Basilisk II: Gay Men and Exploding Amphibians

Exploring COIL's second trip into sex education films

By Phil Barrington

Popular myth suggests that COIL were a frazzled and blurry-eyed fractious mess after the July 1991 release of the truly eccentric 'Love's Secret Domain' album. Indeed, after such legendary - and hallucinatory - recording sessions the group soon parted ways with Stephen Thrower, thus ending that classic run of superb creativity and legendary albums in a haze of debauchery. Jhonn's intake of ecstasy also became a regular part of his lifestyle well after the LSD album release too, so who could imagine the band being anything other than "in need of a rest"?

However, history does not show this myth is based in any way on fact. I'd go so far as to say that, far from resting up, shell-shocked after the excesses of 'Love's Secret Domain', 1992 was a comparatively hectic year for COIL. As well as recording the finishing touches throughout 1992 for a delayed, autumn release of the 'Stolen And Contaminated Songs' collection and completing the remixes for the same year's release of COIL's 'How to Destroy Angels (Remixed and Re-Recordings)' EP, both Jhonn and Peter visited William S. Burroughs in Kansas USA for voice recording work, Peter was travelling lots throughout the year to direct music videos for other artists (Jhonn staying home at Chiswick to work on a book about the history and cultural impact of the alchemical Black Sun symbol), assorted work was done on NiN remixes, and even some preliminary talks were made about submitting new COIL music for a CD accompaniment to Andrew Vachss' 'Underground' graphic novel anthology (Dark Horse, 1993-1994). Some of these projects never ultimately came to fruition for COIL themselves, but 1992 was nonetheless an evidently productive time for Jhonn and Peter.

The band also seemed to have been saying "yes" to pretty much every commission coming through their door in Chiswick, most of them being proposed by Derek Jarman's producer James MacKay, on behalf of his company Basilisk Communications. As well as the 'Sara Dale's Sensual Massage' project, and Jarman's own 'Blue' commission to initially come later that year (for a 1993 release), the band agreed to record tracks for MacKay and the Terrence Higgins Trust to be used for 'The Gay Man's Guide to Safer Sex'. This title was a VHS sex education release that had a markedly more serious and professional tone compared to the frivolous and kitsch (yet good natured) Sara Dale video.

[Left: James MacKay, 2009, unknown photographer. Right: Original track titles for COIL's 'Stolen and Contaminated Songs'.]
In fact a song that they already earmarked for the 'Gay Man’s...' soundtrack was officially released that same year by COIL. In the midst of working on their soundtrack commissions COIL released the ‘Stolen And Contaminated Songs’ compilation. This late 1992 CD release included ‘Omlagus Garfungiloops’ - actually originally titled ‘Exploding Frogs’ on its first mail order CD release (due to its gleeful dialogue sample from Philip Ridley’s ‘The Reflecting Skin’ movie from 1990, now reversed and sounding phonetically like the new song title). The band’s continued work on ‘Omlagus Garfungiloops’ turned what was at one time a surreal swing-like jazz club beat into a dancey soup of sounds mixing synths into the funk that fitted in quite well as backing muzak when the extended version of the track was used for the sex education "action" scenes.

But what of the film itself? An altogether more sobering piece, yet still finding time to exploit the loophole around the repressively censorious BBFC with lashings of explicit gay sex (used for the purposes of education, of course!), the film is also an important time capsule for the UK gay community in several ways. Along with the narration conducted in an earnest yoof presenting style and the groundbreaking gay sex scenes themselves (for its time), there’s contextual set-ups involving actors on location (one chap from the UK cop show ‘The Bill’ appearing) and, for the most nostalgic of people, some great vintage crowd scenes shot in several classic gay bars, the early 1990s apparently still in the tight grip of 1980s fashion. Gay clubs and book shops featured and thanked in the film credits for their participation in the project include Gay’s The Word, First Out, Compton's Long Yang Club, Benjy’s, The Angel, and Black Cap. There’s also some fantastic vintage sexline adverts after the end credits roll, which I have added to this version of the film from Kiefer Gorena’s original upload of another transfer of the video last year (the sound not great on these sections).
Released 27 years ago, the film is sadly also a product of its more repressive era, with nearly a minute of its running time at the start dedicated to a scrolling warning to viewers about its forthcoming explicit gay content, the added intro card stating the film ‘is by gay men for gay men’ is also repeated by the presenter at the start of the video too. It feels like the film is either almost apologising for its existence or, more likely, pre-empting complaints from contemporary homophobic activist groups such as the notorious CARE (Christian Action Research and Education) mob, likely citing the frankly fucking outrageous and censorious Section 28/Clause 28 of the Local Government Act of 1986 for England, Wales and Scotland (repealed in 2000).

Unlike Basilisk's other sex ed tape ('Sara Dale's Sensual Massage: The Stroke of Pleasure'), 'The Gay Man's Guide to Safer Sex' did go on to survive in the digital age, with sections of the film used in pseudo-sequels like 'Getting It Right: Safer Sex for Young Gay Men' and 'Gay Man's Guide Update '97' (which did eventually see a DVD release).

