

Lets begin at the end as Nick Terry probes Neurosis on the apocalypse now and hereafter.

"Hello", says the Californian voice down the phone. "This is Scott Kelly from Neurosis."

Oh, hi. Where are you calling from? Shall I call you back?

"Yeah, this is a payphone. We've stopped over in Georgia to do our laundry." Right. Well. Best call you back.

While it might seem faintly ridiculous that this interview took place over a transatlantic phoneline to a payphone, it's not nearly as ridiculous as the conversation itself might appear. Within about two minutes of talking, we're already talking about the end of the world. It was that kind of conversation. Neurosis are that kind of band.

Neurosis are more than fine, as great as a rock band can be in '92. Formed six years ago in Oakland, California as a trio, they've kept on evolving and growing since then, doubling their membership along the way. Musically and in performance, they're just as expansive and inclusive, staging explosive multimedia shows, complete with films and artwork. Progression in the face of hardcore annihilation, *Souls At Zero* sounds like being swamped, flooded by their everchanging, cyclical, configurations, their deep-bellowed dis-gusts of guitar, through which you can make out cascades of cleaner melodies and a VAST array of instrumentation: horns, pianos, cellos, violins, samples, taped voices. Half the songs, explains guitarist Steve Von Till (who jumps on the phone after Scott), are downtuned to a dulcimer tuning he translated onto the guitars. Like Metallica, Neurosis's songs begin in this folkier-baroque, but unlike Metallica, Neurosis multiply their simple melodies, constantly returning to them in quieter moments before once again exploding outwards. Scott Kelly, Steve and Dave Edwardson alternate vocals between them, cutting from screeches, pained howls and deeper roars in cacophonous, choral abjection. These songs sound like malignant companions to Mercury Rev's *Ice Floe*, or something by Terminal Cheesecake, but drilled into a savage, tribal unit. It's like Skinny Puppy's *Ogre* fronting Godflesh or Killing Joke, a pagan machine conjuring up a spinning, elemental, walking disaster, locked into Jason Roeder's absurdly deep drumming, that at times sinks into a heavier drag, grinding the song down into the earth.

Nature imagery abounds in both lyrics and music, evoking a pagan fascination with fire, cold, earth, poison, blood and the natural cycle of decay. *The Web* is a sucking chest-wound of a song, vampiric, drowning in its own picture of blood, demons and thirsting bestial nature. Neurosis aren't alone in this return to nature. Already in 1992, there's been The Young Gods, with their feminine moon-imagery, PJ Harvey, invoking the prehistoric stone fertility statue, the sheela na-gig (prompting the predictable characterisation of all so-called 'women-in-rock' as witches), and the Swans' fascination with the great American wildernesses, places you could once vanish to, but now themselves have vanished. It's hardly surprising that Peter Steele of Type O Negative, animal as he is, considers himself a "pagan, y'know, a fucking tree-worshipper". Or there's Controlled Bleeding's and Skinny Puppy's visions of urban wastelands, decayed cities turning into rubble forests with sewers for streams.

The pagan has always been present in pop: either the star-as-shaman, The Beatles and The Stones, pretty boys whipping up a storm, channelling out hysteria and barely-controlled sexual desire, or what the likes of Neurosis, God and Swans do: circle round the rhythms, rituals and drones in a group-ceremony, burst the corset of more cramped rock music.

You could mistake all this, and Neurosis, for a goth hangover, confuse them with New Model Army or any number of dipper English groups, but you'd be wrong. Neurosis's paganism is specifically American, conditioned by the apocalyptic tone of American life and experience of social collapse and

decay since the 60s. The way Neurosis see the world, it's being violated. They begin not at the beginning, with the good old things in Nature, but with the bad new ones, in the radical break in history, because, in a sense, the apocalypse they expect has already been. The disaster has already taken place.

Steve Von Till: "How many days go by when people of our age don't think about nuclear war? I think our generation always has that in its mind somewhere, and those are the visuals we use onstage, Hiroshima, I mean I know they've become meaningless bause they're just so unbelievable. A lot of us in the band have German and Jewish blood in our families, and where we live, our grandparents were in the camps and have the tattoos, so that is something that really influences us. I just can't believe that anyone would ever deny that the concentration camps didn't exist, but people do. I suppose I can see people becoming desensitised to the films of the camps. They showed us the films of the camps at school, but they never showed films of Hiroshima. I don't think we'll ever really learn from it."

Treponem Pal screamed "too many humans/need a nuclear war", almost invoking a disaster down onto man as the only, final, solution to overpopulation. And it's been suggested that, deep down, final solutions such as the Holocaust have psychological roots: a need to get air, to clear space, reduce numbers in overcrowded modern cities. For the apocalyptic imagination of the late twentieth century, disaster is something both ahead, not yet present, in the unnameable future, and also behind us, a foreknowledge that seems to impel Neurosis onwards.

In the mean time between past and future disasters, the eternal eversame of everyday life, ever more bewildering, byzantine and beyond anyone's control or comprehension. In the mean time, people look out for number one, one day at a time, in a process of unthinking, circumscribed survivalism, never thinking too far ahead into the future, and certainly never allowing themselves to think about the past. The urban paranoids of the great American cities force themselves to be vigilant, in the short term and near distance, only raising their bowed, cowed heads so far. Neurosis never set their sights so low. If *Souls At Zero* is a vision, it's a vision that's been forced on them. They dared to look up.

