

= The Astonishing =

The Astonishing is the thirteenth studio album by American progressive metal band Dream Theater , released on January 29 , 2016 through Roadrunner Records . It is the band 's second concept album , with a story conceived by guitarist John Petrucci and music written by Petrucci and keyboardist Jordan Rudess . Composer David Campbell assisted with orchestrating the album 's strings and choirs . The album was recorded throughout 2015 at Cove City Sound Studios in Long Island , New York , with the exception of vocals , which were recorded in Canada . Mixing and sound engineering were performed by the band 's longtime collaborator , Richard Chycki , with Petrucci producing .

The Astonishing is set in a dystopian future United States and follows the Ravenskill Rebel Militia in their efforts to defy the Great Northern Empire of the Americas using the magical power of music . It was inspired by contemporary fantasy and science fiction franchises such as Game of Thrones and Star Wars , as well as Petrucci 's observations on the ubiquity of technological automation in modern @-@ day society . In their effort to match the album 's narrative , Dream Theater wrote songs in a wide variety of styles ranging from mellow ballads to their more conventional progressive metal sound .

Leading up to the The Astonishing 's release , the band marketed the album with its own website , fan mailing lists , and trailer . It debuted in the top ten of nine different countries and became the first Dream Theater album to reach number one on the US Billboard Rock Chart . It has received generally favorable reviews from music critics and the band toured to support the album through July 2016 .

= = Background = =

In mid @-@ 2013 , guitarist John Petrucci began writing a story for a concept album , presenting it to the rest of Dream Theater about a year later . The band and the record label were receptive to the idea , with Petrucci recalling , " Everybody had the ' go for it ' mentality . And from the very first meeting that we had with Dave Rath at Roadrunner , when I presented this and even just said the title , he was 100 percent on board . The involvement of everybody at Roadrunner has been absolutely unbelievable , so supportive . It kind of ignited the secret nerd in all of us that loves this sort of stuff , because it 's fun , it 's different . " From its conception , Petrucci envisioned the story as eventually being re @-@ worked into a film , play , or video game .

Petrucci and keyboardist Jordan Rudess wrote the album 's music independently from the rest of Dream Theater by getting together everyday , going over ideas in the morning , and then working through the music during the day and night . Upon finishing their initial drafts , they presented them to the rest of the band , who worked on writing parts for their own instruments . In an interview with Artisan News , drummer Mike Mangini reflected , " The biggest challenge for me was interpreting the initial music that was given to me , because there were no drums . So [I was like] , ' All right , I need to listen to this , really , as a whole piece to understand where I should kind of let loose or I should lay back a lot . ' All that . Just to see it as a whole , ' cause I don 't wanna play blindly or try to fit too much where it doesn 't belong . "

As Petrucci and Rudess felt that the album needed real string lines and choirs , as well as other organic sounds , they enlisted the help of veteran composer David Campbell to assist with aspects of the orchestration and handle the logistics of recording all of the necessary musicians . Reflecting on the process for Keyboard , Rudess explained , " Our initial thought was , let ? s do it all on rock instruments and let David arrange it , but that wasn ? t really thinking ahead in terms of who we are . When we go into the studio , we tend to work on things until they ? re pretty polished . So we got into what we called pre @-@ orchestrating . I ? d use any sound at my disposal to place strings where we wanted to hear strings , choir where we wanted choir , and so forth ? but without getting overly specific about a certain patch or instrument library being the one , because we knew it was all going to be replaced with real players . " Once the album 's arrangements were complete , they were performed and recorded in studios around the world , with Campbell conducting and leading

the sessions from Los Angeles .

