

## STRATOSPHEERIUS GUILTY OF INNOCENCE SONG DESCRIPTIONS

“We are all guilty of innocence. We are all blissful with ignorance.”

“Guilty of Innocence” is my 8<sup>th</sup> studio album, and the 5<sup>th</sup> by my band, **Stratospheerius**. Unlike previous projects, we did not go into the studio and knock out all the songs in a few days. The first 4 songs, “Behind the Curtain,” “Take Your Medicine,” “Face,” and “Guilty of Innocence” were tracked in January of 2014. Each of those except “Face” were released as singles over the course of the next two years, and later remixed and remastered for this album. In 2015, we tracked “Parallel Reality” and “Affluenza.” “Hysteria” and “Game of Chicken” were recorded in 2016, and “Soul Food” as well as “Dream Diary Cadenza” in 2017. This approach was beneficial for a number of reasons:

- 1) It gave us a chance to really focus on the production and quality of each song.
- 2) Releasing singles every few months enabled us to always have something new to promote and share with our fans.
- 3) From a budgetary standpoint, it was easier to write and record a few songs at a time rather than try to lump everything into one recording session. This shit's expensive!

Many of these songs are snapshots of my personal life; others address themes like politics, social media echo chambers, income inequality, injustice, and the psychology of celebrity and mass media. I write in the abstract and try to strike balance where you know what the lyrics are referring to, but there is plenty of room for personal interpretation. Here are detailed descriptions about the songs, how they were written and recorded, and what inspired them:

## 1) Behind the Curtain

Our society relishes watching people go down in flames. It traces back to public executions. In our psychology lies a deep, dark fascination with observing the demise of someone else, as long as it's not us. There is a primal fascination with watching someone suffer. We love to chastise someone while we ourselves often lead a double life, hiding all kinds of skeletons in our closets while pretending we are faultless. One verse says: "Wear the mask so righteous, quick to judge the careless, those who fear the monster, living in glass houses." There is also a line about the trappings of celebrity: "Everybody knows your name...you feel so alone."

A few things about the recording:

I have always wanted to put an electric violin through a talk box, which I have never heard done before, so this song seemed like a perfect opportunity. The talk box represents the "man behind the curtain." I also got inspired by the riff from "My Sharona" by The Knack and "The World Around Me" by Kings X. The time signature fluctuates between 4/4, 6/4, and 3/4. I love alternating between different time signatures without ruining the flow of the song. You can just bob your head to the song or dig deeper into all the intricate rhythmic stuff going on below the surface.

## 2) Take Your Medicine

This was the first song I wrote for the album. Inspired by an incident years ago where my family didn't get our damage deposit back after renting a condo (first world problems) and were accused of a bunch of damage we didn't make. We called a lawyer and resolved the issue, but turned my anger and frustration into a song. The beauty of rock n roll is that you can take one of life's little injustices, write a song, and blow it out of proportion into an apocalyptic battle between good and evil.

Instead of paying a therapist, this is what I do.

### 3) Guilty of Innocence

The title track. In 2012, I served on jury duty for a rape trial. It was a gut-wrenching experience. The prosecution presented a weak case and the accused was found not guilty. A bunch of us believed he was guilty, but couldn't convince anyone else on the jury. Definitely an intense and emotional experience for everyone involved. Most people try to avoid jury duty. For me, it was fascinating to observe how the system works, plus I got a good song out of it. This song drew its inspiration from late 70's punk and early 80's new wave. I wanted to draw from The Ramones, Joe Jackson, Elvis Costello, and The Police, while still keeping it under the umbrella of the Stratospheerius sound.

### 4) Face

A snapshot of a bad moment in an otherwise good relationship...or an ongoing dysfunctional relationship... or an example of miscommunication and differences in outlook in any relationship. A slow, brooding riff that keeps haunting the listener and grows to heights of angst!

### 5) Hysteria

We choose our covers very carefully. I have been a huge fan of the band Muse for many years and this song really spoke to me. We would perform it on our live shows over the past few years, and I felt it suited us and fit in with our set next to our originals. I wanted to record a version similar to the original, but the band refused, saying why re-create something that was so perfect to begin with? They forced me to re-imagine the song entirely. Thank you, guys! This is one of my favorite tracks on the album and the first official single. I was having a very good day vocally

and channeled my inner Matt Bellamy, hitting the E's! Rocking the Viper through a whammy pedal and an Earthquake Arpenoid in the solo. This recording also features the vocal contributions of soprano Melanie Mitrano. We wanted a really over-the-top, operatic Queen-esque vibe in the intro, since Muse was also influenced by Queen, as were we, this song is a tip of the hat to both bands. We pulled out all the stops!

## 6) Affluenza

This is the first song penned entirely by our drummer, Lucianna Padmore, who grew up in the Bronx. The lyrics talk about income inequality and could be about anyone stuck in an ivory tower, unaware of how their decisions affect the lives of common people who are struggling. A certain recently elected orange guy with a weird haircut comes to mind. Our music is not blatantly political, but allusions are made, and we have to write what we are passionate about. It's hard to stay neutral. Lucy's roots are in jazz, funk, and R&B, and her performance on the drums and congas really brings the funk on this track! Also features the funky clavinet stylings of Rave Tesar from Renaissance. For the violin solo, I play through a bass synth wah. I am a stomp box addict and am always searching for new sounds. One never knows what will work on an electric fiddle, sometimes an effect meant for bass can sound killing!

