

The Album Art of Blue Oyster Cult

Each month Classic Rock Revisited Editor Jeb Wright will present an in-depth look into the album artwork of Blue Oyster Cult. The series will go chronologically and will feature interviews with Blue Oyster Cult's Eric Bloom. Please visit www.blueoystercult.com to keep up with the latest news on the band or www.ericbloom.net to discover more about BOC's front man. Also check out www.ericbloomguitars.com to see limited edition guitars with Blue Oyster Cult inspired artwork. Click on the album cover for a larger view of the artwork.

<http://www.classicrockrevisited.com/BlueOysterCultAlbumArt/BOCTyranny.htm>



The Gawlick Era

by Jeb Wright



When Blue Oyster Cult hit the rock scene, they were immediately shrouded in mystery in the eyes of both adoring fans and parents alike. The main cause of the mystery lies in the name of the band containing the word 'cult.' This word struck terror in the hearts of parents and curiosity among the youth of the day. Both ends of the spectrum wondered just what was the Blue Oyster Cult? Were they evil? Did their songs contain spells? Were they going to rot the brains of teenagers or worse yet twist them and distort them into joining their sinister organization? After all, the lyrics were bizarre and scary. The music loud and surreal. Vocalist/Guitarist Eric Bloom hid behind mirrored sunglasses, wore black leather and shot lasers at his audience from his fingertips. Band detractors and fans alike relished in the oddities of BOC and were often perplexed and curious about the groups hidden meanings.

As is often the case in life, the truth behind the legend of Blue Oyster Cult is much more bland than the tales of mystery and imagination people created. BOC was not a German Cult that took hallucinogenic drugs, kidnapped children and sacrificed virgins at midnight during the Winter Solstice. They were five musicians from Long Island, New York and two music critics from Crawdaddy magazine. It was the critics who actually brain stormed the enigma that became Blue Oyster Cult. Sandy Pearlman was the band's manager and early visionary. Richard Meltzer was a writer, a lyricist and an all around weird cat who penned many of the lyrics that both captured the imagination and created mass confusion among fans.

The original idea was not far from a science fiction version of the band Kiss – with more musical talent. Often called "The Thinking Man's Heavy Metal Band" or "America's version of Black Sabbath" Blue Oyster Cult created a stir when they released their self-titled debut. The band had an image and a sound. Now they needed a visual stimulant that would capture the essence of the music contained inside the outer package.

The band was more dedicated to making the best and most original music they could come up with than they were about worrying about the artwork. Pearlman was already one step ahead of both the record company and the band. He already had an artist in mind – an artist who was just odd enough to understand what he wanted to create. That artist was fellow Stony Brook student Bill Gawlick. Eric Bloom recalls, "We left it all in Sandy Pearlman's hands. He put the band together. He knew Bill Gawlick. Bill went to Stony Brook along with Pearlman and Meltzer. We had a band house in '71-'72 and Gawlick almost moved in with me but it didn't quite work out." When asked to describe Gawlick, Bloom candidly states, "He was sort of a unique and eccentric artist. He had blueprints for full size exoskeletons that people could wear. He had really unusual drawings of robots and all kinds of different line drawings. He seemed like a natural to lend us artwork for the first album cover."

Legend holds that Pearlman met Gawlick in the dorms at Stony Brook. Gawlick had transferred from the Rhode Island School of Design. Apparently, Gawlick was inspired by the work of Nazi artist Albert Speer. Speer had been commissioned by Adolf Hitler to design all of future Europe. When Pearlman met Gawlick the artist was hauling around complex architectural drawings in scroll form. The drawings contained within were Gawlick's version of the future of America. Pearlman and Gawlick unfurled the scrolls and they went the entire length of the school buildings at Stony Brook. Upon looking inside, Pearlman knew he had the man to create the first Blue Oyster Cult album.

Gawlick moved out of the dorms at Stony Brook and into a small garret. Bloom speculates, "I can't swear to this but I guess Sandy got a budget from CBS and sent Gawlick to work and he came up with the front and back artwork for the first album cover. We saw it and I liked it right away. I don't think there was too much 'fix this or fix that.' He got it pretty right, right away."

