

## Holy Sun Opera House

The Los Angeles group blend nightmare architecture and cult-influenced folk horror with contemporary classical music and darkwave synths

By Stephanie Phillips



Holy Sun Opera House's Krissy Barker (left) and dl Salo

For years, drummer and classically trained soprano Krissy Barker had the same experience when she closed her eyes every night. "I would have the same dreams over and over," she confides over video call. Trapped in an eerie, sprawling house, she would lose herself in endless hallways and shifting rooms trying to find the attic, a daunting space that she instinctively feared but was nevertheless drawn to.

Her dreams and the ever-changing feelings of anxiety, joy and terror she felt each night became the basis of her collaboration with composer dl Salo for their project Holy Sun Opera House. On their debut album *The Holy Sun Opera House*, trepidation pierces through every note as Barker tracks her dream journeys around the house. Salo's gothic and darkwave inspired arrangements for Prophet 12 and Moog Sub37 synthesizers marry with Barker's angelic operatic vocals and the drama of a choir.

The pair took inspiration from the themes of folk horror and cult mysticism in films like *Suspiria*, *Midsommar* and *The Wicker Man*, to create a soundtrack to Barker's dreams. On "Decrepit Mansion", the unforgiving lurch

forward of harsh, industrial synth lines is backed by claustrophobic choir vocals that close in the listener, coming nearer with every note. There are also moments of respite from the horror, heard in Barker's stirring soprano, and the repetitive, entrancing electronics of "Room With The Rain".

This otherworldly but ultimately entrancing sound has been described by their friends as "opera cult". "I don't know why," jokes Barker. "If you keep bringing people in, everybody's dressed the same, somebody's making us all things to wear, and we're all singing together. I guess that comes across."

Barker, who grew up on a farm in Maine and studied classical vocals before moving to Los Angeles in 2011, began working on the songs for Holy Sun Opera House as a solo project in 2022. She developed the vocal lines while using a loop pedal to fill out her performance, and created her own drum set-up so she could play standing up and still maintain breath control to sing opera. Once she realised that her songs could evolve into something else, but she'd reached the limit for what she could do live since she was "completely out of limbs", she called in Salo.

Salo is a Midwest raised pianist and classical composer who spent 20 years in Seattle playing in post-rock and instrumental bands, including Joy Wants Eternity and A Story Of Rats, before he moved to Los Angeles in 2020. Inspired by Philip Glass and John Cage, Salo took what he described as "a natural path" in his compositions. "Krissy would send me these recordings, because generally she's writing them in the practice space by herself," he explains. "Then we would work from there and slowly build it up, trying to build the song as her vision of the dream."

Although Barker and Salo are the core members of the group, they employ a rotating cast of singers to record and perform live with. As Barker jokes, "once you bring in one person, why not bring in seven more." The joy they felt singing together took Barker back to her childhood, when for a period, in what she describes as an act of rebellion against her parents, she joined a Baptist church and began singing in a choir.

Though she left the church at 15, she realised she missed the communal nature of singing together. "After being away from those kinds of spaces it is really nice to be able to bring people together," she declares, "just to sing together and to sing songs that don't have that kind of meaning, but have a meaning to us in different ways."

Although not religious in nature, the album is searching in its explorations of self. In the slow build of "Latched On", over a warbling, high-pitched synth, Barker sings of the concept of the compulsive psyche as a physical entity that has literally latched onto her, making her obsessively overthink everything, draining her of energy. Across the album, melodies and vocal lines re-emerge and dissipate constantly to evoke a dream state.

That dream state is reflected in the track listing, which guides you down one route, but as Salo explains, it could have taken a number of paths to reach its conclusion. "There was something about it where it felt more natural so we swapped side A and side B," says Salo. "That's why 'Passage II' is on side A and 'Passage I' is on side B. You never know in a dream. Dreams have no rules."

Confronting her own mind could have been terrifying for Barker, if it hadn't lead to revelation. "One night, I had the same dream about the attic three times in a row," she reveals. She kept waking up in fear and falling asleep to find herself in the same place. "A lot of it was scary, and then one night it just shifted. I took that as, I'm braver now." ● *Holy Sun Opera House's The Holy Sun Opera House is released this month by Hologram Opera*