

For me, music's value lies in its ability to bring out the animalistic, brutalized, repressed side of humanity. In a sense, I see rock'n'roll as a ritual that can disarm what culture has stamped on us. When it's at its best, it's a process of de-evolution, turning listeners into wild, sweaty, chaotic participants. Big Black Cloud's newest record, *Black Friday* (Eolian Records), exemplifies this. Hailing from Portland, Oregon, the trio—Nick Capello (guitar, vocals), Soo Koelbli (bass, vocals) and Travis Wainwright (drums)—has been playing together for seven years. I first saw them in 2006 at a house venue in Portland known as the Richland, and have watched them morph from a theatrical art garage punk ensemble into an intelligent, feverish, full of panic and rage three piece. On the weekend of the Trayvon Martin verdict, Big Black Cloud came through the Bay Area while on a West Coast tour with label-mates Drunk Dad. That Sunday I strapped on my overalls and took a walk through the protest-laden streets of Downtown Oakland to the Night Light bar where I had a brief question and answer session with the band. Interview by Brandon Freels. Photos by James Rexroad, Rick Ele and Brandon Freels.

BIG BLACK CLOUD



MRR: What's the origin of your name? What does it represent?

Nick: It was originally Here Comes a Big Black Cloud, which was a reference to a song that we had when Soo and I were in a band in New Orleans.

Soo: It also comes from the fact that we left New Orleans because of Hurricane Katrina and came to Portland, which is overcast all the time.

MRR: When people ask you about what kind of music you play, what do you say? How do you explain it?

Nick: I usually say noise rock. I usually just go for something basic. Yeah, noise rock.

Soo: I would say it's a loaded question (laughs).

Travis: Yeah, sort of abrasive noise rock.

MRR: When I first met you guys I remember it was sort of like garage rock, like the Mummies and the Oblivians. Do you not identify with



rick ele

that anymore?

Soo: No.

Nick: I mean, there are certain elements that are garage-like I guess, but it's more just being influenced by rock'n'roll.

Soo: Yeah, there are a lot of elements to it. But I think noise rock is the way to go.

MRR: What bands would you say have influenced you?

Soo: Brainbombs.

Nick: Brainbombs.

Travis: Acid Mothers Temple.

Nick: Arab on Radar.

Travis: The Beatles.

Nick: Yeah, we all like the Beatles a lot.

MRR: Oh, wow. Strange.

Nick: I listen to a lot of jazz.

MRR: What kind of jazz musicians?

Nick: I like Miles Davis. Eric Dolphy. For me, the more chaotic and weird the better.

Travis: Charles Mingus.

MRR: Well, who are you into right now though, as opposed to who you've listen to throughout your life...

Nick: Right now I listen to a lot of jazz. I love jazz... and Kiss. Seriously, I listen to a lot of Kiss.

MRR: This new album, *Black Friday*, is your first as a three piece, right?

Nick: Yeah, but there's a tape. This is the first LP.

MRR: Your last album, *Dark Age*, was really

expansive. How have you guys changed musically between *Dark Age* and this new release, *Black Friday*?

Nick: We dropped two members, and that's a big thing. We had to rethink our sound.

Soo: I think we play better together. We actually listen to each other's parts a lot more.

Nick: Yeah, there's a lot more give and take.

Travis: Instead of just burying it in random noise.

Nick: It's more nuanced. It's a little more... Well, I guess it's not a little more spastic.

Soo: I think it's more deliberate, though.

MRR: Do you think you've become better musicians? Do you think you're more challenged now?

Soo: Hell yes.

Travis: Yeah, we write harder songs. That's for sure.





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Soo: I think we all had to level up when we became a three piece. Because as a five piece, especially with a layer of noise guitar on top of everything, you just couldn't hear everything, whereas now everything is audible.

MRR: What was the recording process for this album like? Who recorded it?

Soo: Alex Yusimov at the Pool Recording Studio in North Portland.

Nick: He's done our last three records.

Soo: *Black Friday* took two years to get put out. This was kind of a nightmare album.

Nick: It took a year to make.

Soo: Yes, but we lost half of the album and we had to go back and rerecord it.

MRR: Are the lost tracks the same that appear on the cassette release, *Shitty Vibrations*?

Nick: Yes, those were like outtakes.

Soo: No, not just, because it also had a live set recorded at...

Nick: Oh, it also had a live set recorded at the Frawg Pound, and then there was one song that was recorded at...

Soo: Portland Air and Space.

Travis: That's where we recorded the song "Shitty Vibrations."

