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INTERVIEW WITH JUDITH HOWARD - JANUARY 2003

JUDITH HOWARD: Incredibly almost, there is now a legacy of 23 years of Whitehouse music, so how do you currently see its future in artistic terms?

WILLIAM BENNETT: I strongly believe that, either because of its uniqueness, or simply its capacity to transcend a basic musical art form, the future is now deliciously unpredictable in artistic terms. Through not belonging to any established music or art hierarchy in the UK, we have almost accidentally found ourselves in a totally unique position of incredible liberty of expression - one that is genuinely unencumbered from outside pressures or influences - yet I know I remain utterly dedicated to creating memorable and meaningful statements of individual expression and personalised intent.

PHILIP BEST: Well, yes, I agree with that - also I've always thought Whitehouse was great art, originally as a fan and subsequently as a member since 1982. The most exciting thing is that I feel Whitehouse can develop in any direction that we choose. We can explore any territory we want. It's almost like we've got carte blanche to do absolutely anything we want.

JUDITH HOWARD: How do you see Bird Seed fitting into this musical evolution?

WILLIAM BENNETT: Bird Seed is undoubtedly a very difficult album - I don't see people being able to: fall in love with it immediately. It demands the listeners: put a lot of work into understanding it - yet the rewards are potentially huge, if not life-changing for the unwary. This is the real work; this contains emotional content that I never dreamed could be expressed in this way. While recording it, it became obvious that we'd fully have to: expect those simply looking for immediate visceral thrills to be disappointed. It's quite interesting to see so many of the early doubters of Cruise now beginning to appreciate that album.

PHILIP BEST: True - you know, this has been the case right from the beginnings in 1980, and yet now seems even more pertinent.

WILLIAM BENNETT: I'd also really like to reiterate the point I made in our last interview regarding this album that of favouring an extreme form of asceticism - that of the true beauty of minimalism by deliberately denying or removing what you have had and enjoyed, denying yourself or removing skills you are quite able to do - that essential aesthetic of nihilism, in my opinion. As I stated, any form of minimalism without these criteria is just the incompetence you see all over the place.

JUDITH HOWARD: Is critical acceptance or even rejection important to you, or do you tend to ignore it?

PHILIP BEST: It's an essential part of the process. I do particularly savour the reactions of people who aren't sure about Whitehouse, or have misgivings, but are still willing to take a chance and explore things. Those people have my respect. It's nice if people are a little uncomfortable with Whitehouse, but still find it within themselves to go just that one step further.

WILLIAM BENNETT: Yes, I pretty much echo what Philip has just said - the wider personal reactions we elicit are undoubtedly an integral aspect of the art itself. It's designed to create intense reactions, and is thus extremely revealing - in this way, we look into a mirror reflecting our own, occasionally troubled, souls.

JUDITH HOWARD: I know there've been an incredible amount of rumours and half-truths, but could you both in your own words finally tell us a bit about the departure of Peter Sotos?

PHILIP BEST: Well, a particularly tumultuous show in Paris brought things to a head, but, for a number of reasons, things had been tense for a long time. Come to think of it, Leeds was pretty traumatic as well! Pete's a genius, end of story. And a genuinely funny and caring guy as well, as anyone who has ever met him can confirm. I owe him everything and still miss him terribly. But the bottom line, as I understood it, was that it was either Whitehouse without Pete or No Whitehouse full stop. So the choice was made.

WILLIAM BENNETT: Yes, it's been very difficult. Paris was rough. Our friendship is a very long one and then there are all those amazing shared experiences. Unfortunately, latterly, there was a lot of tension and a breakdown in communication - principally between the two of us - with regards to the live shows, and added to this I believe there's been a notable difference in lifestyle attitudes. Funnily enough, in a way, this made many of the later performances even more electric and intense - but sadly the tension before and after the concerts was not as enjoyable as it should be. My personal respect for Peter is absolutely undiminished - his contribution to this band has been and will continue to be incomparable in both visible and less visible ways.

JUDITH HOWARD: So would you say this has affected the live performances to a great degree?

WILLIAM BENNETT: Now Whitehouse with just Philip and myself is a slightly different sort of animal in this new era, and other changes have been made in our approach to reflect this. Fortuitously, I believe the new focus of the music is such that the future is a particularly exciting one - the recent two shows since Peter's departure are testament to that.

PHILIP BEST: I think for a long time the Sotos/Best/Bennett line-up was untouchable : three very distinct and separate personalities on stage, combining to create some truly classic shows. But we had reached a kind of crossroads I think, for all sorts of reasons. With Pete out of picture, we've had to regroup and rethink to a certain extent. As a result, we're more determined than ever to totally deliver the goods on stage. You're soon found out if you don't. Personally, I've really enjoyed the two most recent shows in London and Bilbao. The music's on a different level now, and the whole experience is - dare I say it? - almost spiritual. I think we're now a band capable of almost anything. That's not so much because Pete left, but more that both William and myself have had to re-assess our individual contributions and commitment as well. If we could, we'd be playing every night, I think.

WILLIAM BENNETT: As long as you're doing all the vocals!

PHILIP BEST: One other thing, Pete was often put in a really awful position on stage. He was so often the lightning conductor for the assholes who want to cause trouble or pick fights at shows. Those idiots inevitably gravitated towards Pete and took up so much of his time and energy. I wouldn't have been able to deal with it, it was an impossible situation.

WILLIAM BENNETT: Yes, that last point shouldn't be underestimated.

JUDITH HOWARD: I'm curious, how much space is there for improvisation in Whitehouse performances?

WILLIAM BENNETT: Well, we have now incorporated new spaces within the performances where there is great room for organised improvisation. Undoubtedly, there's a structure in what we do, but there's also a fantastic freedom to feed off the moment; ride the storm and: see where it takes you - the feeling - you can do anything you want - is very liberating. That applies to both live and to recorded work - whether it's something very challenging, or something you can do in your sleep. With me, it's like having vast amounts of money at one's disposal - it's not so much that: you'd want to spend it, but can you: imagine the drunken feeling if one had the capacity, whether exercised or not?

PHILIP BEST: Once you step on stage then all bets are well and truly off. Literally anything can happen once you're up there and things are in full flow. It's the most exhausting and exhilarating 60 minutes or so that you will spend in your life. You've just got to ride it. But to give a general answer to your question, I really expect the wide range of emotions and feelings we conjure up to be increased still further in coming live actions. We've got a real taste for it now. A common mistake people make with Whitehouse is thinking that it's all about simple hatred or violence or misogyny or whatever. I think the music and the performance is far deeper than that, and carries much greater resonance. There's a multiplicity of meanings - not a single, simple, didactic message.