



THE APOCALYPSE THAT WASN'T

In 2000, almost famous space rockers Sons of Pale Horse decided to make a record to end the band. Instead, they became forever infamous and made fans they never wanted. Behind the misunderstood music that was *THE BOOK OF RORSCHACH*.

Words: **Seymour David**



Art by Chris Deschaines and Mark Ennis

Originally released by Black Freighter on the 15th anniversary of 11/2, *The Book of Rorschach* by Sons of Pale Horse was the most maligned album of the unplugged era. No one was in the mood to thoughtfully engage a Frankenstein-Rock farrago of avant-garde ambitions and juvenile manias, certainly not the Pulp Valley elite eager to hustle America into the "New Century" renaissance promised by President Redford. "The last gasp yawp of a dazed and confused decade that just needs to die already," raged *Nova Express*. "Every copy should be rocketed to the lunar heaps." Even 'zine scene vanguards trashed it, from glitch rock tastemakers to horrorcore connoisseurs. Declared Marilyn Manish of *Snoopy Shoes Revue*: "Regressive edginess set to a hodgepodge of sloppily-produced pretentiousness. Profoundly inauthentic on every possible level, for any possible audience. Who do these posers think they're fooling?"

Everyone, apparently. Black Freighter sold 4 million units before bowing to pressure from the Sons themselves to stop satisfying demand for something that disturbed so many and so few understood, even the people buying it. With true crime and anti-heroes once again mainstream entertainment (see: *The Serial Radio Hour*, *American Hero*

Story), the time has come to reappraise a misfit masterpiece gnarly with bona fide madness. Charlton is proud to present anew *The Book of Rorschach* as part of its ongoing series of Cancel Culture Classics.

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The Sons of Pale Horse was a quartet formed by pairs of best friends bonded by a desire for brilliance and undone by a misbegotten novelty. Songwriter Chris Deschaines and bassist Mike Ennis grew up nerdy-grungy on the poisoned banks of the Green River outside Seattle. Guitarist Dao X and drummer Gene Casablanas became tight while attending one of billionaire futurist Adrian Veidt's Millennium Polytechnic schools in privileged Palo Alto. Each was shaped by the big bang of 11/2 and the vacuous Dark Age that followed.

For those born in the bog of epistemological quagmire that is post-Manhattan America, the Luddite lunacy of the Ford era might seem incredible. But it happened. With astrophysicists at a loss to explain the Interspatial Toxic Event (ITE), our foundational understanding of the universe collapsed. People panicked; speculation and pseudoscience filled the void. A plausible-sounding connection took root: Dr. Manhattan — the super-powered super-fluke, himself an inexplicable anomaly — had abandoned earth amid charges that he was hazardous to our health, specifically, that he was carcinogenic. Did his abrupt departure somehow make the environment vulnerable to ITEs? Was radiation pollution from an increasingly electric world corroding the fabric of reality itself? As these worries splintered and multiplied — fertilized, for sure, by 'ITE-sploitation' print pop — the consequences compounded. People purged screens, appliances, anything powered by Manhattan-synthesized lithium, from cars to discmans to wristwatches. Landfills maxed. Industries cratered. Migrations ensued. The return of fossil fuels re-energized Detroit. The switch-off of broadcast media accelerated the ghosting of New York. "No Drama" Ford pleaded for stability, but no one found it easy to trust government anymore, or anything, really. Science. Religion. Teachers. Family.

Chris was 13 when Manhattan fled for Mars. His father was crushed. He had run away from his Catholic parents in the sixties to join one of the "big blue" science cults. He gave up on string theory mysticism after Chris' mother died of

leukemia, but he never stopped believing that Manhattan was a messianic ubermensch. The quiet despair of his home drove Chris to rebellions that didn't stick — Top-Knot gangs, tagging, pills. He finally found a refuge in music when alt-rock hit in 1989. Jane's Addiction spurred him to pick up a guitar. The Nine Inch Nails compelled him to buy black market synthesizers. Needing someone to play with, Chris cajoled Mark into putting down pirate comics and manga porn and picking up the bass. The first song they learned together — or tried to — was "Julio Iglesias" by The Butthole Surfers. "Waaaaay too hard," recalls Mark. "Which became our thing: We were always trying way too hard."