Soo: But, yeah, this album we didn't even think was going to come out on vinyl. Four days before we got the call from Eolian we had a band meeting where we had decided we were just going to put *Black Friday* out on tape because we couldn't afford to put it out on our own label, Stankhouse records. We felt kind of, at that point, that it was kind of hindering progress, you know. We wanted to tour on something.

Nick: Well, he asked about the recording process, and the recording process was pretty fun, because Alex—and we have done three records with him—really indulged us and let us get pretty weird. We did all kinds of weird shit, and smoked a lot of weed.

Soo: So did Alex. (laughs)

Nick: Yeah, everybody was really, really high; and fucking around with weird shit.

Soo: Not all of it worked out.

Nick: A lot of it didn't.

Travis: In between the first and second sessions we wrote some new songs.

Nick: Then we went on tour.

Travis: And refined the songs that we had, so it turned out better than it would have.

MRR: Is there a statement behind this new sound, from *Dark Age* to now? Is there a philosophy behind it? Is there something you're trying to say?

Nick: No, nothing in particular. You know, conceptually we've always been about alienation and being paranoid.

Soo: Anxiety.

Nick: Being pissed. It's all pretty emotional. I guess there's not really a point to it.

Soo: I don't think the statement has changed too much. I think our albums all sound pretty different one to the next, but I think that's kind of part of our band. It's just not sticking towards sound, but kind of continuing to explore whatever we happen to be into.

MRR: Yeah, I mean, I see it as sort of an agonizing sound of transformation. You know, whenever you're going through a transformation it's never comfortable. I always remember this movie clip from *American Werewolf in London*, the transformation scene, and that reminds me of you guys.

Soo: (laughs)

Travis: Sweet.

Nick: (laughs)

Soo: It's never comfortable and it's always a little bit messy. I don't think we ever really perfected one sound before moving onto the next. But that's kind of what's fun about it.

MRR: It's not like after the transformation. It's like in the process.

Travis: Yeah.

MRR: How do the songs develop then?

Travis: A lot of them come from just a couple people being in the basement starting to play. They just come from a jam, and then become a song instantly.

Nick: Or it will be a riff. Someone will just have a riff. And then we'll just fuck around with the

riff. We're all really self-conscious and critical, so sometimes things will happen naturally, and we'll be like, "Ah, we can't do that, we do that too much. Let's think of a different way." End the song different, or something, you know.

Soo: We write a lot more collectively than we used to.

MRR: Did that sort of change come with the reduced membership of the band?

Nick: Yeah, yeah. It's just harder to communicate with more people. You know, to be on the same level.

MRR: Two of the tracks on the new album, the title track and "Terror of Cosmic Loneliness," are pretty intense instrumentals. Do you place more value on the music than the lyrics?

Soo: I do.

Nick: I don't. They are equally important to me, but I write most of the lyrics.

MRR: Soo, why do you feel the music is more important?

Soo: One, probably because I don't write as many lyrics, and because I think that's just how I feel about music in general. I tend to see lyrics more as an afterthought, or a flourish to the thing. I'm happy if the lyrics fit the music and what it sounds like it's trying to express.

Travis: I think the vocals are really important. Actually, I find that usually my favorite vocal moments are songs when it's a sparse vocal part, but it just brings the intensity up so much, lyrically and musically.

MRR: I guess this would be directed at Nick. The lyrics are always pretty dark and psychological. What goes into writing the lyrics?

Nick: It depends. Typically I'll come up with a couple of words first, or a rhyme scheme that I like, or just a line, and I'll just rewrite, and rewrite, and rewrite, over and over again. I feel like my brain is a fucking hornet's nest sometimes. I'm just trying to convey that feeling, and I think the music conveys that feeling. I feel like this with this band too. Aesthetically, it's sometimes kind of hard to write things that are softer or innocent. I feel like this band is a highly conceptual band,

aesthetically, musically and lyrically. So I just try to find things that would sound right with the music. Different words, you know. I get stuck and I repeat myself too, like the word "brain" is in a lot of songs. The word "cities" is in a lot of songs. I just get stuck on shit like that.

MRR: Which brings me to my next question: Is "Bomb My Brain" a reference to the Brainbombs?

Nick: Well, "Bomb My Brain" is actually... (pause)

Travis: (laughs)

Soo: (laughs)

Nick: ...yeah, totally. I was thinking about how cool their name sounds, and we needed lyrics for that song so I came up with that. This song though is *actually* about how I think my boss fucking sucks.

Soo: Are you sure you want that to be in the interview?

Nick: You know how many bosses I have? They can sit and guess which one I hate. He knows I don't like him. Motherfucker knows I don't like him.