## 7. Parallel Reality

In 2014, I was on a month-long tour of Europe. Halfway through the tour, I had a restless night where I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking about my family and was homesick. Finally, at around 4 A.M, I gave up trying to sleep and decided to write some music. I had a "visitation." This song just poured out of me in a flash! I pictured my morning walks to school with my son and the conversations we would have. The song deals with the fact that

tour life is a parallel reality. Your only daily responsibility is kicking ass on stage, you get a lot of love from people....and then it's over. It's an existence free of most daily responsibilities and it's easy to get sucked into the "kaleidoscopic cornucopia". "A fleeting kiss is all this is.."

Musically, I wanted the song to feel restless, as life on the road is, as I was feeling at the moment I wrote it. Hence, the constant changing time signatures and feels. I also wanted to change the texture from the previous songs, incorporating my mandolin into the arrangement.

## 8. Game of Chicken

Probably the most political song on the album. The "game of chicken" has its origins in a game in which two drivers drive towards each other on a collision course: one must swerve, or both may die in the crash, but if one driver swerves and the other does not, the one who swerved will be called a "chicken", or a coward.

I thought about how dysfunctional our government is, how we continue to kick the can down the road for future generations to clean up our mess, how we scream over each other in our online media echo chambers and refuse to listen to differing opinions. Our planet is on the verge of destruction and we are too busy trying to destroy each other instead of coming together to try to solve our problems. Basically, the premise of the song is that we are all speeding towards the edge of a giant cliff screaming at each other and that we are all fucked. Have a nice day!

## 9. Dream Diary Cadenza

In all the albums Stratospheerius has put out, I have never recorded a ripping solo violin piece in the spirit of Van Halen's "Eruption." In 2015, I had the opportunity to write and perform a concerto for Electric 7-String violin and orchestra. The piece was

titled "Dream Diary," and was based on the cycles of sleep:

1. Falling and Flying (sensation of periodic flight when first falling asleep)
2. Delta Waves (shape of waves on heart monitor when first entering deep sleep).
3. Rapid Eye Movement (first dreams occur)
4. Waking Dream (the climax of your dreams, the most vivid and intense moments, interrupted by fits of wakefulness)

The "Cadenza" is a breakdown section in the 3rd movement where the electric violin plays solo and the orchestra stops. I hope to record this concerto and release it in the coming years, but I thought it would be cool to include this excerpt on this album, since it works as a stand-alone piece of music. Every sound you hear was created by the Mark Wood "Viper" 7-string electric violin.

## 10. Soul Food

While on tour in Sweden a few years ago with my string quartet, "Sweet Plantain" (who plays on this track), we found ourselves in a small town in the north called Östersund.

The concert was over. It was freezing outside, we were hungry and the town looked like they had rolled up their sidewalks and there was nowhere to go.

All of a sudden, someone at the hotel told us about a place down the street called the "Jazzkoket" (Jazz Kitchen). They said to bring our instruments.

Sure enough, in the middle of nowhere, we happened upon an incredible farm-to-table restaurant owned by a Norwegian woman who befriended us.

The music that night was phenomenal and some of the best musicians I have ever heard who happened to be local to that area and were jamming there. Needless to say, we stayed at the Jazz Kitchen all night, had a feast and jammed with the local

musicians.

The next day was free so we came back to the Jazz Kitchen, hung out there all day, and they fed us breakfast, lunch, and dinner free of charge! To show our gratitude, we gave a free concert that night to the locals.

When writing this song, I thought about all the people I have played for in different bands have travelled with who expressed their gratitude and generosity. In remote places like Alaska, where we ate fresh haddock and home-cooked moose meat that people had caught in their backyard, or the Navajo deserts in the Southwest, or remote parts of Northern Sweden. Östersund became a symbol for me of that mysterious building in the middle of nowhere where a warm fire, a jam session and a good meal awaits you. When you travel outside of the big cities like NY or LA where people are oversaturated with good entertainment and can get a bit jaded sometimes, and you travel to remote places where people show you their heart and remind you why you became a musician.

Recording of this track was made possible by a generous grant from the Robert and Qin Ryan foundation through the Mark Wood Rock Orchestra Camp, where I have the honor to teach every year.

I have always wanted to write a 12-minute prog epic. I went into the studio and went crazy! It's basically 12-min song about feeding the band! We were honored to have many special guests on this song, including:

Alex Skolnick (Testament, Trans Siberian Orchestra)-guitar  
Randy McStine (The Fringe, Sound of Contact, Stu Hamm, LoFi Resistance)-guitar/background vocals  
Rave Tesar (Renaissance)-keyboards

Melanie Mitrano-Soprano  
Patrice Jackson Thieman (Stevie Wonder, Mark O'Connor)-cello  
Leo Grinhauz-cello  
Earl Maneein (Seven Suns)-viola  
Eddie Venegas (Marc Anthony)-violin

For the intro, I wanted the sound of someone trudging through the snow. There were plenty of sound effects available of wind, but finding some good trudging was the hard part. One night I was taking the garbage out after a big snowstorm where the snow had turned to ice. The sound of my feet breaking through the ice provided the perfect sound effect I wanted for the intro, so I recorded it in my iPhone and that's what we ended up using.

We tracked part 3 first in January 2017 at Tedesco studios in Paramus, NJ with members of Sweet Plantain.

One week later, we did the foundation rhythm section tracks for parts 1, 2, and 4 at Rave Tesar's studio in Warwick, NY.

I tracked down Alex Skolnick on the one day he was in town between tours and recorded at his place in Brooklyn.

The song, and most of the album, was mixed by our friend Alex Salzman, best known for his work with Ace Frehley.

In this age where people consume music in bite-size portions as individual downloads, we still strongly believe in the journey that a great album can take you on. We fight to preserve and create this experience for the listener. We hope this album gets in your head and you enjoy the ride!

-Joe Deninzon  
September, 2017