

DEMIANS

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Nicolas Chapel, the man behind Demians, on how to build an empire...

"One of the most assured and accomplished debut albums I've ever heard, the textures and dynamics within the music are breathtaking. A must for everyone that appreciates the art of epic and ambitious 21st century rock music."

So said Porcupine Tree's Steve Wilson - a man who knows more than just a thing or two about creating exciting music - about 'Building An Empire' the debut release by French band Demians. Equal parts showy and introspective, 'Building An Empire' is one of 2008's early surprises; sitting in Riverside/Sieges Even territory (with a heavy duty blast of Tool now and again: check out 'Sand') it's a cleverly constructed and beautifully played piece of work, and one which may well end up in a few Album Of The Year lists come December.

Nicolas Chapel, the man who is Demians and who wrote and recorded the album, seems genuinely overawed by the attention his album is getting. "Steven Wilson heard my album thanks to my manager, who met him and gave him a copy when he was touring the U.K. last year. Steven liked it, and wanted to share it with people. I discovered his music more than ten years ago, through his various projects

and later his work with Opeth and Blackfield. He's always done whatever he's wanted and I think he deserves the career and reputation he has, so it's very encouraging to



know that he listened to my album and wanted to talk about it. It's a great honour for me that people are interested in my music. I'm

glad you're asking all these questions, and I hope my answers will be interesting!" he laughs. OK, so from the top, let's talk about Nicolas Chapel and Demians. "I've always been into music," starts Nicolas. "I don't remember having memories not related to music of some sort. I started listening to my older brother's vinyl when I was five - Peter Gabriel, Rush, The Beatles, stuff like that. I started playing the guitar when I was seven or eight; I learned it by myself on my father's old acoustic guitar which was very hard to play. I still have this guitar today and when I want to work on a hard

part, I play it on my father's guitar first so I'm sure it will be easier on any other guitar!

"Demians was born in 2001 when I started writing songs naturally. I never expected to release an album or even start a career; I just needed to write for myself. I've always been extremely introverted and it became very hard for me to deal with this at one point. My music helped me get out of my shell, and I naturally wanted to share it with an audience. I finally decided to record this album in 2005, and then spent months and months searching for the right musicians for recreating it live."

I excuse the fact that my GCSE French didn't stretch to the word 'Demians', and wondered if the band's name had any meaning or significance. "When I decided to start a career around my music I quickly de-

ecided that I didn't want to put my name on the cover, because once the music is written and shared with the audience,

it's not about 'myself' anymore. And I wanted a name that would describe the songs themselves: my songs are very important for me, and Demians is therefore the name of the songs.

"I used to go to my grandfather's place a lot when I was a kid," he continues, "and spent a lot of my time reading his books. I read the book 'Demian' by Hermann Hesse when I was very young and it had a big impact on me. So the

name Demians is based on the character of Max Demian. The narrator of the book is a kid whose life is bordered by his parents, school, religion, and his very narrow vision of what is 'good' and what is 'bad' doesn't put anything in perspective, doesn't lead him to question anything at all. It's only when Max Demian comes and talks to him that he starts asking himself what his real purpose in life is; he starts questioning everything, and starts searching for his own place in the world. Since my songs come naturally, and sometimes talk to me like old friends would, they are in some way my own Demians." He pauses. "Well, it's only an explanation, and is as cheesy as any explanation might sound. Maybe a name should remain just a name. But since the person I am today is here because of and thanks to these songs, I thought the name was appropriate." I wondered

if the album came together easily. "Well," Nicolas starts, "it was not written as an album in the first place. As I said, I started writing in 2001 and just let the songs flow for years. I had already written almost 200 songs by 2005 when I decided to record the album. I chose the

songs which I thought represented who I was, and which I wanted to share with other people. That said, I think even though the songs are very different from one to the next, they're written and recorded with the same passion which makes it sound like a cohesive album.