MRR: My favorite songs on *Black Friday* are the last two: "Human Host" and "Medusa." Can you talk a little bit about each of those songs, both musically and lyrically?

Soo: Nick and I wrote the words to "Human Host" separately. I wrote my parts and he wrote his parts. We talked a lot about the theme of it, which is I guess the idea of parasites in a few different ways.

Nick: It also comes back to this transformation thing. Wanting to see something pushed through. Don't want to feel uncomfortable. Don't want to be there on the inside. I want to be there when it pushes through, and transforms. It's kind of like a lot of our themes, super sci-fi.

Soo: I also found it had to do with personal relationships, and how you tend to find a lot of your personal relationships are parasitic, and you find yourself at one or the other end of that.

Nick: Musically that song is easy as shit.

Travis: Yeah. It was one of our steps into writing more slow and sparse songs, and exploring space instead of just packing in a bunch of noise.

Soo: That song came about after we went to see Acid Mothers Temple play, and we were in that phase of pretending to be Acid Mothers Temple (laughs). Which was awesome!

Nick: Oh yeah. That was totally great.

MRR: I had kind of a weird reaction to that song because I immediately thought of it in Freudian terms, so I thought it was kind of creepy. A reference to the fact that you want to be back inside the womb, you know, but maybe I just misheard some of the lyrics.

Nick: No, no, no. Totally. That song is like our "sex" song. I feel like that's the song that makes people want to fuck.

Soo: It's so sexy.

MRR: Well what about "Medusa" then?

Nick: Well, first of all, "Medusa" is a rip off of a Cyril Neville song, like the beginning of it. And I heard that and I was like, "Fuck, man, we've got to rip that off." And then, originally when I first

had the idea for the song, I was telling these guys, "Dude, this will be like the first song on the record." It will have the big build up, and then come in; and so originally it was supposed to be the first song on the record. Ironically it ended up being the last song on the record. Lyrically, I mean, that one is real vague. It's kind of about this comic book that I read where this lady can take her head off, and it flies around the jungle. And the song is also kind of about this documentary I watched about jungle cats. So, it's kind of about both of those. I guess it's about a fear—a sort of panic type mode—with this overseeing thing that's inescapable, and you're the person it's pursuing.

MRR: So how does this pull into the Medusa myth?

Nick: I think it might have just been a rhyme scheme thing. I don't remember.

MRR: Because I remember at some point you sing about the eyes.

Nick: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Maybe that's what I was talking about, looking into eyes. Being afraid you'd turn to stone, like she's Medusa.

MRR: And, you know, Medusa's a very sexual character. Turns men hard. Turns men to stone.

Nick: Yeah, yeah. Totally. I think our music is super fucking sexual. It's violent and sexual.

MRR: And that's what real rock'n'roll does. It's really sexual.

Soo: Yeah.

Nick: We all love to fuck, Brandon.

Soo: (laughs)

Travis: (laughs)

MRR: You'd think that (laughs). Well, what about that song musically?

Travis: That one took a while.

Nick: That was a weird one to figure out, because it was a conceptual thing. We had the bare-nare-nare. That was already laid out, but after that we were like, "Fuck, where do we go from that?" We knew that we wanted to have a build up, and we had the chords, but it took a second. And then there's this whole breakdown in the middle. And Soo and I, we had a bunch of practices—just the two of us—to figure out the middle, because Travis was out of town or some shit. Soo and I kept getting together and were like, "What are we going to do in the middle of this? How are we going to write a bridge to this song?"

Soo: I think that's a pretty good example too of how we function differently as a three piece now, because that's something we never did before. For Nick and I to get together and actually listen to one person's riff and try to actually write something that makes sense, as opposed to when we were a five

piece, when we would plunge into it way more and not be listening to each other.

Travis: Yeah, because it'd basically be one person's idea with the five piece, and everyone is augmenting that, unlike now where we are coming up with it together.

Nick: When we became a three piece it was kind of weird because we had to rethink what kind of music we made, because we didn't know what kind of songs we could write. There's a lot of shit we tried that just didn't work. When we remade the record we recorded a shit load of songs that we'll never play again and will never see the light of day. And after hearing them recorded we were like, "Ah, we're not really good at that. That's just not our thing." And that's definitely when the album was coming together and were like, "We're good at *that* thing. We should explore *that* territory." Rather than taking a song that has a riff that sounds like the Kinks or something and bludgeoning it to death.

Travis: Going into the record we decided to take our time, just to make sure that we got it.

Nick: Well, that's what was great about working with Alex. He'd just let us fuck around.

