

PHILIP LAWVERE INTERVIEW

by Pedro Alonso

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Q: You lived in different States and countries when you were a kid: Berkeley (California), Halifax (Canada), Spanish Harlem in Manhattan, Boston... What was the reason of so many changes? Did living in different places forge your character?

My parents were kind of left wing activists, who were attending Berkeley university when I was born. Berkeley in the 60s is now famous for being a hotspot of dissidence in America at the time. Anti war, anti government etc.

Finally my father decided to move us to Canada, partially to escape the Vietnam war, and also because Canada was more open, and less hostile to their views. Actually, New Zealand was their first choice, but they couldn't get a visa.

They split soon after, because my mother hooked up with one of my father's left wing buddies (very socialist eh?), and in my second grade of school they chose to move to NYC, picking a poor, non white neighborhood to live in – both for financial reasons as well as political 'credibility'. I think they decided that my sister and I weren't going to be raised in whitebread America. So we lived on 107th st. on the west side of Manhattan – which at the time (1960s) was Spanish Harlem.

Later, I went to high school in Boston where my mother moved us after splitting with the guy she was with in New York. She then married a black guy, who was a bank robber and in prison (very long story – next interview). We went to the wedding in the prison. It was strange because the neighborhood we lived in was mostly lower working class Irish, who were very racist – but my stepfather was black (and my grandma and aunties), and even a criminal.

Quite a childhood I suppose, which definitely contributed to my character.

Q: Why did you move to Greece and later to Berlin leaving America to pursue a career in Europe?

I left home when I was sixteen as soon as I finished high school. My mother then decided to move to Greece. Like many foreign women in the eighties, she found Greek men very flattering... Then she fell in love with a poor fisherman, and married him. She sent me a ticket when I was seventeen in 1979, to come and meet my fourth 'father'. I spent almost a year fishing with him, as well as picking pistachios on the island of Aegina, where they lived.

Then I went home and in the next years (80–82) got involved in the Boston Hardcore punk scene. After losing some friends to overdoses though, I wanted to get away from it

all and moved back to Greece, where I rented a broken down village house for about 20 euros a month on the island of Agistri. A small, unknown little island close to Aegina. It was amazing.

Then I met my first big love, Miki, who was on vacation from Berlin. That winter I moved to Berlin, and ended up spending five years together with her. Winters in Berlin, and summers in my cheap little house on Agistri – which I repaired, and installed electricity, water, toilets etc, all paid for by the little money I was getting painting thrash covers.

Q: How did you get in contact with Karl Walterbach?

I don't remember the exact circumstances, but I was a huge Frank Frazetta fan, and had lots of paintings at home which were in that fantasy style that's so synonymous with Metal. Somehow I showed him my work, and he offered me the gig to do covers.

Q: Your name will always be associated with Kreator and you even mentioned one of your favorite covers was "Pleasure To Kill". Do you consider your Kreator covers as your highlights? What do you remember of those artworks?

The Kreator covers were definitely my best, because they were all my own concepts. As Mille has said in interviews PTK was something I had already painted, that they liked and decided to use. From there the demon thing developed, with the eyes sewn up, the carving on the forehead, and the apocalyptic bridge – all being my ideas as well.

In fact, I even kind of named the band too. Karl had told me he was renaming the band Tormentor to something like Creatür, and I suggested that 'Kreator' would be much cooler. Like God or the Creator but with a K, as in spelling the name Amerika when you want to expose it's 'nice' image. It's definitely influenced by my growing up with radical parents. We spelled it Amerika when I was a kid.

Funny, in Greece the word for meats is Kreata, so to them it probably sounds like a butcher or something ha ha.

Q: Did you like Kreator music? Did you have any kind of relation with the band?

I must shamefully admit that I didn't listen to them at the time, nor have any idea what a great and influential band they would become. I was kind of a snob about my punk music back then, and didn't give thrash the recognition it deserved. At the time I thought of it as ripping off hardcore. Just shows you how close minded you can be...

Q: You painted the first Rage cover; "Reign Of Fear". What do you think of that artwork and about the band that still is one of the top German metal bands?

I look at it now and it looks like he's supposed to be arabic no? That was before arabic people were being singled out as villains in society though. Actually I just wanted a kind of evil, ninja assassin sort of character.

And okay, get ready for this: I named them too. Karl wanted to call them 'Raging Aggression', and once again with my american penchant for minimilising everything, I

suggested just calling them Rage. It's cooler, and covers the vibe perfectly. I even designed their first logo, with chains bursting open around the name.

Q: Vendetta, Deathrow, Warrant... Your name was totally associated with the German thrash metal. What do you remember about those specific bands and covers?

My name is associated with thrash only because Karl Walterbach liked my work, and he was the real mastermind behind German thrash. I owe it all to him. He was a great guy to work with too.

Often Karl would brief me without my meeting the actual band though. People might be shocked to learn that to this day, I have never met any of the guys from Kreator. That's a shame because we definitely have intertwined destinies.

It's partly my fault now, because a year go I approached them about royalties on my work. They've sold I don't know how many thousands of teeshirts worldwide over the last twenty five years, and I was never paid a penny, and never signed over the rights to my work (other than for cover art). I think they and Karl panicked then, and thought I was going to demand a seriously damaging amount of money. That's not what I am about though. I just think I deserve something – at least on future sales.