"The songs themselves came together very naturally. The recording sessions went very well because I had worked thoroughly on the arrangements beforehand. It was hard at some points though, because I recorded it with no support or money at all. The drums were recorded in a cellar, the guitars in a bedroom; there always seemed to be a truck or a car passing by outside each time I was recording the vocal harmonies! And I didn't have much gear for recording aside from the recorder and a few microphones. But I wanted to do it that way and not be

alone, but Nicolas was happy creating 'Building An Empire' himself. "To be honest, it would probably have been a harder process for me to have other people involved in it. I'm not doing everything by myself because I'm egotistic or anything like that; it's actually the opposite. When you work with other people, there's always ego involved at some point: there's always someone wants to play louder than the others, someone who is focusing too much on his instrument and not on the overall vibe, etc. At least, that's the way it's been with people I have worked with in the past. I don't want to sound arrogant about it, it's just that as I have this original vision in my head when a song comes to life, I'd rather be focusing on it than on teaching someone how to play something I can play myself.

"Besides," he continues, "I have no fixed song-writing technique. All the music comes to my mind naturally, and then it's a very long process of transcribing my emotions through music, with instruments, words, sounds. Nothing is planned when I write the songs. I do a lot of demos, and then it's a matter of finding the right sound to each instrument, so that the spirit of the song is 'respected' once it's recorded. There are no barriers; whatever sounds great and speaks to me on an emotional level is what I'm after.

"Inspiration comes from everywhere - from life, feelings, events, situations. It's like really feeling part of something; it's like everything making sense at once. I don't consider myself as a writer or composer: I'm just part of the big picture that is my life, and I feel more comfortable transcribing it through music than through words. 'Temple' for example was inspired by meeting someone. As soon as I started chatting with this person that I'd never met before, I heard the music in my head. It's a song inspired by this moment, this moment

when you meet someone and you can't tell whether he or she will have completely forgotten about you in ten minutes or might still be your best friend in twenty years. Every song is like a new step in my life."

A touring band has now been



stressing out about studio time and finances, and I'm very happy with the way it turned out. I learned a lot in the process and can't wait to start working on the follow-up. Creating music really is what I'm most interested in." There are obvious complications in working

put together featuring bassist Antoine Pohn, keyboard player Anthony Broggia and drummer Michaël Roponus. "It's been a long process, and probably one of the most discouraging times in my life. I spent like one-and-a-half years searching for people I would like to get involved in Demians. I moved three times in the process, tried many people, and almost lost heart at one point. You spend your whole

life hearing musicians telling you how much they'd love to make a living out of playing music, but you notice that once they have an opportunity of touring the world and doing

exactly that, they spend more time finding excuses for not doing it than making the effort and the sacrifices it takes. 'Oh yeah, look how much the music industry sucks; oh yeah, people are too stupid to understand one percent of my talent,' you know? I was not interested in hiring studio musicians that would just play a part that's written and stick to it. I wanted to find real friends I'd love to be on the road with, and share these songs with them. Of the members of the band who are here today, the drummer Michaël is the one that got involved first. He's a musician, not a drummer, first and foremost; by that I mean he listens to many bands without even being interested in what the drummer plays most of the time because he's more interested in the songs themselves. His first questions when we met were not related to which snare drums he might use or which drumsticks he likes, but were related to life, feelings, the soundscape of the songs. These guys in the band understood what



the music was trying to convey and that's very important for me."

The album contains some intricacies which might not be easy to replicate live, but Nicolas doesn't appear unduly concerned. "I think the roots of every song are strong enough to overcome any material problem I might encounter. And we're playing many of the songs with sequenced strings or electronic loops, because I think these elements are relevant and really add to the songs' structures. People now are used to seeing artists like Massive Attack, Björk, Peter Gabriel, you know, using sequenced material here and there, because if the songs sound great that way it makes the listening experience even more interesting. We're on stage playing live with as much passion as we can put into it, and even though I can't afford to bring a string section with me on tour, I see no reason for not having the recorded

string section available.

"However, I hope I can afford to have even a small string section in the near future. I'm not into keyboards much; all my arrangements are mapped out as string sections and most of the time played that way in the studio. There are more violins and cellos in my songs than there are keyboards.

"But right now I can't wait until 'Building An Empire' comes out, and people can listen to it. I really hope people like it, because this record is for them. It's the story of anybody who wants to enjoy their life to the full. And I'm looking forward to meeting people and sharing their views about it. That's what 'Building An Empire' means to me," he adds with a smile.



Photos courtesy of Kribophotos