In 1991, Chris' father was running a Burgers-N-Borscht pop-up near the campus of a software giant called Microsoft. When the company collapsed, he relocated to Boeing Field at the suggestion of Mike's father, a scrapper with a shady rep, suddenly flush from hauling gadgets to the Puget Sound Cosmodrome. "Our dads would take us to the launches," Mike recalls. "Such weird vibes. Hippies cheering garbage arks roaring into the sky, yuppies weeping over their car phones, *New Frontiersman*-types raging against



America cuts the cord, circa 1990 (photo courtesy of Seattle Times)

"And at that moment, I shit you not, it started raining baby squids. We took it as an omen. That's our origin story."



Final show: 12/1/00 @ The Greek (photo courtesy of Jean/Jane Casabiancas)

American-Soviet cooperation, Saganites on hunger strikes. And here we were, making a buck off everyone."

Prodded by their fathers, Chris and Mark began performing for the spaceport crowds. They called themselves Space Junk. Devo and Bowie covers, mostly. When they started making money, Mr. Ennis began taking half of every buck thrown into the hat. "When I complained, my dad told me I should forget about it," said Chris in a 2001 interview. Betrayed, Chris ran away. Mike went, too. "He was the best thing I had going in my life," says Mike. "He always was."

In Silicon Valley, Gene's venture capitalist parents went broke in the tech crash, though they'd recover in the print media boom that remade the region into the nation's new media capital. X's mother, an Olympic gymnast and Seventh Level practitioner of Veidt Method transhumanism, taught P.E. at Mill-Poly. The boys met in John Cage's music class. Their first hang was Lollapalooza '91, where they watched Naked City perform *Future Tarkovsky Unmade* for the first and only time. "Life-changing," says X. The next day, they started writing songs. Focus was a problem. "We could never settle on a style," says Gene. "But we became proficient in so many genres as a result." One year before Mill-Poly closed when Veidt's too-soon "Millennium Society" initiatives flopped, X's mother, an activist for Vietnamese independence, vanished. X believes she was a victim of the "Deplorable" dragnets of Ford regime authoritarianism. Gene's parents took him in. "The Moms," as we called them, became my second parents" says X. "They wanted us to

go to Stanford. We chose Sundance. If only I had a time machine..."

Originally launched as a foundation for independent filmmaking, The Sundance Labs transformed into a network of art colleges after Robert Redford entered politics in 1988 and divested from the enterprise. The early days of the music-centric L.A. campus was an incubator of protest rock. Rage Against The Machine. Body Count. Hiroshima Lovers. By the time Gene and X arrived, the fragile hope produced by Redford's victory over Ford in '92 precipitated a shift. "The mandate was 'the new optimism,'" says Gene. "Everyone wanted to be the Spin Doctors. X and I wanted to be Pink Floyd."

Chris and Mike were living in Venice. Slacker jobs by day — delivering newspapers; clerking at Hi De Ho Comics — no-pay gigs at night. Their set included a suite of hardcore fragments inspired by the cut-up techniques William Burroughs and Max Shea. "We saw them at Jabberjaw," says X. "They were doing *Hooded Basilisk* and got booed off. But Gene and I loved it and chased after them to tell them so."

They bonded that night over take-out Tandoori from Gunga Diner and *Pale Horse*, Steven Spielberg's meticulously-crafted recreation of 11/2, which took its title from the death metal band that was among the 3 million victims of the ITE's psychic shockwave. The Sons all had some Truther in them. Chris was a Veidist, Gene was a Cthulhuist, but more than anything, their skepticism expressed

as irreverence, a trait common to their generation. So the moment in *Pale Horse* when a scientist suggests 11/2 was a catastrophic attempt at first contact by a maybe-benign UBE triggered their disdain. Says Mike: "When Jeff Goldblum gives The Big Explanation, we were on our chairs and throwing Sunbursts at the screen and chanting *Bullshit!*"

