

Rob Mazurek Interview: Galaxial & Celestial

By Jordan Mainzer -December 10, 2020



At a time when we can't physically feed off of each other's energy, Rob Mazurek has provided an album that allows even the most metaphysically skeptical feel a connection. *Dimensional Stardust* is his latest with the Exploding Star Orchestra, the avant-garde collective he's fronted since a 2005 co-commission from the Chicago Cultural Center and the Jazz Institute of Chicago, and its levels of long-distance expression are seemingly infinite. The record's creation story itself, pre-pandemic, is evidence enough of the power of art even when collaborators are technically alone. Mazurek wrote the material after JazzFest Berlin curator Nadin Deventer invited him to present a Berlin-meets-Chicago iteration of ESO in Germany; when Mazurek returned to Chicago, venerable jazz label International Anthem in turn invited their roster and friends to record his new music. Each player tracked their performances separately over MIDI scores of Mazurek's compositions, and his editorial and curatorial stamp took the record to the finish line.

Mazurek doesn't play much on the record, offering his trademark cornet but mostly arranging the music for the twelve other musicians, who play in tandem referencing a swath of genres and aesthetics. Ohmme's Macie Stewart's violin and Tomeka Reid's cello intertwine with Damon Locks' spoken word (which appears throughout the album), minimal techno beats, and Coltrane-inspired piano on highlight "Galaxy 1000". With its opening fluttering flutes and string plucks, "Parable of Inclusion" sways along like a sea shanty. Closer "Autumn Pleiades" juxtaposes solemn orchestral swells with percussive, electroacoustic blips. And only a couple songs feature prominent solos, but they're mammoths: opener "Sun Core Tet", buoyed by Nicole Mitchell's flute among clattering percussion and muted horns, and "The Careening Prism Within (Parable 43)", featuring Tortoise's Jeff Parker ripping a guitar solo over Reed's cello. Combine the music with videos from featured percussionist Mikel Patrick Avery and a cover sporting a flowy Mazurek

painting, Dimensional Stardust is a multi-disciplinary achievement that rises above ours—and perhaps even Mazurek’s—preconceived notions of concert and harmony.

I was able to ask a few questions to Mazurek over email about his creative approach on Dimensional Stardust, some individual songs and moments, and what’s next for the prolific creator. Read his responses below.

Since I Left You: In your description of “A Wrinkle in Time Sets Concentric Circles Reeling,” you talk about, “break through the galaxial ceiling of what we think we know and treat each other...with respect and dignity.” Is this idea of abandoning preconceived notions implicit in your approach to collaboration, in general and on this album? Did it have anything to do with your tendency to step back and let others lead the instrumentation on this album?

Rob Mazurek: The music on this record is almost completely composed, so there was no stepping back to let others lead in respect to the written music, but of course there is natural human expression that happens, and these subtleties certainly make the music more exciting and beautiful. The music is about transformation, and letting the overall arc of the sound take you to places less travelled. When I speak of this “galaxial ceiling,” I am putting forth the idea that anything is possible, and all is acceptable within the realm of ESO.

SILY: Though I wouldn’t call Dimensional Stardust “dance music,” there are certainly very groovy moments, like when the beat first drops on “Sun Core Tet” and the almost minimal techno of “Galaxy 1000”. When composing and playing this music, did you at all think about the prospect of people dancing to it? In general, how do you (or do you) imagine people listening to it?

RM: I make music to give myself and listeners

energy and light. I make music with the notion that anything is possible and acceptable. I make music with melody, rhythm, intervals, harmonic shapes, noise, repetition, chromatics, modal, etc....anything is danceable. I certainly danced quite a bit while making this music.

SILY: At what point in time and why did you ultimately decide to have Mikel Patrick Avery do the videos? How involved were you in the process of making them?

RM: I love Mikel’s aesthetic...I wanted someone to make the films that had an intimate relationship to the music. Since Mikel plays on the record, I thought it would be excellent for him to do it. We spoke a bit about the tendency for Exploding Star Orchestra music to be quite celestial in nature. From that idea, Mikel came up with the idea of “the First Kid in Space” and ran with it.

SILY: “The Careening Prism Within” certainly recalls Jeff Parker’s work with Tortoise but also sounds like it could have come from his Suite For Max Brown from earlier this year, the other first of two collaborative releases between Nonesuch and International Anthem, which you also played on. This may be coincidental, but I thought I’d ask: How aware are you of the other music your collaborators are working on and releasing, and does it ever make its way into your compositions and playing?

RM: I am influenced by many things, and one of them is my friends’ music. Jeff’s record Suite for Max Brown is probably my favorite record of the decade! I love what Tortoise has done. This music was composed almost 3 years ago. Upon recording it, there were some slight changes, but [it] stayed pretty much intact. I write music very intuitively mostly based on my own developing vocabulary these last 30 or so years. Sometimes, against my own will, something will happen...a crazy



example is a composition for ESO I made some years ago which just by chance borrowed a whole section from a composition of Jeff's! I didn't even know that until Jeff brought it up at a rehearsal! Hahaha, that was pretty stunning. Yes, influences are certainly there, but a lot of influence is insular to my own path to making sound.

SILY: The fleeting nature of time is a big theme on this record, yet you take the approach of finding beauty in the minutiae of moments and endless possibilities rather than playing "what if" games and obsessing over the butterfly effect. Have you always held this mindset, and how do you continue to hold it these days?

RM: There are a million suns in one melody, there are galaxies hidden in feedback and noise, one note = one breath = new universes. Spirals create energy, energy creates light, light moves quickly, and all is possible in the realm of love.

SILY: What's the story behind the cover art of this record?

RM: It is a painting I made titled "Some Other Time." The painting was basically started at the beginning of the Dimensional Stardust composition process and finished about the

same time we recorded the record. It seemed a perfect complement to the sound, so we used it for the recording. My painting/art practice has been happening for 20 years or so. I have been developing the idea of sound and vision being ultimately the same thing. When a painting emits energy and light and sound to me, then it is finished, and when I can see the colors and forms and shapes from listening to a composition, then it is done. I am desperately trying to find a way where these 2 mediums coexist in the most intimate and powerful way possible.

SILY: What's next for you?

RM: I have hours and hours of modular synth constructions I am working on. I just finished some interesting work with the architects from Paris at AWP, where we worked on transforming image through sound into video into architecture. There is a new release coming at the beginning of the year with David Grubbs and Mats Gustafsson under the name "The Underflow" on Blue Chopsticks records. A new suite of material I am working on for Ballroom Marfa with Damon Locks, Lisa Harris, and Mauricio Takara. Finishing a suite of large scale paintings and conceiving the next sculpture exhibition that will happen in Italy at some point when the pandemic gets under control.

SILY: What have you been listening to, watching, and reading lately?

RM: Mauricio Takara dropped some really interesting music on Bandcamp that is quite nice, the new Autechre records are pretty great, Sam Prekop's Comma is very nice. I have been watching the King Hu film A Touch of Zen over and over again, and I am re-reading Samuel R. Delany's masterpiece Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand.