VEXES

Charlie Berezansky – vocals guitar, keyboards

John Klagholz – guitar, keyboards

Bobby Carpenter – bass

Justin Graves – drums

Some say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. That’s especially true when passionate artists draw from multiple sources to create striking, original compositions that retain the essence, but not the song structures of their greatest influences. Vexes love music too much to resort to wholesale theft. Yet one listen to their debut albums *Ancient Geometry* confirms their love for Deftones, Meshuggah, Thrice, Helmet and even post-metal bands like Isis and Pelican.

“Between myself and Charlie, we definitely know what we like,” says guitarist and keyboardist John Klagholz. “And Charlie [Berezansky’s voice naturally sounds a lot like Deftones vocalist Chino Moreno. But When we write, we’re very cognizant of saying, “Okay, that part sounds a little too much like our influences. Let’s add the Charlie and John spin on it to make it our own thing.”

*Ancient Geometry* should appeal to the fans of the bands Vexes love, but also to anyone that enjoys creative, eclectic and surprising hard rock and metal. For Vexes, the best albums aren’t the ones that are instantly accessible or easily palatable. They’re the ones that require repeat listening to fully absorb the many subtle and not so subtle layers of emotion. But there’s one rule the band adhere to: Every song, whether aggressive and chugging, fast and frenetic or slow and melancholy needs a strong melodic chorus.

“A lot of heavy bands don’t have catchy choruses,” John says. “It’s riff after riff after riff. And the riffs are great and they’re heavy, but there’s not that one standout moment in the song, where you’re like, ‘Oh, I love that chorus.’ For us, the verses get driven by the vocals, but it’s the choruses that really define the songs.

While *Ancient Geometry* isn’t a concept record, it’s definitely meant to be taken as a whole as opposed to digested in pieces. From start to finish, the album takes listeners on a journey, starting with the bombastic “Hellion,” the first song they Vexes wrote together. The track flips between thrash beats and surging, choppy riffs layered with atmospheric guitars. Then, at the half-way point, the drums and bass drop out and the band shifts gear, delivering an airy acoustic guitar midsection, before everyone comes back for a euphoric climax, which is followed by a full minute of droning bass guitar and airy keyboards.

The diversity in the song is a microcosm for the rest of *Ancient Geometry*. After battering the listener with songs like “Lift” and “Decisions are Death Here” – each of which veer from tuneful and textural to brash and furious -- Vexes tone down a bit and emphasize vulnerability over anger. The distorted guitars and unsettling tempos don’t disappear, nor does the juxtaposition of crooning and roaring vocals, but on songs like “Plasticine” and “Lush,” the vocals become more consistently tuneful and the backing instrumentation less pugnacious. At the midpoint of the album there’s “No Color,” a multifaceted song that flows like a daydream turned into a nightmare and features a guest rap by Islander member Mikey Carvajal.

“I wrote to him and said we’re huge fans and asked him if he had any interest in coming up with something for the record,” says John. “I sent him three or four songs and he picked out “No Color” and found a space to lay down his part. We weren’t whether he was gonna rap or sing or scream, ‘cause he can do it all, but it turned out great.

Before forming Vexes in 2016, Klagholz and Berezansky and original bassist Brian Symniuk played together in the more mainstream New Jersey rock band, Vessl. The group released an album in 2010 and recorded a second record that was never released. After Vessl capsized, John reopened the band’s vault of outtakes and found a batch of riffs that he liked, but that were too heavy for Vessl.

“I said to Charlie, ‘Hey, let’s try to do something with these,” John says. “It gave us the chance to experiment a lot and make our music more aggressive. We worked in my studio and then at John’s place. The fun thing about doing your own thing in your own space is you get to structure the songs the way you want to and there’s no label telling you what you can and can’t do. Once we had the structures for the songs, we started tinkering around with them and layering lots of different parts. We spent our time with the songs and developed them over a long period of time.”

When Vexes finally finished most of *Ancient Geometry*, they sent the songs to friends and industry contracts, including ex-A Life Once Lost drummer Justin Graves, who raved about the songs and hinted that he would love to join the band.

“I knew Justin from the local scene in Asbury Park, “John says. “He contacted me on Facebook and wrote, ‘Damn, these are impressive! Really good!’ Charlie and I were like, ‘Wow, if someone outside of our circle likes this, maybe we’ve got something here.”

“John and Charley were fans of A Life Once Lost which had played some shows with their former band,” Graves says. “I went down and hung out with them, and we just took it from there. I liked that it was a different kind of band than A Life Once Lost. It was heavy, yet very melodic, and there was this dissonant sound to it, too, that I thought was really cool.”

After Symniuk departed the band in late 2017 due to various circumstances, another former member of A Life Once Lost joined the fold – Bobby Carpenter – who began to fill bass duties.

Bobby says, “I couldn’t have been more excited to join the Vexes camp. Not only is it great to be playing with an old friend, but with a group of likeminded musicians that share a similar approach to creating music.”

While Vexes has an entirely different sound than Vessl, the two bands have one element in common. Both strived to expand beyond the parameters of traditional rock arrangements without straying from their musical roots. The epic title track of *Ancient Geometry* ends with a melody played on a hand harp tuned to the same frequency as the main guitar hook, and the interstitial cut “Meridian Response” incorporates a Dobro, a lap pedal steel guitar and a gamut of studio production effects.

“That was the last thing we wrote and it was actually going to be a full song,” John says. “We started messing around with it, but we couldn’t come up with an arrangement we all liked. So we used what would have been the verse part of it to create this break on the album between the noise and the chaos. I think it works well as a breather between the different parts of the album.”

To add to the variety of the guitar parts, Klagholz and Berezansky experimented with standard six string guitars in drop-A and drop A# tuning and they even recorded some songs on seven string guitars. But their Klagholz favorite was the “Doom Guitar,” a Jackson six string with a 30-inch neck.

“It plays almost like a Fender stick baritone/bass guitar, which Frank from Deftones uses sometimes,” he says. “It sounds and plays like a bass, but has the resonance and chord structure of a guitar. We used that on every song. All the deep dark, undertones of the riffs are mirrored with that doom guitar.”

While everyone in Vexes currently has a job outside the band – Klagholz and his wife run their own company and Berezansky is the go-to producer for local bands. Still, Vexes look forward to sharing their music with live audiences around the country. “We’ve all played live in other bands, so performing onstage in nothing new to us,” Klagholz says. “But I feel like what we’re doing is really different that everything else that’s out there and I really want to be able to play it for other people and get their reactions.”

From the pulverizing staccato bursts of “Helion” to the multiple rhythm and haunting feedback trails of the brooding “Ancient Geometry,” Vexes are a new voice in the dark gunning to show others the light. They’ve got the songs and the right approach. Even if sold out crowds aren’t imminent, Klagholz is thrilled that he and his bandmates have created a hybrid of their favorite subgenres that’s gripping from start to finish. The rest is gravy.

“When I write, I imagine the band’s that I like to hear playing this stuff,” he says. “Maybe that’s why it comes out a little weird. I like to play things I don’t hear other bands doing. A lot of post-rock and post-metal bands just use the same notes and the same chord structures over and over again and that’s boring. It’s impossible to create something that’s totally original, but that’s not gonna stop us from trying.”