"We were also stoned," recalls X. "Afterward, we're eating Diddy Riese in Westwood and Chris is still spitting fire. *That movie is sentimental trash that insults the memory of Pale Horse! They must be avenged! For them, we must band together and bombard the masses with sonic enlightenment! For we, my friends, WE are the SONS of Pale Horse! And at the moment, I shit you not, it started raining baby squids. We took it as an omen. That's our origin story.*"

Converting zeal into vinyl took time. Gene and X lingered at Sundance — mostly so the Sons could use the rehearsal spaces to fine-tune their defiantly electronic style of space rock. Meanwhile, Mike started finding his true passions, most of them in underground or "sub-pop" media. Competing in *Doom* tournaments, he won thousand-dollar purses and made valuable connections. In 1995, the Sons produced the score for iD's *Quake*, a black market sensation. In 1996, they produced sound effects for grindhouse auteur Quentin Tarantino's unlicensed, now-suppressed *Star Trek*. They tried to develop more following by playing pirate TV stations — bootleg recordings abound — but they found no takers for their demo, *Sirens of Saturn*. It wasn't the Poz Pop labels wanted.

"After rehab, I got the idea of **writing songs about this madness - about getting lost in it, about getting out of it.**"

Sirens of Saturn probably wouldn't have caught fire in any possible world. Its 70 minutes of low-fi prog rock included just three pieces: a new version of *Hooded Basilisk Suite* - weirder with X's messy speed-picking and wilder with Gene's haphazard beats - and two early *Rorschach* tracks, the venomous "Good Men Like My Father" and "Aoxo-moxoa Now" (later "No One Cares But Me"), which crawled out of a dream about Chris' cousin, a self-proclaimed clairvoyant who died in 1984. From Chris in '01: "His head is attached to a mass of tentacles and he's adrift on a river of gore, floating on a raft of dog carcasses. He's mouthing 'Save me' but I only hear Jerry Garcia singing Iggy Pop's 'Neighborhood Threat.' I have no clue what it means, but it made for cool lyrics."

As the Sons struggled, each began hearing new callings in new niches. X became politically active, taking after his mother. (He's now a field director at The Trieu Center for Social Justice.) Gene, also a writer, fell into journalism. (She's now vice president of emerging media at Time-Meredith, a Moms holding.) And Mike reconciled with his father. With family backing, he launched *Black Freighter*, an early force in the new century reboot of home entertainment, grown from the spoils of a certain dubious blockbuster.

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Making "Sirens of Saturn" at Sundance (photo courtesy of Dao X)

By 1999, with the Sons drifting apart, Chris pitched one last hurrah. Not a gambit for world-changing greatness, but rather, "a way of putting the past behind us as we reach for something new." He was ready for it. The previous year, as the others were chasing new visions, Chris, addicted to KT-28s, was trapped in a sick one. At rock bottom, Chris was so altered, he thought he was the reincarnation of a notorious vigilante known for his inkblot mask. "I found him in our apartment one night ripping up floorboards, screaming *Where's my fucking trenchcoat?*" says Mike. "The intervention happened the next day."

Chris' fixation with Walter Kovacs, aka Rorschach, flowed out of a childhood fascination with masked vigilantes. "The last gift I ever got from my mom was a set of Veidt Crime-busters toys," he said in 2001. "Maybe it started there." Interest reignited in 1995 when two famed second-generation costumed adventurers sparked a media sensation by foiling domestic terrorists from detonating a lithium cluster bomb in Oklahoma City. Injured during the heroics and captured by police, they were offered plea deals. Laurie Blake - known first as Silk Spectre, then The Comedienne - now works for the FBI's anti-vigilante unit. Dan Dreiberg, dubbed Nite Owl, accepted the 30-year sentence mandated by the Keene Act and issued a terse statement: "Never compromise, never surrender." He was quoting Rorschach, who hasn't been seen since Halloween '85, when Dreiberg and Blake raided New York State Penitentiary to bust him out.