The original drawing was about the size of an album cover and the medium used was ink and paper. The cover shows futuristic architectural structures on the front and what appears to be a set of railroad tracks on the back – perhaps the hot rails to hell? In addition to the unique monochrome look of the album cover, Gawlick innocently added a touch that became forever linked with Blue Oyster Cult – the symbol. There were no deep conversations between band members and management and the artist. There was no demanding that they come up with a mysterious symbol to represent the band. Bloom humbly admits that, "The logo was put in there by him and we adopted it. He got it from a book of symbols." Perhaps it was nothing more than kismet. Either way, when Gawlick added the hooked cross, the album art was done. This was Blue Oyster Cult. What the symbol means is not clear to anyone within the band. Some say it is the symbol of the Greek Titan Kronos. Others say it is an ancient alchemist symbol for heavy metal. It has also been called an inverted question mark. It becomes quickly apparent that this mysterious symbol fit perfectly with BOC's image.

When the debut album sold well, Pearlman commissioned Gawlick to create the cover for the next album. The original work Gawlick came up with was very small – quite a bit smaller than the first one. While BOC was beginning to have success, Gawlick was becoming even more odd than before. He didn't have enough money to afford heat in his garret. Gawlick would shut himself in and hardly even eat while working on his projects. Bloom remembers that getting the second album cover was not as easy as the first, "Sandy had to ride Gawlick a little bit to get the cover done on time." Bloom is actually being kind in his description. Pearlman made several visits to Gawlick's garret trying to get the artwork. The band was getting ready to go on tour and the music was completed but they still had no cover. Finally, after much pressure, Gawlick relented and gave Pearlman what he needed, barely beating the deadline. Like the first album, the band accepted it pretty much as is. The only major change to the album came at Pearlman's request. The original cover, like the first, was monochrome. Sandy had Gawlick add red at the base of the futuristic structure.

In addition to creating the art, Gawlick actually named the band's sophomore effort. Eric Bloom recounts the tale, "Sandy rehired Gawlick to do the second album cover. He had a couple of copies of album one in his apartment. He had an old record player that had an arm on top that would let you lower multiple albums down onto the platter of the turntable. He kept playing side one and side two of the first album over and over. Sandy went over to visit him one day to see how the artwork was coming. Gawlick had been up for twenty hours listening to side one and side two of the album over and over. He looked at Sandy and said, 'This music is like tyranny and mutation.' That is where the title came from."

The first two albums laid the groundwork for a career that has been going on now for 34 years. The cryptical state that surrounded Blue Oyster Cult has faded as the band's fan base has grown older and wiser. However, there is still one mystery that remains: What happened to Bill Gawlick? Eric Bloom reveals, "I don't think I have seen him in thirty years. He was a very clever guy who created great artwork for us. What happened to him after that I don't know. I have actually done web searches and looked for him and there is nothing. I don't know where he is."



Secret Treaties

by Jeb Wright



Blue Oyster Cult's career seems to be divided into different eras. The first three albums all featured black and white artwork and a sound that can only be described as heavy, raw and progressive. Next came BOC's most successful era, ushered in by the classic "Don't Fear the Reaper" from Agents of Fortune and "Godzilla" from Specters. The early to mid 1980's was the era of the comeback, mainly due to the surprise hit "Burnin' for You" from the album "Fire of Unknown Origin. Move the clock forward a few ticks and BOC began to fall apart with what could be considered the forgotten years, clouded by the failure of the album Club Ninja and the convoluted, supposed-to-be-a-masterpiece, Imaginos. Next were the lost years when there was no Blue Oyster Cult. Finally, came the era of rebirth as the band released two classic albums titled Heaven Forbid and Curse of the Hidden Mirror. "The Reaper" is considered to be the creme de la creme of the band's back catalog but without Agents of Fortune's predecessor, Secret Treaties, it may not have even come to be.

Blue Oyster Cult's self-titled debut and the follow up, Tyranny & Mutation, brought the band fame and a cult-like following yet they were still unable to make the leap to being the featured name on the bill. Secret Treaties opened the door for Blue Oyster Cult's future. Singer and guitar player Eric Bloom admits, "If you ask a casual fan from that era then they will all say that it is their favorite BOC album. A lot of our live show, from then till now, are songs from that record. Secret Treaties was the thing that kicked us up to being a headliner. It laid the foundation for the success that followed with the live record and Agents of Fortune."

