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Senior Exhibition Abstract

Mainland U.S. is in shambles. Taken over and ravaged by a special frequency that corrupts both the body and mind: turning anyone who listens too long into violent, sound-obsessed maniacs willing to rip, tear, and crush their way through others to spread the viral noise like an infection. What's left of the government is bound to only a handful of fortified cities, leaving the rest of the country to be slowly overtaken by a cult that worships the frequency as a 'sacred song'. However, other groups also emerge from the chaos, refusing to fall for the sweet song and striving for their own freedom.

I had a lot of inspirations in making this story: in things like the *The Walking Dead* with its focus on the monsters in people just as much with the zombies, *The Last of Us* with its unique type of zombie interpretation, and series like *Mad Max* and *Borderlands* where they depict corrupt wastelands/corporations where true justice does still find itself despite everything.

The sound, nicknamed the Z_3 frequency, started as an experiment, where a group of military scientists discovered a special set of tones that, when played together, can act as a painkiller unlike any other: physical, mental, and even emotional pains seemed to wash away, even if only for a few days. However, the more a patient was exposed to it, the more obsessive and violent they became with the noise (and general sound) they became, until their own bodies were mutating with the frequency: both to hear better and even eventually create the sound themselves. After the patients became too unstable, and many of the guards and scientists had inadvertently being infected by the noise, it was shut down and covered up. After that, it'd only been known to the general public through urban legends, as the sound that turns you into a monster, and by conspiracy theorists as a secret, black-market cure-all known only by the richest of the rich...

The frequency and its origin is heavily inspired by short story *The Russian Sleep Experiment* among a multitude of creepypasta, or internet based horror stories, that I grew up with. I don't know what the noise sounds like, and I want to keep it that way. H.P. Lovecraft wrote, "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown"¹. I feel like there is far more dread in keeping the noise ambiguous for everyone, even myself.

Having been around before the fall of society the cult, Sanctum Sirēn, started out as a religious radio show hosted by wealthy housewife Delilah Vescovi. Dalilah's husband, both of them having been using the (actually true) black market sound cure, had begun to turn monstrous. She'd seen this as a sign, a gift, a song, from God to bless his most devote followers

¹ (Bleiler 1927)

with a spiritual cleansing of mortal pain and sin. This is what she'd preach on her show and had started using her infected husband to expose her listeners to the frequency, twice a month, as a form of holy meditation. Eventually her miracle song would amass her a large following and adopt the title of Mother Dahlia, the new prophet. Her use of the noise, along with a multitude of other incidents with it, would cause an apocalyptic world overrun with the Z₃ infection. Her influence and cult following would allow her to take over a large part of the U.S.: preying on those hopeless and terrified and created a large number of cathedrals, towns, and camps in her honor (promoted through my pieces *The Call* and *The Unity*). Anyone who became too far infected, so long as they were devoted to her, were considered 'ascended' and put through an ascension ceremony: where they are painted with divine symbology, dismembered, and prayed over before being placed in the meditation room to sing/guide the rest of their brothers and sisters (See my piece *The Ascension*).

Mother Dahlia is a conglomeration of quite a few general inspirations: A used car salesman, a deep-south evangelist preacher, and a buttery voiced radio DJ to name a few. For real life inspirations however, she is based on Amy Carlson of the Love Has Won, and Gwen Shamblin Lara of the Remnant Fellowship Church: Shamblin Lara for her focus on looks, and ability to prey on women's insecurities to promote "faith-based weight loss" that is still being used today even after her passing², and Carltons grand, spiritual hierarchy of herself and the world and her followers who were so devote to her that they filmed her death and kept her mummified corpse in their facility³. I grew up in a Christian household, and I used a lot of what I remember in the painted imagery on *The Ascension* and in the wording of both *The Call* and *The Unity*, even finding real church promotional posters as reference for *The Unity*⁴.

The cities that were able to lock themselves down before everything got too hairy are run by a fear induced strictness. Highly limited on outer communications due to the auditory nature of the infection, they rely on very old-fashioned ways of trading resources and messages to one another. Meaning they send out trusted citizens, geared with noise cancelling gear (though actual physical protection is not required, as seen in the *PROTECTION NOT REQUIRED*), to do their work with a special pass to get back into city limits, though it's very easy to get it revoked. Though all are slightly different from one another, most have an inner and outer set of walls: the most inner walls lead to the actual city limits where only citizens are allowed to go, while the outer walls are where survivors can trade, temporarily camp out, or even apply for citizenship into the inner walls (though it is very, very hard to do so). Getting into the outer walls can also be a task of itself, as the cities are so afraid of any infiltration of the frequency, or cult activity, that anyone found with symptoms of Z₃ symptoms or sympathy are either quarantined prison-style, or permanently gotten rid of (as seen in *HESITATION WILL BE PUNISHED*). Brutal, but looking out for their own immediate safety.

² (Weigh Down Ministries 2016)

³ (HBO Documentary Films 2023)

⁴ (Revival Sunday Flyer 2020)

Of the groups that emerged in spite of Sanctum Sirēn's influence, the Colony is one of the most notable. Named after the term for a large grouping of bats, they're a caravan community of vehicles and motorcycles that travel primarily across the northern hemisphere of the U.S. The leader, Frank Chubbuck, started out as a field worker for one of the fortified cities. In one of his jobs, he had been cornered by a group of infected and, in a split decision, mutilated his own ears to dampen his hearing and slow his own infection (an act he incorporates in the initiation process of the Colony). It worked, but in the extended time he'd been away he'd lost his family at the neglect of the city's conditional safety (also seen in Frankie's treatment in *Colony's Origin*). In his own grief and anger, he fully left the city, setting out to create a community based on trust and loyalty, and to live with a freedom neither the city nor the cult could provide. Frankie's punk and biker roots from before the fall do come through in the design of their jackets (See Frankie's specifically in my piece *A Bat and its Wings*) and the mentality: to live for themselves, off the lands as they go and wreaking havoc on any cult camp they come across.

Frankie's character comes heavily from my own personal experiences growing up in the Black Hills. He's based on friends, strangers, and respected figures I've met and listened to throughout the years: primarily from the strong punk and indigenous communities of this area. I wanted a proper representation of the Midwest, beyond the stereotypical, white-washed suburban-ism always so associated with it. I also chose bats as the primary symbol of the group for the hearing-based symbolism/sacrifice associated with them. On the jackets, the bat's ears are severed, much like their own and their ears become the new eyes for the bat to see with. The Latin phrase that surrounds the scene reads "Auditus Ultra Aures," which means "hearing beyond ears". They sacrifice their sense of hearing, to survive better in a new world that takes advantage of a thing most of us take for granted.

I wanted to create this body of work, this world that so different from our own, to make a point about us as people. When turmoil and chaos where no one knows what to do, people naturally seek answers and comfort in someone may have answers. This is where leaders will always come to rise up. There are many people who can have good leadership qualities: charisma, persuasion, problem-solving, etc. However, what they chose to do with those qualities is what's truly important: are they used to gaining the attention of a following hung up on their every beckon call? Do they protect primarily themselves and only other lucky enough to be around at the right time? Or do they truly want to help, protect, and see others thrive?

Works Cited

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