Amid the fuss surrounding the Oklahoma City incident, *The New Frontiersman* published a bookazine that reprinted the archconservative tabloid's signature scoop: excerpts from Rorschach's alleged journal. Anecdotes from Kovacs' abusive childhood; fragments of a lurid origin story involving child abduction and slaughtered German Shepherds; details of a helter-skelter investigation into Adrian Veidt and attacks on retired costumed adventurers; and high anxiety rants about liberal politics, moral relativism, and impending nuclear Armageddon. (11/2's only blessing: chilling the Afghan conflict and stopping certain war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.)

The bookazine was a smash. "I was obsessed with the journal during my spiral," Chris said in '01. "After rehab, I got the idea of writing songs about this madness - about getting lost in it, about getting out of it." This was the project he pitched to the band - a concept album using Rorschach as an allegory for himself that doubled as an act of catharsis for the Sons to grieve the end of their dream. "I couldn't resist a joke. *Sounds like some sentimental trash to me!*" said Gene. "Of course we said yes. We were so proud he got clean. We did it for him."



Poster designed by Red D'Eath of Pale Horse

Chris set the process. He broke Rorschach's journal into 11 distinct episodes. He then reimagined each episode from the perspective of an unnamed protagonist suffering from identity crisis: Is he Rorschach or is he someone who *thinks* he's Rorschach? Chris then edited the episodes into surreal, Beck-style lyrics, doting on the tragic, queasy bits of Rorschach's biography - the abuse of his mother, the absence of his father, and the misogyny it seeded; the psychotic break that transmogrified his resentments into extremist ideology. Chris also wrote a 12th song, an epilogue that didn't exactly resolve the album's central ambiguity, but instead, sent the protagonist into the future resolved to evolve into "a new creation," vowing to "live clear," his commitment summarized in the refrain: "Never compromise, never surrender."

When X and Gene saw the crowd – “dude bros in Rorschach masks,” says Gene, “looking to mosh each other bloody” – they walked off.



Chris read each poem to the band, and then the Sons would jam. Their creativity took them afield from their usual space rock. “American Love (They Don’t Make It Anymore)” is muddled-up rockabilly. “Dead Dogs and Pretty Little Butterflies” fuses Trallpunk and power pop. The Sons repurposed their own work — *Hooded Basilisk Suite* morphed into “Face/Mask” — and appropriated others. “Moloch (I Fought Law)” incorporates an abstraction of the Sonny Curtis classic, while the 11/2 epic “The End Is Nigh” — a medley of layered nightmare sounds meant to evoke the psychic shockwave — samples songs from the Sons’ namesake, Pale Horse. “We dumped all of our musical imagination into the record,” said X. “We also experimented with stuff which didn’t work. At least we had the good sense to tell Mark he couldn’t rap. We shut that shit down quick.”

But it was Mark who released *The Book of Rorschach* on November 2000 through his nascent Black Freightier company, a small run to sub-pop retailers. “For the band, the record was proof of our existence. We just liked that it was out there, even in some bargain bin. For me, it was a learning-by-doing way of figuring out the business,” said Mark. “We had such small expectations. But then people started buying the thing.”

Perhaps the Sons had developed a larger following than they thought. What’s certain is that they had made catnip for people who shared an unhealthy fascination with masked vigilantes. They also had the luck — or the misfortune — of a changing zeitgeist. America was starting to shake off its phobias, roll with the unsolved mysteries of their new reality, and even trust Washington again. After eight years of reliable governance and amid an uptick in the economy, Redford was rewarded with a third term and, for the first time, majorities in Congress. He soon began pushing through the progressive agenda he’d been promising for years.

All of these factors contributed to *The Book of Rorschach*’s peculiar success and polarizing reception. On January 1, 2001, L.A.’s KROQ re-launched after five years off the air, and at midnight, played *The Book of Rorschach* in its entirety. The attention catalyzed sales and press, which included two auspicious raves: a glowing profile of “sub-pop bad boy” Mark Ennis in *Gamegate*; and a front page editorial in *The New Frontiersman* lauding the Sons for “introducing the youth to a true American hero.” This triggered rejoinders from the conservative journal’s political opposites, with *Nova Express* blasting the album for “romanticizing lone nut archetypes, enlightened madman clichés, and a manifold of toxic pathologies.”