Dream Theater began recording the album 's bass , drums , guitars , and keyboards in January 2015 at Cove City Sound Studios in Long Island , New York , where they also recorded their two previous albums , A Dramatic Turn of Events (2011) and Dream Theater (2013) . Longtime collaborator Richard Chycki , who Petrucci described as " a sixth member of the band " , was again brought in as the album 's sound engineer , while Petrucci served as producer . In July , they took a break from the studio to play some shows in Europe , but did some writing while on the road . In August , James LaBrie began recording vocals in Canada with Chycki . Singing as multiple characters , he took it upon himself to create unique interpretations of each one , with Petrucci offering him sporadic advice and feedback . Recording completed in late September , with mixing beginning the next month and mastering concluding in mid @-@ December .

= = Synopsis = =

The following is based on The Astonishing 's official synopsis , published by Dream Theater upon the album 's release .

= = = Act I = = =

In 2285 , the northeastern region of the United States has turned into a dystopia ruled by the oppressive Great Northern Empire of the Americas . The only resemblance to entertainment that exists is the electronic noise of the Noise Machines (NOMACs) . The empire is ruled by Emperor Nafaryus , Empress Arabelle , Crown Prince Daryus , and Princess Faythe . In a distant village called Ravenskill , a man named Gabriel possesses the natural ability to make music and sing (" The Gift of Music ") . He has an older brother , Commander Arhys of the Ravenskill Rebel Militia , who has a son , Xander , with his deceased wife , Evangeline (" A Better Life ") .

Nafaryus hears a rumor about Gabriel being the savior of the people . He and his family travel to Ravenskill to see him for themselves (" Lord Nafaryus ") . In the Ravenskill town square , Gabriel is performing for the people when the royal family shows up . He continues playing at the emperor 's request (" A Savior in the Square ") , nearly bringing them all to tears (" When Your Time Has Come ") . As he plays , Faythe remembers how she found a music player when she was a child and kept it a secret all her life , and as she and Gabriel stare at each other they fall in love (" Act of Faythe ") . Nafaryus , though briefly moved by Gabriel 's song , sees him as a threat to his rule and gives the people of the town three days to deliver their savior to him or he will destroy the town (" Three Days ") . Arhys hides his brother and refuses to give him up (" Brother , Can You Hear Me ? ") .

Back at the Emperor 's palace , Faythe decides she must see Gabriel again . Disguising herself , she begins to travel back to Ravenskill . Arabelle , knowing about her daughter 's intentions , instructs Daryus to follow and protect her . Daryus feels he has always been overlooked by his father in favor of his sister , so he travels to the town with his own intentions (" A Life Left Behind ") . Faythe arrives in the town and finds Xander , who trusts her and leads her to his father Arhys . Faythe convinces Arhys that she can help , so he brings her to Gabriel 's hideout . Gabriel and Faythe embrace , and she tells him that she believes she can convince her father to give up his hunt for Gabriel (" Ravenskill ") . Gabriel tells her that if he could just meet with the Emperor , he could inspire him to restore peace to the land using his gift of music (" Chosen ") .

Meanwhile , Daryus finds Arhys ' home and takes Xander captive . Daryus promises he will guarantee the safety and wealth of Xander in return for Arhys bringing Gabriel to him . Daryus does this hoping that it will gain him respect from his father (" A Tempting Offer ") . Arhys is forced to agree to the deal , remembering a promise he made to Evangeline to protect their son (" The X Aspect ") . Faythe travels back to her father 's palace and learns that her music player once belonged to her father . After a while , Nafaryus bows to the pleas of his daughter (" A New Beginning ") and agrees to meet with Gabriel at an abandoned amphitheater called Heaven 's Cove (" The Road to Revolution ") .

== Act II ==

Arhys informs Daryus that Gabriel will be at Heaven 's Cove that night (" Moment of Betrayal ") . While the meeting time approached (" Heaven 's Cove ") , Faythe decides that she wants to use the power of her royal status to change the world for good (" Begin Again ") . At the amphitheater , Arhys changes his mind on the deal , and when Daryus shows up , they start a fight . Daryus overpowers Arhys and kills him (" The Path That Divides ") , unaware that Xander followed them and saw the whole scene . As Xander runs to his father 's dead body , Daryus sees the silhouette of someone approaching him . Assuming it to be Gabriel , he attempts to kill him , realising too late that it is actually Faythe (" The Walking Shadow ") . Gabriel arrives at the scene and sees his dead brother and the dying Faythe . Covering Xander 's ears , he unleashes a scream that causes Daryus to go deaf and that is heard by Nafaryus , Arabelle , and the entire town (" My Last Farewell ") .

