



a darker shade of pagan

music for fire worshippers

Tribal, emotive, exotic, passionate. These were words that came to mind when I first encountered the music of Incus, a Boston-based band led by singer and songwriter Jason Cohen. Incus bills itself as “music for fire worshippers,” and listening to the ever-present tribal drumming that informs their sound you can almost picture a horde of people dancing around a huge bonfire. Once I encountered this dark and evocative band, I knew that my readers would want to know more about it. I managed to catch Cohen before he headed out on his latest tour. We spoke about music, faith, and how the two often meet and intersect.

newWitch: How did Incus get started?

Jason: Incus was a vessel for me to develop my writing and my voice. I needed to explore and express all that I was feeling through music.

How would you describe your own spirituality?

I honor a sacred space or vessel and instill it with the sacred flow of life, using will and faith. The vessel can be many different things, from a goddess or a god to a stone, to a fire circle, to my hands. This for me is the grand nutshell. With music, the container can be a performance, a song, a tone, a venue, etc.

Your first album is entitled *The Burning Thread*. What does that mean?

With *Burning Thread* I was experimenting with the belief of an eternal plane of fire. Fire has been and is existent in all places. The Burning Thread is that which connects each flame, bonfire to lit match, through that plane. I have experienced that it can be used from an individual to a fire, to another fire, to another individual.

Your songs seem to come from a very personal place.

A little more than half of them are autobiographical. When I am writing about something else, I still use my personal experience and emotions to vibrate from a place that is similar to the experience of the person in the song. I’m putting



Jason Cohen of Incus. (Photo by Jerry Hoyt.)

myself in their shoes. We all want to consider ourselves unique and, of course, we are. We also share many human characteristics and emotions. That makes it possible to feel someone else’s story with passion. Somewhere inside ourselves, it is much like our own story.

What is “*Echoes of Incus*”?

“*Echoes of Incus*” came from my solo piano and vocal shows. I wanted to give the songs a chance to be heard without the full tribal sound, the way most of them were written. For the last couple of years, I have been doing solo shows with guests, and the guests were often members of Incus. Now we can travel and do shows or quick appearances without bringing the whole tribe on the road. This way we can swing through an area and play, and still let folks know about the larger group, even when the whole group isn’t touring. Two of us and perhaps a manager can go, say, over to Europe and do a small inexpensive tour, and plant seeds for the larger group. It makes it easier for us to find new markets.

What was it like working with (Bulgarian folk singer) Yanka Rupkina on "Just One Thing?"

It was an incredible experience. On the album, I refer to her as "The Illuminous Yanka Rupkina" because that woman *shines* when she sings. It is pretty amazing. Her voice could put tears in the eyes of the most hardened, thick-skinned city boy I know, with just a few notes.

That piece is about a person who is getting pushed around by the forces around him, unsure of who he is and where he'll end up, but he is asking for one ultimate thing in the end. This is not revealed in the lyrics, so that every listener can decide what they would ask for. I was taking a class with Yanka while she was passing through Boston and I told her the story of the song. I let her know that the person in the song, at the time of his death, wanted an angel to come down in the form of a woman's voice, and sing to him as he passed to wherever it is that he would pass. I asked her to be the voice of that angel. She then told me that her dear friend, George Harrison, had asked her to sing to a friend of his in the hospital while she was preparing to pass, and that she went in and sang. They all cried together and it was a wonderful experience for them all. She then said, "I would love to be that voice on your album."

Fire seems to be a recurring theme in your music and work. How does it relate to Incus as a whole?

For me fire is about the sun, freedom, depth, introspection, timelessness, beauty, passion, patience, servitude, and mystery. As I have grown, my music and my spiritual path have been merging. As I step out from the casings of the dark and heavy musician/composer, I still embrace that part of myself, but now I allow myself to feel as much of the full spectrum of emotion, dark and light, as I can. My work and play with sacred fire and sacred flow have opened myself and my music, and thus the world, like a fan. I have come to know and experience the balance of ecstasy and agony through fire. I know there are many people who enjoy fire as well, and I am reaching out to them. The plan is to get together to celebrate and honor life, to create sacred space, to put our shadows on the fire, and to come closer to becoming whole.

Ultimately Incus's future tours will be made up of both shows and facilitating sacred fire circles. The Dark World Cabaret line up is made up of some of the most magical people I've worked with. We are looking to tour different regions for a few weeks, then do a weekend festival. It's a sacred gathering on wheels, really. On this tour we will be keeping our eyes open for prospective communities that want to learn about the culture and medicine that we can bring.



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Could you talk about the "Forest-dance" project?

I have been part of a developing culture in North America that creates sacred fire circles, going from midnight until dawn. The drummers all sit together on one side and rattles are used on the other side to keep the rhythm strong. People circle the fire, dance, sing, chant, and co-create. Layer after layer comes off and people attain levels of freedom and clarity that they have lacked for years.

There is a special forest in Georgia that I have visited for almost a decade. It is there that I first experienced sweat lodge ritual. Much of my spiritual development has been linked to my time spent there. Early last year, I received a pretty clear message to bring a fire circle to that land and "Forestdance" was born. There are currently four similar festivals that I am aware of, yet they all carry wonderful differences and flavors as well. They are: "Firedance" in Santa Cruz, California, "Fire Tribe Gathering" in Oahu, Hawaii, "Celebrate the Spirit" in West Virginia, and "SpiritFire" in upstate New York.

Your Summer tour was called a "Dark World Cabaret and Body Painting Festival." What does this mean for you?

Our sound goes into an intense and somewhat dark place. Dark is like night time, mysterious, rather than how it is often used to refer to evil. People are often afraid of the dark. That fear is most often about something else than what is happening under the bed or in the closet.

We bring with us a variety of sounds, songs, belly dancers, fire spinners, and body painters to evoke a spirit of passion and freedom that is sometimes playful, sometimes serious.

What is coming up for Incus?

Our current plans are to work on the second album, put on Forestdance in Georgia in November, and to then do one of two things — either release *Burning Thread* in Europe and tour there this winter, or build up our next tour here. Perhaps we will do both!

To find out more about Incus you can visit their website at www.incus.net. For more information about the Forestdance Festival check out www.forestdance.net.

— JASON PITZL-WATERS is a writer, artist, club and radio DJ and community activist living in Illinois. He is currently preparing to go back to school for religious studies.