I have been assured by lawyers that I would win sizable damages, because German copyright is very much on the side of the artist – but how 'alternative' would that be? Using lawyers to cause harm to someone does not appeal to me, no matter how broke I am. Plus like I say, our destinies are connected, and I don't want to make it a negative connection. I do owe them the fact that I am known in metal, so...

The sad thing is that Karl and I (he's still friends with them) were begining to discuss my doing their last (13th) album cover – but they shut down all communication with me when I raised the royalties question. Although I like and respect Benscoter's work, I think it would have been cool for everyone involved if I had done my first comeback cover for them, on that album.

They, Karl, and I blew that possibility. Emails can really fuck up communication...

Q: Apart of the bands listed in your site, did you paint more covers at the time. For example I've got a V2 LP with your signature...

Nothing I'm proud of. Sadly, sometimes I didn't take the work seriously enough at that age. I also experimented with airbrush, which resulted in lower quality work. I finally realized that painting was my strong point.

Q: You claim your Kreator demon head was copied by Slayer a lot of years later. Did you ask any explanation to Slayer?

I think the explanation is obvious. It's a kind of homage to that era of thrash and to Kreator themselves. I think that's really cool, and never meant to suggest any sort of copyright infringement. I'm really proud that they did that.

You have to admit that the copying is obvious, and no coincidence.

Q: Could you explain your current works and what bands are you working with?

After losing the chance to return to the scene with Kreator's last album, I decided to do so in a low key way. After all, I wasn't sure if I still had it in me, and I wouldn't have wanted to fuck up in the spotlight – ha ha. So, instead I just made a little facebook page, with no publicity, that only old school fans would find. I posted that I was looking for new cover work, and two German bands, Minotaur and Nocturnal, were the first two to respond. There was a little mix up as to who would be the 'first' cover for me in years, but in the end they are all friends – so I guess they didn't mind sharing that spot.

I'm very satisfied with both results, which are now on my site. Now I'm ready for more – although I'm pretty lazy about self promotion. I really dislike facebook too.

Q: Regarding other metal covers painters do you have any favorite? I mean Ken Kelly, Derek Riggs, Joe Petagno...?

I have become friendly with Brent Elliot White through emails, who's work I became familiar with recently, while getting re-acquainted with the whole metal scene. I think his work is brilliant, and he has been more than helpful with advice and information about the scene. We have very different styles too – no competition there, ha ha.

Aside from the guys you mention who are all really talented too, I remember now how I felt when H.R Giger took over as Kreator's cover painter. It was a real coup for Karl to get him, because he was probably the most famous commercial illustrator on earth at that time (from Alien). I felt like a young amateur, who was replaced by a master. Now years later, I discover that my teeshirts remain their biggest sellers, and my demon is their mascot. I can't help but feel very, very proud of that.

Q: THIS IS A PERSONAL QUESTION. (You can answer or pass it)

Q: Could you explain in easy words what was your enlightenment experience?

Sure, it's a very human, even funny kind of story actually. Nothing magical about the circumstances. It may not be a short, or simple answer though – you decide if it's too long to print.

It began while walking down the street returning from a german lesson in Berlin. It was in 82-83, which was pre Gorbachev and Perestroika. There was still that cold war threat of nuclear strike in the air – especially in Berlin. I think that atmosphere was a big part of the punk, 'no future' outlook.

Anyway, as I was walking home, over and behind my head was a loud boom. For a split second my first thought was that it was a warhead burst, and I turned around to see it. I remember actually being curious as to what it would look like. Of course there was nothing there, and I realized it was a military plane breaking the sound barrier. They used to do that frequently over the city, but I was still new there, and had never heard one before.

It was the next moments that put in motion a kind of mind set and outlook that was totally new to me. I remember everything I experienced in that first minute. A woman running to cross the street, the sound of an ambulance, someone walking a dog. And I thought to myself, that the difference between all this being here, and it not being here, could be a matter of a nanosecond. As though the possibility of existence and non existence were happening simultaneously.

For the following hours ideas about the nature of life just came flooding in, and I remember rushing home to sit down and write about patterns, how every thing and situation is a pattern, and that all patterns had something in common, somewhere or somehow. That led to a sense that everything is connected. The over cliched 'we are all one' concept became incredibly real to me. I remember sitting by a radio and flipping through music stations, and there was nothing I didn't like. From hardcore to classical – even crappy pop songs, all had their place in the world, and I got that!

That feeling lasted about six weeks during which time I wrote a small book, where each page was designed to playfully provoke anyone's mind into seeing things in this way. Just little ideas written on each page. I ended up sending it to a publisher, who got very excited and wanted to meet me. As soon as she opened her office door though, and saw me with my mohawk and Dr. Martins, her enthusiasm vanished and she began trying to get rid of me. I can understand that now.

In fact, I realized in that moment that the whole idea of the book would be ruined by any single person or face being associated with it, because it belonged to everyone, who should each feel that it was their book – and not from someone else. So I decided to call it 'The Book of You, by You', and remain anonymous as it's writer.

Of course, I came down to earth eventually and resumed my own, self aware persona, which I no longer see as a 'mistake'. We all can and should be free to be who we are as individuals, and express ourselves accordingly. Eventually, once the internet took off, I was able to publish the book on-line at www.youbbyou.com.