

The Plaza of the Mind Interview with Paul Robb of Information Society!



I had been a fan of **Information Society** since the release of their self-titled LP in 1989. But it was their follow up release, **Hack**, that propelled them into the forefront of my favorite recording artists, a spot that they have remained in ever since. The original line-up of the band [**Paul Robb**, **James Cassidy** and **Kurt Harland**] dissolved shortly after their third release, **Peace and Love, Inc.**, and was continued solely by lead singer **Kurt Harland** on the incredibly atmospheric **Don't Be Afraid**.

Information Society had not recorded any new material since that 1997 release and I had begun to give up hope of ever hearing anything new until last spring when it was announced that **Paul Robb** was working on a new record [*Synthesizer*] with **James Cassidy** and newcomers **Christopher Anton** and **Sonja Myers** and would soon be playing select cities. I was lucky enough to catch the reunited **Information Society** last summer [see my coverage of the show here] and had an amazing time. **Information Society** has been on hiatus for almost a decade but has not missed a beat.

Paul Robb graciously accepted an invitation to participate in an electronic interview for the **Plaza of the Mind**. It was conducted over the past month and I am happy to present it here today as it coincides with the internet release of the band's new EP, *Oscillator*.

[The *Plaza of the Mind* quotes appear in Bold-type, Mr. Robb's in normal-type]

How old were you when you first began recording?

I started making my first "pause-button" cassette recordings when I was 17.

Any chance of them ever seeing the light of day?

You never know what might turn up in the archives at www.informationociety.us !

Information Society has a nebulous history with many members and it's been stated that it grew up as a cult dedicated to a certain artist. How early on were you involved?

Information Society was my band from the beginning. The group, and the name, were my idea, though clearly a sterile idea until Kurt Larson, James Cassidy, Amanda Kramer, Chris Anton, et al, made their distinctive contributions.

You are very open to your fans - allowing them to download 'Remix packs' of your songs -granting people that no one has ever heard of interviews;) - Where does this spirit come from?

We've become much more mellow about the whole thing now that we're not household names anymore. Usually, the people wanting to interact with us are intelligent and interesting, and have a sincere interest in the work, rather than the "I wanna hang out with you 'cuz you were on MTV"-type thing.

What era of Information Society were you most happy with?

I'm a naturally dissatisfied person, so I'm always complaining, no matter what! I can remember having band meetings back in New York where we were all bemoaning how horrible our existence was, when we were completely at the top of our careers...

I've heard a minute long excerpt of the 'Orthodox Pleasure Song' and I love the jam in the middle. But then it cuts off

and I have to play it again. Is there any chance that this song will ever be made available in its entirety or is the excerpt the only piece that still exists?

Yes, there is a chance. We are currently cooking up a little 25th Anniversary bonbon for next summer. (You didn't hear it from me.)

I listened to your recent interview with Nick Johnson and I was blown away to learn that there is a whole Information Society record that has not been released. Do you see a release happening anytime soon?

Kurt and I recorded some songs together in 1999, but I wouldn't go so far as to dignify them with the title "record." Neither of us was thrilled with the results, although the tracks in question do seem to have acquired semi-legendary status in some circles...Some of the same songs appear on the SYNTHESIZER release, viz., *Back in the Day*, and *Burning Bridges*.

You performed *Burning Bridges* with the new line-up and it was great. How is the new line-up going? Your new site looks great and has a lot of content to look and listen through.

Thanks. The new lineup is working well, but I must say there really is no "lineup" per se...The days of us going out on the road for months at a time are over, so we're more like an amoeba forming and re-forming as needs require.

Where is Information Society based now?

We're decentralized, baby. Transnational.

I heard that the band Sugar recorded that way [decentralized] in an interview and often found that method to be kind of cool but difficult to get my head around.

Well, we need to get together in the studio anytime I need vocals! For us it's less a question of cool than one of necessity. We simply couldn't do it any other way...

Do you have your own recording studio?

Yes.

Is James Cassidy back on the roster for good or was his Portland appearance due to the fact that he teaches close by?

He's as in as any of us.

Information Society has always struck me as having a great talent for generating mood, as though you somehow infuse emotion into your ambience. This seems to be a rather singular talent and makes the band stand out from other electronic artists. Even after such a long absence the new album feels as though you hadn't missed beat. What do you attribute the band's sensibility to?

That's a good question, and I'm afraid I can't answer it. There is certainly an "INSOC" style, but I'll be damned if I can figure out what it consists of...There are definitely some of the new songs that are more "classic INSOC"-sounding than others.

