**Zeal & Ardor – Devil Is Fine**

 *Summon the children, for tonight He rises…*

Emancipation. Damnation. Blasphemy. Ecstasy. Vengeance. Deliverance. Rebellion. Liberation. Consider this your invitation to the transcendent, transfiguring Satanic Spirituals of *Devil Is Fine*.

“Nothing released this year is as strange, inscrutable or wonderful than Zeal & Ardor's *Devil is Fine*,” extols *Rolling Stone*, hailing the debut album as “a dream world of infinite possibilities.” The creation of Swiss-American songwriter/soundscaper Manuel Gagneux, *Devil Is Fine* is an artistic artefact like no other, a meld of black metal, field recordings, Delta blues, jazz, ring shouts, music box melodies, glitchy hip-hop beats, soul and gospel, brought together in the service of The One With Horns. It is the most provocative, challenging, innovative and utterly individual album of the year, a recording which obliterates genre boundaries and creates a dark, diabolical universe all its own.

“It’s like walking through slave-era America and seeing a chain gang in the woods practising Satanic rituals,” says Manuel Gagneux, offering a glimpse into the compelling world conjured by *Devil Is Fine*. “Imagine if slaves in America had rejected Christianity and embraced Satanism instead, if instead of being forced to accept the ‘will of God’, they had chosen defiance and rebellion and the power of Satan. That’s the world in which the album is rooted.”

The concept underpinning *Devil Is Fine* originally came to Gagneux via an unconventional route, namely the messageboards of the notorious 4chan website. In 2014, while living in Harlem, New York, making music as Birdmask, Gagneux would post anonymously on the bulletin board’s music threads, inviting forum members to suggest disparate musical genres which he would endeavour to splice together in 30 minutes or less to create new songs: one such entreaty led a community member to propose that the Swiss musician combine black metal with “nigger music”, a wilfully offensive and obnoxious provocation which Gagneux nonetheless considered “a thematically interesting idea” to pursue.

“Was I offended?” he asks, addressing the crude racism of the original posting, since he himself is African-American. “No, because it’s 4chan, and to take offence there is to give the idiots and the bigots a power and influence they do not deserve. But when I considered the idea, I saw a certain defiance in spirit and attitude in the slave spirituals and work songs that I could relate to the defiance in Norwegian black metal towards Christianity and the destruction of their original environment. And so that was the starting point for the experiment.”

“New York is a huge, overpowering, endlessly stimulating city, where people do great things artistically, which can be both intimidating and inspiring for a musician,” he continues. “It forces you to be original, because every type of music there is, is being done better by someone else in the city. But I was pretty sure that this was a style of music that no-one else was attempting to create.”

A fan of black metal from his teenage years – “It was the most extreme music I’d ever heard,” he says, “and as an isolated, lonely teen I thought ‘I can only be understood by these people’” – Gagneux began immersing himself in the historic recordings of work songs, Spirituals and prison chants collected by archivist, folklorist and ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax and his father John Lomax for the Library of Congress in Washington DC. Combining these source materials with his love of maverick musical talents from Tom Waits to Portishead, Captain Beefheart to Mr Bungle, his own bespoke musical vision began to take shape.

“Though there’s often no instrumentation at all on those Lomax recordings, there’s always a real heavy implied rhythm in those chants, a syncopation that tears at your heartstrings and makes you nod your head,” he says. “It’s so beautiful and so spiritual that I kinda wanted to steal it. And I’ve always loved musicians who create their own worlds, who write songs like others write stories, and draw you into their universe. So that was the challenge for me with Zeal & Ardor.”

With striking artwork featuring Robert Smalls, a heroic escaped Civil War-era slave turned pioneering US politician, the result is one of the most original, bold and subversive recordings ever to emerge from the black metal scene. From the raw, hypnotic, call and response Satan-praising exhortations of the title track to the sinister, jazzy, Bayou swamp grooves of What Is A Killer Like You Gonna Do Here? via the chamber music versus icy blastbeats of Come On Down and the beautifully disorientating three-part Sacrilegium suite, *Devil Is Fine* is a superlative artistic statement which marks Zeal & Ardor as one of the most inventive new voices in underground music. “There are many, many experimental music—metal, noise, and otherwise—albums out there, but none of them sound quite as human as this one,” noted Noisey approvingly.

“Responses to the album have been mixed, but always passionate,” laughs Manuel Gagneux. “There’s been a lot of hatred from black metal purists, but a lot of love from people who maybe don’t primarily listen to black metal. Truthfully I’m not sure that I can even label my music as ‘black metal’, but it’s always amusing to annoy elitists.”

With *Devil Is Fine* set for release via MVKA in February 2017 and a first ever Zeal & Ardor tour – including a date at the legendary Roadburn festival - booked for April/May, Manuel Gagneux is understandably excited about the year ahead. Though his music is rooted in America’s troubled past, the young musician has his eyes fixed firmly on the future, and the prospect of taking his sacrilegious Satanic Spirituals to a world increasingly in need of solace and salvation.

“I’m obviously aware of the concept being problematic for some - whether that be right-wing racists offended at the ‘purity’ of back metal being mixed with African-American music, or by left-wing commentators claiming cultural appropriation – but my motivation is to break down barriers,” he says. “I think it’s a sad, regressive, isolationist thought that culture should only belong to a certain ethnicity or group. For me, music is about freedom, and there’s a real sense of liberation in the Spirituals which is empowering and ennobling. It’s okay to be offended, Zeal & Ardor is not for everyone. But one function of art is to provoke and challenge, and if nothing else, I think *Devil Is Fine* will certainly do that.”