Scott Kelly: "Living in Oakland, it's totally fucked up, like a wasteland. We got two perspectives, the city and the country. I live just a bit out in the country, where there's only logging to make up any industry, but there's no jobs, the economy's collapsed. In the city you've got drugs and violence against people, but in the country, you've got violence against the earth because of all the logging and deforestation. *Souls At Zero* is just where everybody is, we've gone a complete circle, and that's where it ends and begins. It's a reflection of what's going on here in America around us, because it's going down fast. If people don't do it themselves, then the earth will I think, because it just cannot go on."

Steve: "I think the profit motive is making people sick, mentally and physically, I see it get to people, because they just can't live with themselves anymore, all these people I know past 40 who are just burnt out or alcoholic. Everything's so isolated now as well, and that gets to people. Like our song *To Crawl Under One's Skin* is about the importance of touch."

It seems quite personal.

"Yeah, well, it's not about me, but I amplified some things about myself to make it more effective. If you don't get touched, then you'll end up psychotic without that kind of human contact. I see so many people living in their own little cubicles, who end up living by themselves, and they end up in a mess. You try to get close to them, and it just doesn't work, because they're too tripped out."

"It's probably going to come down to the survival of the fittest level in the end, as it has in the cities," says Scott, "I don't know," counters Steve, it's probably a result of modern things in the cities, the way people behave there, advertising, media, guns, none of which happened before. There is some really heavy racial stuff going down, and I would not be surprised to see a race war, because everybody's got a fucking gun, and everybody's

organised, the Aryan Nation and the skinheads are all organised and so many gangs in the cities are organised. I could definitely see that as being part of the apocalyptic solution."

Do you think anything could be done, through politics or activism?

Steve: "To a certain extent. I've worked on single issue campaigns. Politics as a whole is too out of my control. But I have seen change that I've caused on a single issue, even though I don't think anything can be done ultimately. The whole institutionalised set up of politics, and how big society's gotten, I

impact on the political. Neurosis turn all this on its head: like Skinny Puppy or Sepultura they understand - 'feel' - how the political and the planetary impacts on, and resonates inside the personal.

Neurosis are no-survivalists. Unlike the protest-and-survive school of politicised hip hop and thrash metal (Public Enemy and Metallica), they don't try to strip themselves down to the minimal self, the small target flitting from cover to cover in the urban wasteland, acting psychologically as if it's in the middle of a drive by shooting. (And the minimal self is so depersonalised it is

writhing on the wall

just don't know how you can make it work at this level."

Scott: "A lot of the reason why we worry so much about this is that we have three kids between us in this band, and obviously we have this hope that things will be okay for them. I kinda go back and forth between everyone being wiped out in an apocalypse, and just a lot. In one way we look at it like this is probably the end, but on the other hand, we wish all the stupid people would be wiped out."

Do you think you yourselves would survive a disaster?

"No," replies Scott, "I don't think so."

Steve: "You've got to revert back to the tribal level. When it comes down to it, it's basically about who has the food and who has the land. We're only 30 years away from scientists' predictions of how many people the earth can carry. I'd say we've already exceeded the carrying capacity. A deer population on an island, for example, if it gets too much, they have to die, and the species sorts itself out."

But human beings aren't lemmings, the suicide rate is hardly high enough, though it's high enough as it is, and rising - in industrial countries to reduced the population significantly.

Steve: "Two of my close friends gassed themselves just a couple of months ago because they didn't like the way the world was going."

an 'It'). Which is probably why Neurosis sound like they're in pain so much: a maximal self is a luxury, and a bigger target.

In 80s America, survivalists actually prepared for the apocalypse, building shelters and stockpiling food and stores. With the return to Cold War and the resurgence of fundamentalism, a millenarian perspective pretended it was possible to survive the disaster: thus the concept of 'winnable nuclear wars', the fervent hope for a Second Coming, apocalypse as absolution and redemption. The sleeve of *Souls At Zero* hints at the real outcome: a film still from *The Wicker Man*, effigy ablaze on the pyre seen through and ringed by an *uroboros*, a writhing serpent eating its own tail. Drawn from prehistoric, pagan myth, the *uroboros* symbolises the natural cycle, a magic circle of regeneration and rebirth that. In Norse myth, it's the world serpent, symbolising Armageddon, a pagan return to nature, the twilight of modern man who thought himself a god ruling over nature. Neurosis aren't pagan survivalists in love with the lone wolf. Instead, there's a pagan acceptance of the natural cycles of death in life and new life in death, of decay and of the body. It means a reimmersion in nature, a surrender to natural disasters and oceanic deluges. A final (dis)solution. Not that it solves anything in the mean time

Steve: "One of our songs, *A Chronology Of Survival*, is about accepting the

cycle complete, because you have to accept the death side, and see the beauty in that side. When I see natural killing, it's harsh, but that's the way the earth lives. We humanise death too much, because the death of some small animal will probably give life to some pups or something. Nature sorts itself out."

And still they protest. "Calling to those that would hear but I am deaf", scream Neurosis on the title track. Protest, and die anyway. Neurosis are suicidal. While the likes of Corrosion Of Conformity and Fugazi still manage to retain some belief in a collective, political solution, struggle to wake up the apathetic, Neurosis seem to want to wake people up to a nightmare, for the hell of it. Struggle, kick, scream,

writhe, wake up - to what end? To your own end.

Somebody once described music as prophecy. God, let's hope not.

Souls At Zero is out now on Alternative Tentacles.



It's all a far cry from the 80s popstar pose of radical chic and faked concern. The legacy of the later Clash left us with Billy Bragg - always on hand when you need an Aunt Sally - and Red Wedge, all those New Romantic pop stars like Weller and Spandau Ballet, taking time off from their lovesongs to indulge in a bit of protest, thinking their personal involvement could have an