MRR: I think as writers you're tighter, but do you also think you've loosened up a bit? I feel that a song like "Hate Myself" feels much looser. It feels more traditional rock'n'roll where the other songs feel like they have a heavier side to them. It seems like you guys can strip it down and at the same time do stuff that's more intricate. I don't think you guys would have had the courage to do something like "Hate Myself"



before. I think before you were more concerned with trying to be too smart, and now you've eased up a bit.

Soo: I guess so. I never really thought of that.

Nick: I think a lot of times we're a lot more playful and have a sense of humor than we actually come off as having. I feel like a lot of times people are like, "Ah man, 'Hate Myself,' and 'Pile of Shit?'"

Soo: A lot of it's *really* tongue-in-cheek.

Nick: I thought "Hate Myself" was fucking hilarious.

MRR: I feel like those two ("Hate Myself" and "Pile of Shit") are more of the punk rock songs of the album.

Nick: Totally.

Soo: I think we've loosened up in another way too. Something we never did before but we do now is a little bit more improvisation. We jam a lot more in practice, but even in shows there are some songs that don't have definite endings, where it's always kind of different and we feel it out. There's a jam we do now that we play live a lot, and it doesn't even have parts. It's never solid and it's fine like that. And that's something we never would have done a few years ago, because it would have been a mess, a fucking mess.

MRR: Do you think this comes with being better musicians?

Travis: I think it comes with being able to play with each other better.

Nick: It's with being a better band. It's not being better musicians.

Soo: And I think it comes with we've played together for eight years now, the three of us. I think we can anticipate what each other is going to do a little bit more, and we've become a lot more attentive to how each other plays.

MRR: We talked about my favorite songs on the album, but what are your favorite songs on the album to play?

Travis: You know we only play about half of the songs on the record. The other half is new material.

Nick: This tour, *Pile of Shit*, has been one of my favorites to play. I've been really digging that. I always like playing "Cities of the Red Night," but I like that song way more than these two guys. And I think we all like "Black Friday" a lot. I love playing "Black Friday."

Soo: "Black Friday" is my absolute favorite.

Travis: And it's not one we play, but "Gettin' Heavy in the Jungle" is one of my favorite parts of the record.

MRR: What is it about these songs?

Nick: I guess it's just the song itself feels good. I like playing the faster songs. And I like "Black Friday" just because I get to do all that shit with



the slide that's ridiculous but it's really fun to do. Soo: I like "Black Friday" because it's so full of anxiety, so tense and frantic. I kind of think of it as our version of, say, "The Flight of the Bumblebee" or something (laughs).

Nick: It's almost like a blues song but fucked up. Soo: I like "Human Host" too. We don't really play it anymore.

Travis: Yeah, that one's fun, because it's sinister but soothing at the same time. It's really fun to play and really fun to listen to.

MRR: On the *Shitty Vibrations* tape you have a song called "Cocaine World." What's your relationship with drugs?

Travis: We have a strong relationship to weed.

Nick: We have a strong relationship to drugs. Those lyrics are a joke. I had a dream and there was a stupid song in the dream about cocaine, and I basically just rearrange the lyrics for that song.

Soo: We have a strong relationship to drugs.

Nick: Yeah, we really like to party.

MRR: With your newer sound do you feel you get more respect?

Nick: Yes! I think we're getting a lot more respect than we used to. People are paying attention. I don't know, it's weird.

Travis: It's not for everybody.

Nick: But in Portland, I feel we definitely get more respect there.

MRR: Well, it seems to me that Eolian usually does heavier music.

Nick: They still do heavier music. We're just on the label too.

Soo: Yeah, this is kind of an experiment for them. Testing out the waters to see if they can widen

their scope.

MRR: Do you guys consider yourselves outsiders? Where do you think you fit in musically?

Soo: I think we're outsiders, definitely.

Nick: I don't know, man.

Travis: We fit *with* a lot of things, but we don't fit *into* much.

Nick: We're not heavy enough to be metal. We are always too *something* to be something else. It's always too far in one direction to be something else.

MRR: Are there any bands you identify with?

Nick: Oh definitely, but that doesn't mean we sound like them. Yeah, I don't know. I think we're outsiders.

MRR: What's going on with Stankhouse Records?

Travis: It's been on hiatus due to financial restraints mostly, but it will be back.

MRR: What were the last tapes you guys put out?

Travis: Drunk Dad's *Failhouse EP*, Valkyrie Rodeo's *Ready, Set, Ruin*, Tiny Knives' *Static*, and our own *Shitty Vibrations*.

Nick: Hooded Hags is going to have a tape out on Stankhouse soon.

MRR: I'm out of questions. Is there anything else you guys wanted to say?

Travis: Where can I get the best deal on some overalls?