Back to COIL's soundtrack work and, all in all, it seems that a total of four main finished pieces (and two further remixes and alternative versions of 'Protection') were recorded for this Terrence Higgins Trust sex ed project, the individual song titles causing a little confusion amongst fans over the years. Let's try and batten down what the tracks actually are, once and for all. The original plan for COIL's 'The Sound of Music' soundtrack compilation (ultimately abandoned) had the following three tracks noted for inclusion:

'The Gay Man's Guide to Safer Sex I (Theme)'
'The Gay Man's Guide to Safer Sex II (Exploding Frogs)'
'The Gay Man's Guide to Safer Sex III (Proto-Protection)'

I assume the numbered track sequence intentionally refers to the order in which the songs appeared on the film's soundtrack. A couple of years after the DAT and other tape transfers were completed in 2010, the track selection from the 'Gay Man's...' sessions earmarked for release were slightly renamed and expanded, thus:

'The Theme from Gay Man's Guide'
'Exploding Frogs'
'Proto-Protection'
'Untitled'
*'Untitled' here possibly being either an alternate version of 'The Theme...' or a reconstruction of 'Proto-Protection' (‘Protection 2’?) or, in fact, neither - the confusion amongst fans starting when rough MP3s of those tracks, an edited dub from the VHS tape and associated 'First Dark Ride & Protection Remixes' sessions all leaked on Soulseek in the early 2000s. You’ll see what I mean when I list the following non-descript titles from that latter leaked session/remix batch of tracks:

'Protection 1' (which is the same track as ‘Protection II’ from Coil's 1999 'Song of the Week' free download release)
'Protection 2' (which is obviously not ‘Protection II’)
'Protection 3' (which is the same track as ‘Proto-Protection’ from ‘Gay Man's Guide to Safer Sex’, but with around 20 seconds of silence tagged on the end).

The brain really begins to hurt when trying to piece the whole sessions together from every source. But, as far as I can gather, here's the currently-available 'Gay Man's...' session tracks and where best to get them from, ahead of future commercial compilations:

1. 'The Theme from Gay Man's Guide' (get it either from 'Song Of The Week'/’Black Gold' or the bootleg soundtrack).
2. 'Exploding Frogs' (get the 8+min track either from the bootleg soundtrack, or as an alt studio version with half the running time from 'Stolen & Contaminated Songs' - subsequently named officially there as 'Omlagus Garfungiloops').
3. 'Protection' (the refined version was officially released on 1994's 'Born Again Pagans', so get that track from there).
4. 'Protection II' (get it, named as 'Protection 1', from 'First Dark Ride & Protection Remixes').
5. 'Proto-Protection' (get it, named as 'Protection 3', from 'First Dark Ride & Protection Remixes').
6. 'Untitled' (assuming the track is the reconstructed 'Theme...' get it from the bootleg soundtrack or, if it is 'Protection 2', then get it from 'First Dark Ride & Protection Remixes').

For completists, another COIL track appearing in this sex ed video (in a section suitably focussing on fetishes) is 'The Sewage Worker's Birthday Party'. According to several sources, 'NASA-Arab 2' is also heard on the soundtrack, the MP3 often included in the soundtrack leaks, but I cannot locate that song anywhere within the two copies of the VHS film I've seen, and the MP3 does not sound to me like it is ripped from the VHS. Maybe the sources are possibly mistaking the starting section of 'Exploding Frogs' or the groovier sections of 'The Theme...' as being the hand drum-led 'NASA-Arab 2', or my ears are just not picking up the sounds from this fairly bland track under the narration mix. I know that one current Youtube version of 'NASA-Arab 2' isn’t that track at all, but a section of the reconstructed 'Theme...'. Perhaps the more likely answer is that ‘NASA-Arab 2’ was a part of the soundtrack sessions but ultimately unused in the finished film, but we shall come back to this track in a moment.

With regards to other extant recordings from these sessions, there was at least five takes of 'The Theme...' and two takes of 'Protection' transferred from Peter's DAT collection in 2010 and I am sure Danny Hyde would have kept copies of at least the initial versions of all the main tracks, or track files and notes for their reconstruction, given his heavy involvement with the writing, the sessions themselves and his knack for cataloguing studio sessions. For example, I note that Hyde's epic upcoming 'Swanyard' compilation (May 2019, Infinite Fog) includes what may be yet another version of 'Protection', this time labelled 'Jhon’s House Tune From GM Guide - Protection'.

