

Eleven have always had friends in high places. Percussionist Jack Irons, initially of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, became Pearl Jam's drummer du choix between '95 and '98 after Eddie Vedder made him the kind of offer no muso should refuse. Guitarist Alain Johannes headed up early Chili Peppers scion What's This? along with bass player Flea, and is a Desert Sessions collaborator of QOTSA's Josh Homme; his partner Natasha Shneider is a classically-trained pianist and singer from Moscow and played on Soundgarden's 1994 mega-selling album, *Superunknown*. The couple helped write, arrange and produce Chris Cornell's 1999 solo album, *Euphoria Morning* and formed the core of his touring band before the singer departed for pastures new with Audioslave. Story: Clare O'Brien.

# L.A. Confidential

Confused? It doesn't matter, because Los Angeles trio Eleven don't want you to remember them for their session resumé or their starry connections. Behind the music they've made with others, there's been a steady parade of albums of their own. In particular, 1995's *Thunk* and 2000's major-label *Avantegardedog* were adventurous, uncompromising and challenging, resisting easy analysis. They call it rock – but the wilful audacity that's worked for other musically literate innovators like Radiohead, Muse or The Mars Volta seems only to have kept Eleven out of the spotlight.

Part of this may be down to their instinct for big, unhelpful pronouncements: a website which proclaims their vision to be “a unique synthesis of all styles and periods of music focused and forced onto a rock aesthetic” sounds like a band covering up the fact that they don't know where they're going and aren't very sure of how to get there. And this is a shame, because the vague rhetoric only serves to obscure the cracked majesty and gothic sumptuousness of some very unusual music.

So what are Eleven really up to? “I look at rock music as the one “style” in which you can get away with almost anything,” replies Alain Johannes. “There's nothing to which you have to strictly adhere, it's more the attitude with which it's delivered and the intent behind it. It has a certain inherent freedom.”

So is it art-rock, then? Experimental music? Prog-rock, even? “I've never heard anyone say prog-rock,” laughs Natasha, “but ... well, you know, people have to write about something. And who was it who said writing about music is like dancing about architecture? Well, we think of ourselves as a rock band but it's definitely not a specific genre where you can tune into a radio station and know you're going to hear that kind of music.”

The band do find the recent resurgence of experimental musicianship encouraging, though, especially after an era in which they feel everyone's musical tastes have been dumbed down. “It's so irritating when everybody does the same thing with the same three chords and not even in an inventive way. And it's been done millions of times, and better, and you can smell the agenda...” complains Natasha.

“The only choice is what's on the radio,” agrees Alain, “and I find that most people don't have a relationship

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## Eleven Discography

1991 *Awake In A Dream*  
(Morgan Creek)

1993 *Eleven*  
(Hollywood Records)

1995 *Thunk*  
(Hollywood Records)

2000 *Avantgardedog*  
(A&M/Interscope)

2003 *Howling Book*  
(Pollen)

with music that goes any deeper. It just becomes sonic wallpaper for their lifestyle and a lot of their choices are based on trying to fit into a group based on fear. It goes along with how they speak and what they wear and who they hang out with."

Despite past support slots with QOTSA, the Chili Peppers and Soundgarden, the band hasn't played live for a while – though Irons recently guested with Pearl Jam, Chris Cornell and John Frusciante at a benefit show in Santa Barbara, and Johannes recently played Jools Holland's TV show *Later with the Desert Sessions* crowd. "I think the touring will come when it's right," says Jack Irons. "I think that at this point in our careers we're all over going on a tour and not really enjoying it, or thinking you're doing it for the sake of this, that or the other. The goal should really be to just play music for people and for everybody to enjoy the experience."

Still, their fifth CD *Howling Book* may succeed in bringing Eleven to a wider audience at last, especially in Europe where attitudes to free-ranging and unbranded creativity are less suspicious than in the States. It's an intense, driven album, ranging from swampy, haunted blues-rock to Beatles pastiche, from jazz-punk to drama-laden torch song. High-quality musicianship abounds, with Shneider's intricate, cerebral keyboard work melding with the liquid, sensual guitar of partner Johannes. The pair alternate on lead vocals and co-write all the band's material. Do they feel that being a couple helps or hinders their working relationship?

"We've always had a special understanding as artists and as people - that's why we've been together for a long time," explains Natasha. "You wouldn't choose to write with someone who has a different set of musical values. And it's an egoless process anyway so I'm not quite aware of what is going on...!"

Johannes is more down to earth. "We have quite different backgrounds and we're quite different as people and yet we always manage to find a common ground...there's not a lot of arguing about stuff. I would say that I'm a little more experimental and more improvisational and she's more compositional...she hears it in her head much more than I do because she's got the heavy-duty classical background. We just sit down and one of us has a fragment of something, and then it's just a ping pong match really, just back and forth. And then after that, if we go down a road that looks interesting and we realise that we don't like it, then we turn back."

