

"I'm In The Band": White Zombie, and Cultural Shifts with Bassist Sean Yseult

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Text and photos by Abrii Ratkovich

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As a founding member of the hugely successful metal/industrial band White Zombie, Sean Yseult helped create the band's esoteric sound, drawing influence from bass-heavy punk and primal rhythms.

With frontman Rob Zombie, the four-piece band combined music with dark visuals and powerful live performances that seemed to create a world you could step into. Although she was often referred to as the "Chick in White Zombie," Yseult embraced the phrase. Since her days in White Zombie, Yseult has lent her talents to musical projects such as *Star & Dagger* and *Rock City Morgue*, released her own signature coffin bass model through Schecter Guitars and has also returned to her roots in visual arts and design.

She Shreds recently sat down with Yseult in her amazing Greek revival mansion in New Orleans to talk about the impact of White Zombie, B-movies, horror films and the cultural shift for women in metal.

She Shreds: You're famous as a bass player but what other instruments do you play? Sean Yseult: I play piano. I started off reading and writing music before I could read and write the alphabet. One of my mom's parents passed away and she inherited their little Spinnet piano. I was two or three years old but I wouldn't keep away from the piano. I was just banging away on it. So my father was like, "get this child some lessons." I also was playing violin when I was little. I haven't picked up a violin in years, it's not like a bicycle. I don't think I could just pick it back up right away. I also play banjo, dulcimer, and Therenin. I haven't quite mastered it, but I play.

What drew you to bass?

It's funny, I don't mean to offend any bass players but a band said, "hey we need a bass player," and I'm like, "Well, I played violin before. I think I can master something with four strings."

At the time I had just moved to New York to go to Parsons School of Design. I had just switched to visual arts [studies] and my whole life changed. I was going to art school but I was also spending every Sunday afternoon at the CBGB's matinee, seeing hardcore bands and being very immersed in that. There were all these people from all over the world and I was being exposed to all this punk and hardcore music that I never heard before. So one thing lead to another, I met people there, they needed a bass player for a hardcore band so I got a bass for \$50 and learned the songs. That band never came to fruition but now, here, I have a bass.

How did you and Rob get together and eventually form White Zombie?

There weren't that many people that were into punk at Parsons. It was mostly a lot of clean-cut kids, so we kind of noticed each other looking kind of different, having all our clothes and hair dyed black and all that kinda thing. We both wanted to have a band so then finally I was like "Let's just do one together." We liked similar things. We loved going to see Black Flag and Butthole Surfers, and we loved The Birthday Party, so those were kind of our influences. We were trying to do something a little tribal and rhythm heavy with bass and drums, and that's how we started out.

White Zombie had a strong stage presence and a cool confidence. Is that something you all had to work on, or was that just your personalities?

It developed because I remember our first White Zombie show and we were all nervous as fuck. We were just moving around and shaking our hair as much as possible it takes a little while to develop that confidence on stage. Also, it's hard without an appreciative audience so when you're first playing and people don't know your songs, or they don't know what the fuck you are doing, or they don't like it, it's kind of hard. So much of being on stage is the back and forth report between you and the audience. Once they like your band it's so much easier. You can interact with them, it's so much nicer when someone is reaching their hand out for a high-five then when they are flipping you off.

At least the spitting on bands didn't catch on so much here, like the whole Sex Pistols-era gobbling thing.

Oh yeah, when we had to go to England we were terrified that we were gonna get not just spit on, but they would throw bottles of piss back then and they would also sharpen coins and throw them like weapons. We were sure that was going to happen to us at Donington because we were kind of weird, we weren't exactly metal. Thank god it didn't, instead there were 80,000 people jumping up in unison, singing along with our songs. We were so thrilled; talk about the confidence of being on stage, that was one of the best. At first you don't know how people are going to act but it does change your performance. Once you have that it's kind of like, "all right, I got this," we were good but we did start off nervous.

I've read that Rob was very self-critical of his own work, a perfectionist. Is that something you struggle with? How do you balance self-critique of your work without being overly critical?

That's definitely a Rob thing. I'm not like that so much. I feel like nobody is perfect, nothing is ever going to be perfect, and you've got to put it out there at some point. I don't beat myself up over it. With music it's a collaborative thing, there's got to be a certain looseness with rock 'n' roll. I grew up with years and years of very strict rigorous piano training and I know about that, but that's not what it's about for me. That's the kind of thing that makes me mental and have a nervous breakdown. I can't be that way about music, it's got to be loose and fun. I've got a horrible perfectionist streak in me and that will make you insane. You can't be afraid of looking silly or worried about what other people think or your just covers going to do jack shit. You know, you have to get out there and do something.

I read an article where you mentioned how you were really influenced by The Cramps. The idea that the music was only half of it, that the other half was their attitude and their lifestyle. Can you talk more about how that shaped you as a band?

Definitely. We loved The Cramps. The first show I saw when I landed in NYC was a secret Cramps show at CBGB's, it was amazing! It was the early '80s, and when I got there the whole club was filled with all these freaks who looked like Lux Interior, with hair three feet high and ghostly pale. These people don't go out in the daylight, they live by the glow of the television. We just really liked that. We were very into B-movies and film. It's just a whole sub culture. A way of life.



White Zombie was clearly informed by your love of horror and old movies, I noticed two Star and Dagger videos also make movie references. Can you talk about how classic and B-movies have inspired you and influenced your work?

For White Zombie it was definitely a huge inspiration because Rob has been obsessed with movies his whole life, and now he has become a filmmaker. For me, horror films in particular were a huge influence on my childhood and my life. I don't know why, I was just drawn to it, like other things on the dark side of life. As far as Star and Dagger, I didn't realize that but now that you mention it one is based on *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* and the other is based on *The Shining*. I guess it's something that still informs us. So many of those movies are just such a part of your life in this subculture; all these crazy directors like Herschell Gordon Lewis and Russ Meyer. It was this underground culture thing everyone was into, maybe not the horror so much as we were.

In 2010 you published the book *I'm In The Band: Backstage Notes from the Chick in White Zombie?* What were you trying to accomplish with your book?

There were two things that sort of brought it about. One was Hurricane Katrina. All the things that I had saved from my White Zombie days was up on the third floor in this huge storage closet. We had so much roof damage that a lot of that roof was missing. We came home to a large puddle of water in the kitchen, and I was like "oh man, I could have lost all this." So I thought, just for history's sake I should scan it, photograph it, get it all in my computer, file it all away.

Also, in 2008 we had this box set come out [*Let Sleeping Corpses Lie*]. It had no information. It was just all our music in little 5-point type that no one could read. It was lacking credits, it was just horrible. So I thought, I'm going to just kill two birds with one stone here and get this together: I was the only one [in the band] who always had a camera. I'm not talking a good camera but I would always take something on tour. So I was documenting backstage and everything. I was a fan of most of the bands we toured with so I took some great photos of some of those bands too. It was really fun putting it all together. It's in it's third pressing now.

Tell us a little more about why you chose that title for the book, being labeled "the chick from White Zombie," and why you chose the sarcastic play on, *I'm with the Band: Confessions of a Groupie by Pamela De Barres?*

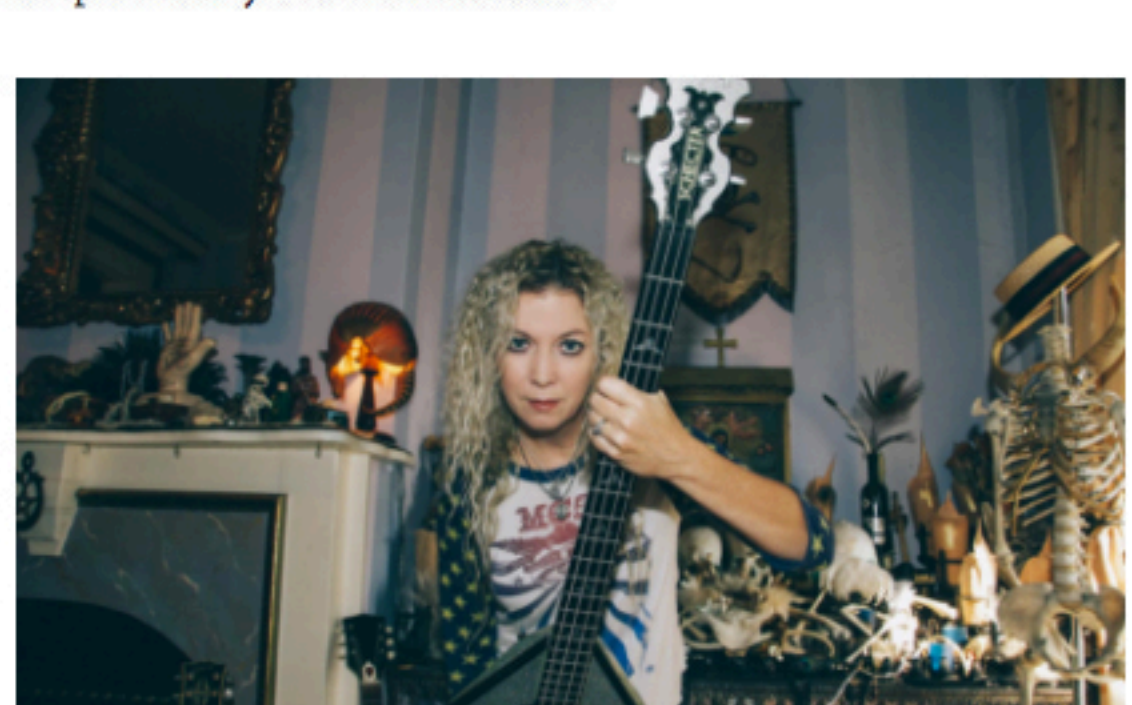
Some people don't actually get that, but yeah, definitely, I knew the name of the book right away. I would get stopped from going on stage sometimes when we were suppose to be performing because I was a girl. Obviously I wasn't in the band, so... "I'm with the band."

Being a groupie. I guess there was a time and place for that but it's so unappealing and demeaning to me. I just don't even get that. I guess I'm a little strange. I kind of wanted to be those guys on stage; I didn't want to date them, you know what I mean? It's funny because I ended up at some party, and Pamela De Barres was there. I had never met her, I just kind of kept my mouth shut because she's a legend, I didn't want to offend her. I'm not like pissing on anyone, I just you know I don't ever want to be "with the band." I'd rather be in it. I want to be in the band, thank you.

Have you noticed a culture shift in regards to women musicians, especially in harder musical genres?

Oh, god yes. There are so many girls in metal bands now. When we played Cattle Donington [now called Download] and we were with Metallica and a ton of other great bands, but I was the only girl playing there. MTV interviewed me about it. They were like "You're the only girl, not only to grace the stage today but in the entire history of Donington except for once when Doro Pesch was onstage."

I do have a lot of female musicians come up to me and say that I inspired them which is always inspiring for me to hear. The landscape has completely changed—it's great. I see a lot of amazing metal bands, that just happen to have a girl in the band, or all girls, and they're all great and look cool. I can't even keep track anymore. It's awesome.



What projects are you currently working on and who are you playing with?

I'm in a band now called Star & Dagger, and I'm also in a band [that] started back in 2002 called Rock City Morgue. Rock City Morgue put out a few records. Star & Dagger put out two. I'm not into touring [but] I still enjoy performing—I don't mind playing some shows here or there.

It was fun coming out of White Zombie and getting to play with some other people and do a few things. Famous Monsters was something where I had these silly trashy garage surf songs in my head that I just had to get out. I had the whole idea for the monster outfits and I just found two girls who didn't even know how to play. I got them to play and it was just completely for fun.

Star and Dagger got together about a month ago to work out some new songs, and it went well. We're hopefully going to record soon, that's our next project. The three of us are best friends, that's how we started out. We'll go on trips, sometimes a gig or a recording session is an excuse to go to Joshua Tree and travel together. Joshua Tree is very inspiring and we're very good friends with Dave Catching who runs the Ranchos De la Luna Studio that so many great records have come out of. There aren't many places that have ambiance and the soul like New Orleans does. Joshua Tree is so complete opposite of New Orleans, and I don't mean to sound hippy-dippy, but it has this spiritual thing about it. There's a reason musicians and artists are drawn to it. There's something going on out there that I don't understand but it's pretty amazing.

Do you have any pre-show rituals?

I'm a creature of habit from my White Zombie days. After 11 years of touring, we were very locked down before a show. People thought we were doing drugs and all kinds of things but no, we were pretty straight-edge, drinking Gatorade, getting B-12 shots, and stretching. No one was allowed backstage and to this day it makes me mental when you're getting ready to go on stage and all these people are pouring into that tiny dressing room. It totally rattles me.

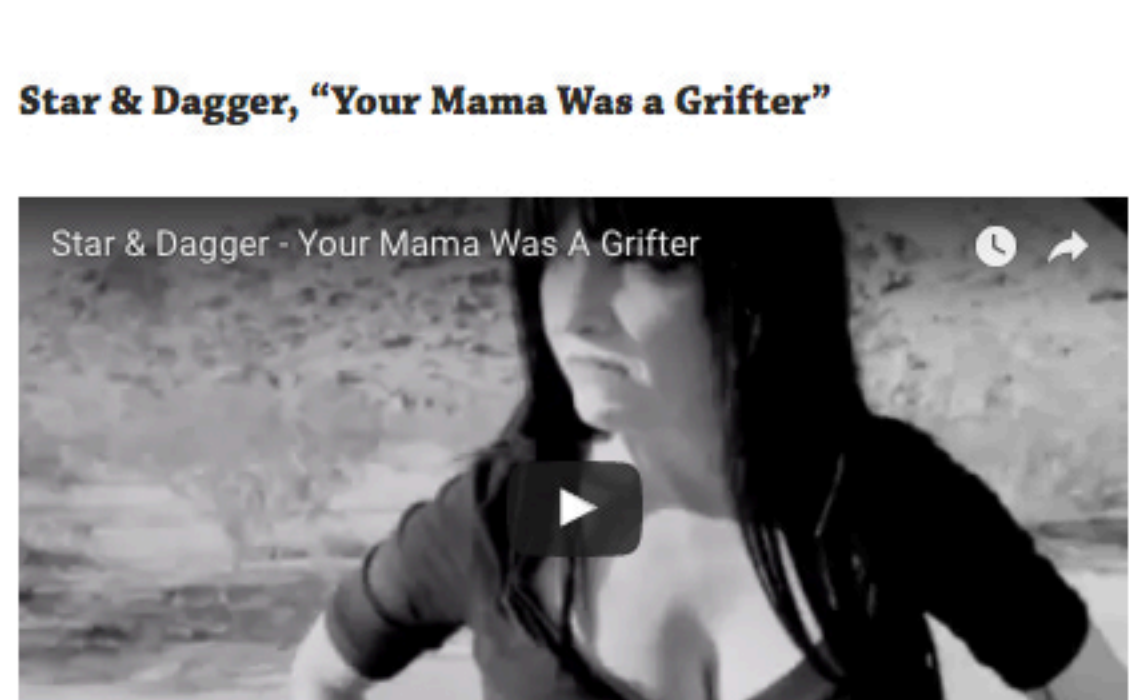
Tell us a great tour story. Not necessarily the best show you ever played, but a memorable one.

We had a show in this little town outside of Vegas called Fahrump. These kids who lived in a trailer park set us up a show that was outside in a drainage ditch. They brought a PA and 200 of their friends. I think they all dropped acid because half-way through the set they started picking up the logs in the bonfire that were lit on fire and throwing them up in the air. Somebody was doing gun practice right nearby, it was completely insane. To this day I must have had about 200 people say they were at that gig and I'm just like, "really?" cause there was like 15 of 'em at the time. It's become legendary, the drainage ditch in Fahrump! The band that set it up were called Doom State Club. I'll never forget that. They let us sleep in their trailer for the night and took us to a casino for brunch the next day. Those are the shows you remember.

White Zombie "Thunder Kiss '65" 1993



Star & Dagger, "Your Mama Was a Grifter"



Issue No.11



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