ulrich invited friends and family to contribute in one capacity or another, while he further underscored his abilities as a vocalist as much as a percussionist willing to embrace Middle Eastern, African, Indian, and Latin-American



Final Reflections - TPUC (2019)



Still from the animated video for 'Dark Daddy' featuring Erin Hill. Courtesy of Dodo4Story and City Canyons LLC.



A promo shot of Peter for the release of *Enter The Mysterium* (2005). courtesy of City Canyons LLC.

rhythms. He also made arresting use of the yang ch'in - a Chinese instrument similar to a hammered dulcimer - that he had first learnt to play as a member of DCD.

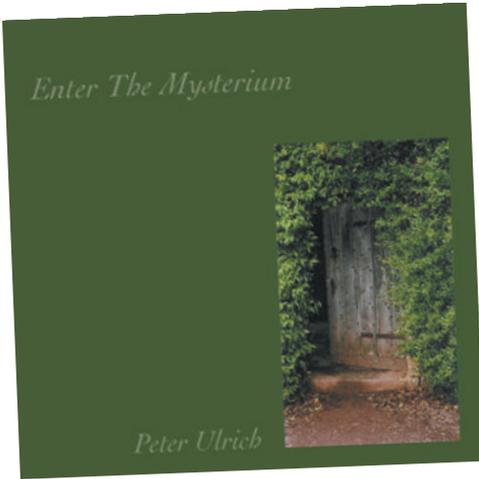
Enter The Mysterium was released on City Canyons - an American label owned and run by Trebor Lloyd - and drew agreeable comparisons with Pink Floyd and Brian Eno, though one might as easily detect a broader palette of sounds ranging from Shirley Collins to Natacha Atlas or David Sylvian.

Lloyd was so impressed by the album that he suggested the pair work together on a song he had been writing, while also proposing to enlist the help of New York singer Sara Wendt whom he had just signed to the label. 'I had never worked by swapping files over the internet; the process was then in its infancy but I soon adapted. Trebor sent me a basic melody he had worked out, and I set about arranging it and adding rhythm and writing a part for uilleann pipes.'

The resulting song, *Hanging Man*, became the first official recording of what was then a tentative global music



ABOVE: TPUC performing at Webster Hall, NYC in 2015. L-R; Sharon Hochma-Hawk, Peter and Steph Linn. Photo: Melissa kinski. Courtesy of City Canyons LLC.



Front and rear cover of *Enter The Mysterium*.
Courtesy of City Canyons LLC

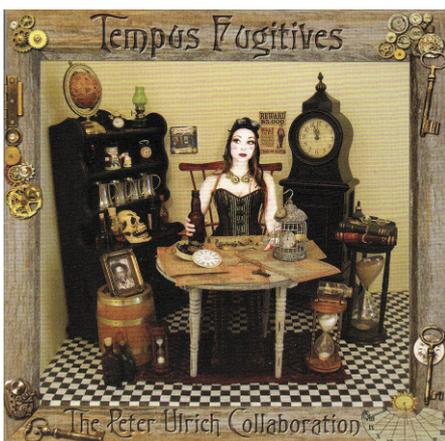
workshop that soon transformed into The Peter Ulrich Collaboration.

'We gradually began amassing songs and by 2012 we had enough material sufficiently advanced to start planning an album. Some of the tracks I was heavily involved in, and for one or two I just initiated the idea, or for others I simply added the percussion to a song that was already fully formed. But Trebor and I were involved at every turn to a greater or lesser extent, and Trebor turned out to be a very talented producer and financed the project himself, so we were able to achieve some high-quality mixes.

'The album came out in 2013, but within eighteen months we had enough material for a second album and this became *Tempus Fugitives*. So it became a rolling project with somewhere between 50 - 60 musicians contributing with an enormous range of instruments at our disposal.

'The inspiration that Trebor took from me, which I had in turn inherited from DCD, encouraged the concept of having no boundaries with regard to the instrumentation of each track, and of having a different approach to each song, which made for a very varied but hopefully cohesive album.'

Tempus Fugitives was released in 2015, and the last album *Final Reflections* followed in 2019; a fitting finale to a venture that had produced an illuminating tapestry of emotive airs and tunes



Tempus Fugitives - TPUC (2015)

steeped in traditional folklore and fable. And folklore is the very lifeblood of so much of Ulrich's work as evidenced in many passages throughout the book.

Aside from an ever-entertaining autobiographical narrative, he frequently discourses on music and what it means to him, and it is in these discourses that we learn of the length and breadth of his own understanding of world music, be it the Pipes of Pan at Jajouka, the recordings of David Fanshawe (remember *African Sanctus?*), King Sunny Adé or Ali Farka Touré. Such influences inform his work, and his passion for English folk stretching back to medieval times is also often assimilated into his compositions, though it is just as likely to possess Gaelic or Appalachian references if he thinks them appropriate.

'In musical terms, I have been working lately with an old compatriot called Glenn Johnson, who was the

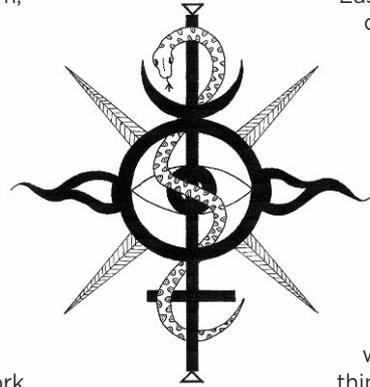
prime mover behind a band called Piano Magic. But other than becoming involved with music again, and thinking about a third solo album, I also want to continue writing. I actually enjoyed the process of writing so much that I have

now drafted my first novel. Set in

East Anglia, it features many different aspects of East Anglian folklore and is called *Drum The River* inspired by a Harold Mills West short story called *The Gleaners* that I chanced upon in his *East Anglian Yarns* [1992] collection.'

As Ulrich explains the premise for his novel, I'm instantly hooked. And when he mentions that he is

thinking of issuing a corresponding soundtrack of folk songs and sea shanties, I cannot deny that my imagination longs to re-enter the mysterium once again. Fate always plays a hand in these matters.



ABOVE: The 'Mysterium' symbol designed by Peter for his second solo album. Art by Peter Ulrich.

BELOW: Peter in his studio, Spring 2023.

