

Pluto Gods Vol.1

Review by Paul McDonnell (A Band Called Paul)

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Pluto Gods is a collaborative project comprising virtuoso blues and rock guitarist Jørg Klein, known to many in Indie rock circles as much for his incredible playing as he is for being the host of the immensely popular syndicated radio show Jørg's World, and the genre-agnostic American vocalist, actor and radio host John Reneaud, known for his work in blues and jazz as well as his own rock/blues band The Electric Shamans. And so, with two such established artists combining before my very ears, it's with some amount of trepidation that I approach the task of reviewing their new release, the E.P. "*Pluto Gods Vol. 1*".

You see, as a recording artist myself I'm very aware of the time, effort and craft that goes into producing original music. There are always positives to be found in the listening experience of any track when you appreciate what went into making it. But sometimes, you do have to dig deep to find those positives ... and here, as I commence my listening, I can really hope that I don't need a shovel. Gulp.

But with two heavyweights such as these guys, I guess I should have known better ... this release blew me away.

The E.P. itself comprises five tracks – four songs, with one repeated as an alternative version featuring a guest performer. First up is *Electrify Me*, which thumps into your ears with a pounding double-time snare teeing up a track that is full of feverish, pandemic induced oddity. The song splits itself between double time, half time and full tempo in a soundscape where radio vocal effects mix with full-throat vocals. "Misery loves company" sings Reneaud as a refrain but "I'd rather shine" he pushes back, through the bleakness of "thunder above, rain falling."

The song itself – in what becomes a recurring theme throughout the E.P. - has distinct stages to it, each accompanying by a slight stylistic shift in Jørg's guitar parts which flow effortlessly between blues, funk and rock. John's vocal delivery brings a welcome layer of American dystopia to the lyrics and their delivery. "Driving hard like a Diesel Engine all the way from Detroit City," he intones at one point as Jørg duly supplies him with an underscore that sounds lifted directly from the ZZ Top playbook. A half-time drop and abrupt scene change to a lyric of "this pandemic is killing me" has Jørg move to a more blues style of playing, bending harmonic notes to almost a point of discord, flying across the fret board with subtle decorative licks.

Initially, I'm left wondering what the sound is that opens the second track *Secrets of Life*. At first it enters like a hard sawtooth synthesized keyboard tone, but then morphs into a treated vocal sound. But before you have time to figure it out, the track breaks out into another conundrum ... an oddly syncopated unison melody between guitar and bass with the drums in full support of the syncopation. The actual time signature remains a mystery at this point, hinting at possibilities but never fully landing on something discernible onto which you can latch. The aural confusion reigns for about 40 seconds before a full-on, note bending melody displaces our original theory on the opening sound, being Jørg's guitar fed through a Digitech Whammy that now tangibly establishes the core groove as being a syncopated $\frac{3}{4}$ meter. Once again, the guitar, drums and bass are tight as they punch home the accentuated jolts. The tone of John Reneaud's vocals comes to the fore here in a slow-moving lyric that allows his throaty upper baritone to carry and soar with full vibrato on the sustained notes. Lovely stuff.

A middle section breaks it down to almost military punctuation between the instruments before Jørg finally breaks rank with the lower instrumentation and lets fly with a lead guitar part that somehow manages to bend notes as if it were slide guitar, but you know it's not. He's just that good. This leads to the concluding section of the track, where it becomes the most conventional it's going to get and brings the $\frac{3}{4}$ signature to a close waltz tempo – almost like the track previous to this point was intentionally blurry in terms of its own style and now comes into sharp focus.

Keeping us in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, the third track up is the first of two versions of the song “*I’ll Be There*” and ‘this one goes full wave-your-torches’ slow song with a theme of support and comfort in times of need, such as a parent providing a safe haven for their child. Before being led to the breakout point, though, an elaborate introduction in two parts establishes the tone – one reminiscent of The Beatles and the other of Queen ... at first, I almost expect it to become a cover of Joe Cocker’s cover of the Beatles’ “With a Little Help From My Friends” before feeling that we’re about to break into the final section of Bohemian Rhapsody where “nothing really matters”.

On this track, it’s very much the vocals that push us forward at first, carrying us through the first verse with the guitar providing a supportive accompaniment. I say “at first” because then the guitar itself becomes the voice of the second verse with beautifully crafted melodic sweeps and rises with subtle decorative frills, as evocative as any vocal performance could be. The two parts join forces from the middle point and, to me, the song becomes that most elusive of things ... a classic. It’s a track that simply sounds like it’s meant to be. Carefully crafted to sound as effortless as possible, it now reaches that moment of pure gold. But not for long, as somewhere around the fourth minute a middle-to-end section takes over where Jørg throws lick after lick at you to pull you out of your listening complacency. The virtuosity is unmistakable. It’s relentless, and drives the track towards its destination with twists, turns and “voiced” playing that carries a personality of its own. Wow.

The sleeve notes for “*Five Time Lost*” identify it as being “about things in life you might not be comfortable with.” To establish the sense of identification with the listener, the track opens with sounds of the urban streets – drilling, traffic, car horns, snippets of conversation out of which emerge snippets of vocals and quasi-musical tones. A piano, played in an almost Sondheim musical style, also emerges from the cacophony heralding in John’s slightly raspier than usual vocal. Strings enter in support and the combined effect is reminiscent of Scott Walker’s take on Jacques Brel. The lyrics flow, sometimes slow and sometimes tripping over themselves to arrive at a stated realisation that “I got lost, I fell down ... yet here I stay. All is well.”

All is well, indeed, as drums and bass enter with an understated guitar to reign the song into a half-time 4/4. Amid keyboard pads supplied by guest performer **Christian Saal**, understated remains the order of the day in Jørg's guitar on this track. Having completed the vocal exposition, the track turns to Jørg with an impressive and expressive solo that manages to remain respectfully self-aware to the overall tone of the track and not draw too much attention to itself. And then, the same reverence is applied to the surprise inclusion of a low, almost wood flute sounding, slow-attack guitar solo that perfectly carries the listener to the song's conclusion.

The final track of the E.P. is a reworking of the earlier track "*I'll Be There*," with the special inclusion of drummer **Jared Asher** from Love Battalion who adds a lovely tom-tom-dominant, rock style thumping punch to the classic ballad sound. Naturally, my preference sits with this version of the track given the very live feel from the drumming and how that reframes the sounds of the guitar as the fingers do their fretboard dancing. That's not to take away from the other version of the track ... more that it's one of those "you don't miss what you never had" realisations of the extra punch brought to it by Mr. Asher.

As a body of work, the E.P. is quite unique. The influence of Jørg's previous instrumental journeys is very present, with the tracks refusing to follow a conventional structure in the usual sense but, rather, flowing in a cinematic way moving from vignette to vignette in a free form but sonically cohesive way. Each takes us on its own unique journey in stages, all the while saying "don't look back, look ahead" as we move from section to section.

The guitar playing is superb, and the vocals here provide a tonally perfect foil to the complexities of the instrumentation below. It's an immensely detailed, passionate and polished body of work that is exceptionally well performed. Based on this, I cannot wait to hear more of what Jørg and John can deliver as a collaborative team, because this first release from the duo is jaw-droppingly good.