Nafaryus and Arabelle arrive and beg Gabriel to use his gift to save Faythe (" Losing Faythe ") , but Gabriel is unable to sing after screaming so loudly (" Whispers on the Wind ") . The people , attracted by the scream , show up and start singing , giving Gabriel hope . He finds his ability to sing and brings Faythe back to life (" Hymn of a Thousand Voices ") . Nafaryus , realising what he has done , decides to end the conflict with Gabriel and shuts down the NOMACs for good . Daryus is forgiven for his actions , and Gabriel and Faythe raise Xander as a family (" Our New World ") . Nafaryus promises to govern the empire as a fair leader in a new world where music is appreciated again (" Astonishing ") .

== Composition ==

The Astonishing is Dream Theater 's second concept album after 1999 's Metropolis Pt 2 : Scenes from a Memory . Described as an " honest @-@ to @-@ God rock opera " by Rolling Stone , it has been compared to The Who 's Tommy (1969) , Rush 's 2112 (1976) , Pink Floyd 's The Wall (1979) , and Queensrÿche 's Operation : Mindcrime (1988) . 2112 also revolves around music being used to achieve freedom in a futuristic setting . The album 's story was inspired by Petrucci 's love of fantasy and science fiction franchises such as Game of Thrones , Lord of the Rings , and Star Wars , as well as his observations on the role of technology in modern @-@ day society . In an interview with Billboard , he explained , " I was thinking of all of the things now that people used to do that they don 't do anymore because they 're automated or done by robots : lots of jobs , self @-@ driving cars coming right around the corner ... My thought was , ' What would happen if ... music [became] all artificial ? ? "

Clocking in at over two hours in length and containing 34 tracks , The Astonishing was planned as an immersive experience that would be best enjoyed as a full album as opposed to a collection of singles . The album plays out similarly to a film , with Loudwire observing , " It 's an enormous amount of music to absorb in one sitting , but when you think about it , most movies are around two hours in length , and The Astonishing is very much like a movie in the way it delivers the storyline . " Certain songs , such as " A Savior in the Square " and " Our New World " , have reoccurring themes , while others stand more on their own in order to move the plot along .

In writing music to match the The Astonishing 's narrative , Dream Theater ended up playing in a wide variety of styles , from cinematic instrumentals to mellow ballads to the band 's more conventional progressive metal . Compared to previous Dream Theater albums , there is more acoustic playing , both in terms of guitar and piano . In an interview with Ultimate Guitar , Petrucci specifically mentioned the song " A Life Left Behind " , recalling , " [It] starts with an acoustic , kind of proggy riff , which is something we 've never done and has a very Yes sort of feel . " Several songs introduced new elements to the band 's music , such as " The X Aspect " , which is the first Dream Theater song to use bagpipes , and " Three Days " , which features a saloon @-@ style swing section that was written as a juxtaposition to the bleaker aspects of the album 's story . Five of the album 's tracks are short , electronic songs that represent the music of NOMACs .

= = Release = =

Dream Theater began their marketing campaign for *The Astonishing* in October 2015 , prompting visitors to visit their official website to choose between mailing lists for the Great Northern Empire or the Ravenskill Rebel Militia . Registrants were then notified of updates to their side 's Twitter page as they occurred . In early November , the band announced that their thirteenth studio album would be titled *The Astonishing* and launched a promotional website that suggested it would be a concept album . The website slowly revealed key elements of the album 's story , including its characters , map , and track listing . In December , *The Astonishing* was given an official January 29 release date , with multiple special editions being made available for pre @-@ sale including a deluxe set with a handmade NOMAC 3D model . Leading to the album 's release , the band released a single , " The Gift of Music " , on December 15 , and premiered another song , " Moment of Betrayal " , on January 21 . They also made an official trailer available via YouTube .