In a sense the pair are fire and ice, a mass of musical and emotional contradictions. Shneider's classical leanings can be alienating, keeping the listener back behind a barrier made out of her obsession with mathematical form. At other times her brittle Eastern European cool fractures into flame, her voice a wounded wolf's howl of yearning and loss. Johannes' playing and singing is more evenly energised and sensual, more charged with the rock aesthetic, but he comes across as the more level-headed of the two. What kind of emotions and ideas inspire these strange songs?

Shneider refuses to be drawn into an area she obviously considers private. "Just life. It's something that you experience everyday and you do not document it until the time comes and it then somehow manifests itself, in some form. There are people who keep diaries or write their thoughts everyday and we don't do that. We trust the process that when the time comes there will be something to say."

Johannes is a little more forthcoming. "Lyrically we don't sing anything that we don't feel natural with, a statement or some point of view or whatever...we're kind of fishing for something, for the vaguest feeling which way it should go and we always know when it's not right. But after the fact it's kind of hard to remember how we got there and who did what."

Jack Irons may at first glance seem the gooseberry of the bunch, but in fact he's an old family friend; this is his second stint behind the Eleven kit. A founder member, he left to join Pearl Jam in 1995 and then recently returned to the Eleven fold (replacing Greg Upchurch, now of Puddle of Mudd) after a period of illness which kept him out of music altogether. Was it easy to pick up where he'd left off eight years before?

"He'd been on quite a long journey while we were apart," recalls Alain, "and I found him to be much more of a musical drummer in terms of what he brought to the songs as opposed to being any kind of a show-off! Which is wonderful for us as songwriters; I mean he still manifests his personality through the music but he certainly doesn't get in the way of it, which can be the case. And so it was quite interesting to come back together again... his concerns are not the same as ours in terms of the harmony and the orchestration and all those things."

Irons, too, feels he's slipped easily back into step. "I think we're all a little more seasoned as regards what we're doing studio-wise and stuff... [but] I think my function in Eleven is pretty much the same as it ever was in the beginning. There were a couple of songs where Alain said right, here's the part and we sat down and it started to happen, and so the original inspiration drove the rest of the creative process to complete the song. I think that happens a lot; that has traditionally happened a lot in Eleven. But a lot of times, they will come in with complete songs and say

here it goes."

For a man who's been part of two massive bands, he's engagingly humble. "I'd love to see my music find a place in the world that would allow me to make it into a career," he says. As well as his work with Eleven, he's also been working on a solo project with various high-profile guests – including Chili Pepper Flea. "There's gonna be some other people but since they haven't done it yet, I'd better not say!" He hopes the album will be ready for release in the Spring. "I don't know what you would call it – it's instrumental, it's definitely very eclectic but it's not jazz. I dunno, this is the first anybody's ever asked me that so I don't have the right words for it yet... a lot of rhythmic stuff because obviously, that's what I do. But it's more just free flow."

So what does the future hold for Eleven? More albums, obviously – solo projects and loose collaborations as well as group endeavours. Their success as individual musicians means they have their own Hollywood recording studio, 11AD, where both their own work and Cornell's *Euphoria Morning* were made. "A lot of shenanigans, a lot of interesting things go down," Alain confides. "It's a nice meeting place for a lot of our friends and we do a lot of recording here with a lot of good people and artists that we admire and that we're close with. It's just like a home, really, but it happens to have a studio in it. So it's invisible and that usually brings out really natural performances and removes you from the anxiety of the studio – all the unnatural things that people go through." Irons' solo effort will be followed by two more; Shneider is planning to record classical music with a chamber group while Johannes wants to venture into more "phasey" instrumental music.

After a brief stint on A&M, Eleven are also developing their own label, Pollen. So do they hope to sign and record other artists?

"We plan to, hopefully, as soon as we've built up a small scene," says Alain. "I certainly wouldn't want to until we were able to give them everything they deserve and the ability to reach their potential audience - we wouldn't want to become everything that we've fought against with Pollen. I'm confident that, after a passage of time, you start to sell more records and then you get a bit of infrastructure. From there, we can figure out how to reach someone's audience and that's all you really have to do, because from there it becomes self-sustaining... you shouldn't need to spend a fortune on a video or have a million dollars recording budget. It's just the music, and that way there should be money made straight away."

And the name? No, it's nothing to do with Spinal Tap. According to Natasha Shneider, it was chosen to be "as ambiguous as possible". And perhaps that very ambiguity – the band's biggest stumbling block in terms of marketing – is also their greatest strength as musicians. Perhaps the best music can't be contained inside a genre or a brand. Maybe, as Jack Irons puts it, the best music is simply what happens when "musicians just incorporate all their madness into a body of work – and allow themselves the time to do it."