You grew up in Minnesota home of the first mall. Are you familiar with Victor Gruen [the architect who designed the first mall] and his *Gruen Effect*?

I am not...However, I was aware that *Southtown* in Edina, Minnesota was the world's first mall. Good ol' Minnesota! It's just like Sweden, but with Taco Bell.

If one were to find themselves in Minnesota, is there a good restaurant you could recommend?

Minnesotans are temperamentally disinclined to good food, as are Angelenos,

unfortunately. But for good bad food, I would recommend Mickey's Dining Car in St. Paul, the Convention Grill in Minneapolis, and the Original Pancake House in Edina.

When I think of Information Society I think of gray skies, light amounts of snow falling and driving around the warehouse district of Grand Rapids Michigan. Information Society was quite resonant to me and my small band of friends during our formative high school years. This makes sense to me because the band is from Minnesota. I find it quite fascinating, however, that the band also has a huge following in Brazil. How did that happen to come about?

I have always used a lot of winter imagery in my songs, and also the feeling of emotional dislocation is central to what we are about. Glad it worked in your case. I live in LA now. Not having winter makes me feel like half (or more) of my soul is gone. My nightmare is to leave my children a world of deserts.

I think the resonance we have in the Latin world is more just an accident of history and timing. Puerto Ricans in NY, Cubans in Miami, Mexicans in LA (and Mexico), and all over Central and South America (as well as Spain)...I can't explain it. It runs counter to all the clichés.

How many times have you been to Brazil?

Six or seven times, and Kurt went once without me...

If you had to pick a musician, who would you say had the most profound effect on your work?

Golly, I've never really been asked that before, believe it or not. I'm not sure if I could really come up with just one. I would list Gary Numan, James Brown, Maynard Ferguson, the Residents, Devo, Kraftwerk, Yello, DAF, Donna Summer, and Afrika Bambaata as the Top 10.

Have you been able to meet any of them?

We worked with two of the guys from Kraftwerk on the *Peace and Love* record; that was great. Although, not surprisingly, they were complete squares :-). I had an awkward conversation with Bob Casale of Devo. I once asked Astrud Gilberto out on a date. That's about the extent of it.

Are there any authors or filmmakers that you would recommend?

Authors: E.T.A. Hoffmann, Mervyn Peake, E.R. Eddison, China Mieville

Filmmakers: Jacques Tati

What is your favorite style of architecture? Information Society always sounded good to me with the cold gray Brutalist background of downtown Grand Rapids.

Personally, I prefer an eclectic mix of industrial, craftsman, and Japanese elements. For the band, I suppose a Mies van der Rohe vibe would work the best, with some de Stijl wall-coverings thrown in for good measure.

I've heard that Kurt is a videogamer, do you also play games, and if so, which ones?

I do not play video games. I have children, which are like video games, but more expensive.

I've been to your personal site and it is very cool, can you describe the HIFI project?

Hi Fi is my admusic company. That is where I work for the man, and pimp my divinely-inspired talent out to such modern-day gods as Honda, BMW, and Advil.

Do you enjoy making admusic?

Yes and no. I love the pace, the variety, and the money. I don't love the workaday aspect of the business. Really, I was meant to be a gentleman of leisure, a layabout; I would complain about any job. Alas.

How many commercials have you scored?

Hundreds.

There is a legend that Mark Mothersbaugh has been known to throw little bits of subversion into his commercial music - do you ever feel tempted to do the same?

Generally speaking, I don't care enough about the products in question to bother subverting them. Perhaps my conscience doesn't need as much salving.

I am guessing you moved to LA due to business reasons - How long have you been down there and do you like it? You said earlier that missing winter makes you feel like half your soul is gone (having migrated to the West Coast myself I know exactly what you're talking about).

I've been here since 1997. We moved out here when Brother Sun Sister Moon got signed to Virgin Records. I can't say I like it here. From a topographical perspective, it's all wrong. The trees are wrong, the seasons are wrong, the smells are wrong: there is something innately blasphemous about picking out a Christmas tree when it's 80 degrees out. I am an exile. But honestly, I don't really feel at home anywhere, with the possible exception of New York City and a few small towns in Minnesota.

What is a day in the life of Paul Robb like? I imagine an urbane setting - polished wood floors, state of the art computer equipment, clay colored walls and deeply green plants.

Yes, that's exactly it! Don't forget the smoking jacket, fine Cuban cigars, and vintage port.

Lastly, what is the best thing about being the founder of Information Society?

Money for nothing, and chicks for free!