Upon its release , *The Astonishing* debuted on many album charts , including top ten placements in Norway , Hungary , Italy , Sweden , Portugal , the Netherlands , Germany , Austria , and Canada . In the United States , it entered and peaked on the Billboard 200 at number eleven overall and became Dream Theater 's first ever number one debut on the Billboard Rock Chart . In February , the band released a music video for " The Gift of Music " , which mixed live performance footage with CGI animation and was filmed in New Jersey . Later that month , the band announced that it had partnered with Turbo Tape Games to create a video game adaptation of the album 's story for PC , Mac , iOS and Android . On May 7 , a music video was released for " Our New World " , followed by a video of tour visuals for " Hymn of a Thousand Voices " on June 14 .

= = Critical reception = =

The Astonishing has received generally favorable reviews . At Metacritic , which assigns a normalized rating out of 100 to reviews from mainstream publications , the album holds an average score of 80 , based on six reviews . Critics were especially complimentary of the band 's willingness to write a long , unconventional album , with AllMusic commenting , " Dream Theater have invested in the ' album ' concept (and in listeners ' attention spans) even as the music biz doubles down on the notion that long @-@ players are merely envelopes to hold singles . " Rolling Stone echoed these sentiments , concluding , " The results won 't please every Dream Theater partisan , nor will they convert the skeptical . But it would take a hard heart to deny Petrucci , co @-@ composer and keyboardist Jordan Rudess and their mates credit for the boldness of their aspirations and the assurance with which they achieve them . " Loudwire was also supportive of the band 's unique approach , but warned that it might make the album polarizing for fans .

Some reviewers were critical of *The Astonishing* 's concept , including Consequence of Sound , who described it as " very silly " , but ultimately gave the album an overall positive review . By contrast , Record Collector described the storytelling as " seamless " . In their write @-@ up , RTÉ.ie advised , " park the snootiness before pressing the play button because while *The Astonishing* makes Iron Maiden 's recent 92 @-@ minute double *The Book of Souls* look like a Ramones record , it 's great fun ... Mental elbow grease is required , and the quintet wouldn 't have it any other way . "

LaBrie 's vocals on *The Astonishing* were singled out by many critics as being particularly strong . In their review , Loudwire elaborated , " A concept album with different characters puts a lot of pressure on the vocalist , and James LaBrie lives up to the challenge . From mellow crooning to Broadway belting to edgier singing , he utilizes every style in his arsenal and delivers a first @-@ class performance . " The band as a whole were also praised , although AllMusic observed that Mangini and bassist John Myung weren 't featured as prominently as usual .

= = = Supporting tour = = =

In November 2015 , Dream Theater announced some European tour dates for early 2016 . The

next month , they announced North American tour dates beginning in April and ending in May . As the band felt that The Astonishing would lend itself well to a live performance , they decided to play the album in full for each show and hired a production company to help with their presentation . They also made it a point to book historical concert halls and theaters such as Radio City Music Hall .

= = Track listing = =

All track information taken from The Astonishing liner notes ; all lyrics written by John Petrucci , all music composed by Petrucci and Jordan Rudess .

= = Personnel = =

All credits taken from The Astonishing liner notes .

Dream Theater

James LaBrie ? lead vocals

John Petrucci ? guitar , production , story and concept

Jordan Rudess ? keyboards

John Myung ? bass

Mike Mangini ? drums , percussion

Additional musicians

Eric Rigler ? bagpipes on " The X Aspect "

City of Prague Philharmonic Orchestra

Production

Richard Chycki ? engineering , mixing

Jiema ? cover art

David Campbell ? orchestral and choir arrangements

Mike Schuppan - engineering

Travis Warner ? engineering

= = Charts = =