Part of Blue Oyster Cult's plan was to present a band that was shrouded in mystery and larger than life. Band manager Sandy Pearlman had successfully created that image with the cover art of the group's first two records. There were no photos of the band members, instead there were geometric shapes and hypnotic art created by Bill Gawlick, a friend of Pearlman's. As the band sold more records, they tired of being behind the scenes on their own albums. One must remember that this was years before the advent of MTV. Album covers were often the only place fans could get an up close glimpse of their heroes. "We were sick and tired of being anonymous," Bloom admits, "We wanted people to have some idea of who we were and what we looked like. We had a constant push and pull with Sandy and the record label on how we wanted to be represented. After a couple of years, we were starting to become more popular and we wanted the band to be recognized."

In the end, the band won out and were featured on the cover of Secret Treaties. Their likenesses were painted standing in front of a World War II fighter plane. The cover art was created by Ron Lesser who was commissioned by the Columbia Record Art Department. The front and back covers depicted a scene created in the mind of Sandy Pearlman. Inside the album cover there was another version of the front cover done in full color along with text that referenced a mysterious book titled "The Origins of World War." The fictitious book talked of secret treaties being drawn up between world powers.

The symbolism of the cover art harvested the eyes of the record buying public and without the aid of airplay, or a Top 40 hit, Secret Treaties began selling. Bloom explains what type of aircraft is in the painting and why that particular plane was selected, "The plane is an ME-262. The ME-262 was the first jet plane used in combat. It had nothing to do with politics – it had to do with the advanced technology of the plane itself. All of the BOC guys are very interested in technology. The German's actually stole the technology to build the plane from the British. If you ever watch one of those PBS shows, like The Planes of War, then you will see that the ME-262 is often mentioned. If Hitler had not made the mistake of wanting the ME-262 to be a bomber then it really would have wrecked some havoc on us as it was much faster than our prop aircraft.

"The cover shows a plane that is old but also very technological. Most people would not know about it. The juxtaposition of the plane with the Caribbean background reflected the idea we were going after. Did the plane really fit there or not? That was sort of the idea – that you would have a highly technical World War II aircraft sitting with palm trees."

The back cover shows the plane by itself and the band nowhere to be found. The dogs that Bloom held leashed on the front of the album lay dead, littering the landscape. BOC fanatics have developed theories on the significance of this scene. They range from ritualistic sacrifice to the band just having a sick sense of humor. In the end, no one is explaining what they mean, leaving it up to the viewer's own imagination to bring the story of the artwork to a conclusion.

The final mystery yet to be discussed is the reference to the book about World Wars. It turns out this is yet another cryptic Pearlman message alluding to his masterwork *Imaginos*. Bloom explains, "The *Origins of World War* is a Pearlman-ism for a book that doesn't exist but should. The book is something out of Pearlman's head. It is part of the *Imaginos* thing. The lyrics to *Imaginos* were written before we were a band. He wrote them in the late 60's. Throughout the years, *Imaginos* lyrics were used in different songs such as 'Subhuman' and 'Astronomy.' The lyrics were used way before the *Imaginos* album."

In summary, the album *Secret Treaties* catapulted the band to the world stage while at the same time enhanced the mystical image deemed necessary by the band's manager Sandy Pearlman. While it is ultimately the music that matters, an album's artwork can help define who a band is and what they are wanting to say at a given point in time. The fusing of the dramatic black and white scenery, mixing technology and paradise, life and death and blurring the lines between history and fiction worked well with the music contained on the record. "Subhuman," "Astronomy," "Career of Evil," "Dominance and Submission," "ME 262," "Harvester of Eyes" and "Flaming Telepaths" reflect the band's determination, strengths and twisted sense of humor perfectly – as does the album cover.

In the end, Bloom is content when reminiscing about the artwork. "I have a sketch of the original painting hanging on the wall of my house. It is very small – maybe five inches square. It is like a little oil painting on tile. It was in the back somewhere and I just grabbed it and kept it to this day. I am proud of it. It could have been better and it could have been worse but I think it came out okay."