Hyde is also planning to release his version of the known Gay Man’s soundtrack on vinyl and CD later in 2019 under the Swiss label Musique Pour La Danse, with the following track listing for the vinyl version (possibly subject to change, as it is currently still at the test pressing stage and none of the many
versions of Protection are included - with lots of room on the CD version to include at least one of them):

1. Alternative Theme from Gay Man's Guide To Safer Sex (6:43)
2. Exploding Frogs (8:41)
3. Nasa-Arab 2 (4:13)
4. Nasa-Arab (10:49, from COIL's ‘Stolen & Contaminated Songs’)  
5. Omlagus Garfungiloops (4:24, from COIL's ‘Stolen & Contaminated Songs’)  
6. Theme from Gay Man's Guide To Safer Sex (8:35)

As I have mentioned elsewhere before, COIL certainly looked upon their slow, groove-based soundtrack work for the 'Gay Man's...' film with a higher regard than their efforts for Sara Dale. With no Dale-based morsels reworked for other COIL-based ventures, the band went on to release pieces from this new set of soundtrack sessions on other titles. To recap, though disregarding the two versions of 'NASA-Arab' and the band's fruitless aim to release the main tracks on their consistently doomed 'The Sound of Music' compilation, COIL officially released session tracks on the following titles over the years:

[1994] - 'Born Again Pagans' by "COIL Vs. ELpH" (the 'Protection' track).  
[1999] - 'Song Of The Week' (COIL releasing the following tracks as free downloads during 1999: 'Theme From The Gay Man's Guide To Safer Sex' and 'Protection II').

Now, if ever there was one true transitional COIL record, then 1994's 'Born Again Pagans' must surely be it. Simultaneously saying goodbye to the Basilisk video commissions for now (Their 'Blue' soundtrack finally released on vinyl in December 1993) and saying hello to the ElpH era, the record suffers greatly from being seriously uneven. By this time the leading house dance track 'Protection' (yanked from 'The Gay Man’s...' sessions and further developed) clearly existed in a completely different time and place to the rest of the tracks here, the second half of this "Coil vs. ElpH" EP being a far more captivating listen by comparison. Somewhat of a bridge or pointer towards one of COIL's most experimental albums, 'Worship The Glitch' (1995), this sketchy EP of tracks also sounds like a clearing of the decks ahead of fully concentrating on that all-enveloping ElpH album concept.
By the time the band returned for yet another MacKay commission, Jarman’s ‘A Journey To Avebury’ for the 1996 festival circuit, COIL’s sound had evolved immeasurably - for they were journeying further into the McDowall era and towards the shady, troubled lands of the Black Light District.

Download the accompanying 'The Gay Man’s Guide to Safer Sex' (1992) film with COIL’s soundtrack now, available under the Fair Use / Fair Dealing doctrine – especially for reviewing lost films - with the following elements:

* Mpeg video file [1st Generation VHS Tape > PAL .Vob > Remastered 1.87gb mpeg w. additional elements].
* Newly Designed DVD sleeve & DVD menu png for home collection use.
* This illustrated pdf essay.

*My sincere thanks goes out to Arild Stromsvag for the very generous original DVD-R donation of this version.*

Best wishes & good karma to you,

Phil Barrington
April 22nd 2019
Resources

'The Gay Man’s Guide to Safer Sex' Related Discography:

1992 - 'Stolen & Contaminated Songs' ('Omlagus Garfungiloops' / 'Exploding Frogs').
1994 - 'Born Again Pagans' (COIL Vs. ELpH E.P.) ('Protection').
1999 - 'Song Of The Week' (releasing the below tracks as free downloads on the band’s Brainwashed site in 1999) https://archive.org/details/CoilSongOfTheWeek -

"This track has never appeared on a Coil release whatsoever. Some people have said this sounds like an alternate version of "Protection" but there are really no indications in the song anywhere. The sound quality is not all that great, it was dubbed off of a video cassette whose sound quality was not that great to begin with. Perhaps later we can get a better recording, but for now you can at least hear the song."

[21] 'Protection II'
"This is another version of the track that appeared on the Protection EP [Born Again Pagans]. This version is the one that was used in the 'Gay Man's Guide To Safer Sex' instructional video. This version seems to go on forever. 13:24 total, it's roughly twice as long as the version originally released on the EP."

2000s - 'First Dark Ride & Protection Remixes'
https://archive.org/details/CoilFirstDarkRideProtectionRemixes
Note: These were floating around SoulSeek in the early 2000s and include:
Coil-FirstDarkRideProtectionRemixes-5 Protection 1 (same as 'Protection II' from 'Song of the Week').
Coil-FirstDarkRideProtectionRemixes-6 Protection 2 (possibly aka 'Untitled').
Coil-FirstDarkRideProtectionRemixes-7 Protection 3 (aka 'Proto-Protection' with blank section at the end).

2000s - 'The Gay Man's Guide To Safer Sex' (Bootleg Soundtrack)

Unrealised Projects From 1992:

What could have been: COIL were involved in a plethora of concepts and projects throughout 1992, with some plans never progressing - such as the band being part of the superb 'Underground' graphic novel anthology series, which was first released by Dark Horse the following year.