“Which, obviously, was the opposite of our intentions,” says X.

The Sons came face-to-face with what they had wrought at their only concert for the album. When X and Gene saw the crowd — “dude bros in Rorschach masks,” says Gene, “looking to mosh each other bloody” — they walked off. “I never wanted fans like that,” says X. Dismayed, Chris asked Mark to reissue the record with an explanatory essay. “My partners wouldn’t let me. It was too expensive,” said Mark. “The best I could do was to refuse new orders.” He did. Slowly. Too slowly for the other Sons. In 2001, Chris found a platform for apologizing in *Might Magazine*, another Moms holding. “We never should have made the record,” he told Dave Eggers. “I should have just let the band die. Maybe then we’d all still be friends.” The week after *Might* reached newsstands, *The Book of Rorschach* hit number 1 on the charts.

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Following his father’s death in 2016, Mark liquidated Black Freightier. He donated most of his profits to The Three Million Foundation, devoted to rebuilding New York and financing experimental treatments for ITE-inflicted PTSD. He also reconciled with X and Gene and gave them the rights to *The Book of Rorschach*. They are donating their royalties of this re-issue to various charities. None of them have seen Chris since 2001. His whereabouts are unknown.

For years, *The Book of Rorschach* has been a cautionary tale about good intentions, blinkered perspective and privilege, and the aesthetics of provocation. “I admire risky, uncomfortable art,” says Gene. “We just weren’t very good at it. The bitter irony is that I doubt our weird little thing would make even a ripple today. Have you seen *American Hero Story*?” Today, *The Book of Rorschach* talks back to our glut of glib, gleeful nihilism. And perhaps this record about a kid under the influence of noxious nostalgia has something to say to the masked extremists roiling America amid the tumult of Redford’s “New Century” programs. “I know some of those folks love this record,” says X. “Maybe one day they’ll actually hear what Chris was trying to say.”

Seymour David is a historian, author, and lecturer. He’s a fellow at The Douglas Roth School for Media and Popular Culture at New Columbia University. His books include *Happy Face: The Button Art of Big Blue Dick* and *The Making of Martin Scorsese’s Knot-Top*. For *Charlton’s Cancel Culture Classics* series, he has written essays for *Suction Cups for Strings* by Linette Paley and *Eating My Way Out* by Womb Goof. He lives in Greenwich Village with his partner, acclaimed vegan chef Philip Borquin, and their bulldog, Hum.



This relentless world
there is only one sane response to it.

sons of pale horse are
chris deschaines (vocals, guitar, keyboards, synthesizers) mike conis (vocals, bass) dao x lian (guitar, bass, synthesizers, strings) gene jean casablancas (drums, horns)
the book of ratschack by sons of pale horse produced by chris deschaines music composed and performed by sons of pale horse (except where noted)
originally recorded and mixed by chris deschaines for black freighter at the village recorder in los angeles and various california basements
additional mixing and engineering for this release by ronnie linette palay for charlton records
art directed by chris deschaines and mark conis design by joseph orlando jr. legal by schenayder & sons, llc management by "the monks"
published by charlton home records

Regret nothing. Lived life free from compromise.
... and step into the shadow now without complaint



DC logo, WATCHMEN and all related characters and elements © & TM DC, 6/99



side a	side b
american love (they don't make it anymore)	moloch (i fought the law)*
good men like my father	dead dogs and pretty little butterflies
kitty-made	locked up in here with me
my violent new continent	all my friends are so very soft
face/mask*	the end is nigh (suite)*
no one cares but me	never compromise, never surrender

all songs written and performed by sons of pale horse except where noted.
 "face/mask" written and performed by chris deschaines, "i fought the law" written by sonny curtis
 "the end is nigh" (suite) contains samples of "neighborhood threat" written by iggy pop, performed by pale horse
 "ink blot guy" written by red d'eath, performed by pale horse, "the spirit of seventy-six" written by red d'eath, performed by pale horse
 published by charlton home records