

Dan Blakeslee's creepy alter ego gets set to haunt Salem

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Thu Oct 16, 2008, 09:19 PM EDT



Dan Blakeslee, also known as Doctor Gasp, performs the role of the Sunken Sailor in his annual Halloween show in Salem.

Salem -

Yup, he's got a problem.

He knows it and admits it — and that, of course, is the first step in the recovery process. If there were going to be a recovery process. Which there isn't. Not one step, let alone a dozen.

He's not going to do anything about this strange obsession of his because, well, it's a harmless. So far.

He may not have bats in his belfry, but this much is clear: Dan Blakeslee loses his head every year around this time. He starts calling himself Doctor Gasp — and, more worrisome, spells it with three exclamation points!!!

The former Newburyport-based singer-songwriter, who moved to Greater Boston earlier this year, is a Halloween freak. Has been for years, ever since he was a kid in South Berwick, Maine, living near Witchtrot Road, where nearly 400 years ago Rev. Stephen Burroughs supposedly scared the sanctimony out of emissaries of the Salem witch terror, who had come to collect him. It was probably good fun, unleashing all those flying horses and so on, but things didn't turn out that well for him.

So, the question becomes this: Is this good, goofy fun or is it time for an intervention?

Blakeslee, also a visual artist who may be as well known for his posters as his music, is late for the interview/evaluation. Not a good sign at all. But he does call. The glitch with the directions is cleared up and 10 minutes later he shows up: Wearing a mask and a piratey-looking bandanna, driving a Jetta hatchback that is buried deep in pumpkins and props.

This, apparently, is not all that unusual for Blakeslee/Gasp!!! — who, it should be noted, cannot provide any documentary evidence of advanced degrees. In fact, just last week, he turned up in Halloween drag — for an RADIO interview (!!!) in Burlington, Vermont.

After a brief negotiation about how many plastic pumpkins he could bring with him (only one) the interview began.

This obsession with Halloween, he admits, is with him day and night. Not long ago, while he was still in the midst of nailing down the details for Gasp!!!’s 2008 tour, which pulls into Salem’s Gulu-Gulu Cafe on Saturday, the songwriter woke up in the middle of the night with “great idea” for his alter ego’s 2009 tour: The performances, if plotted on a map, would show the face of a jack-o-lantern — something no one would see, much like his costume during the for-radio interview, or fully appreciate — at least not in the way he does.

But, instead of scribbling a note to himself and going back to sleep, he dragged himself out of bed at 4:30 a.m. and started mapping a possible tour route — estimating that it would take about 25 dates to fully realize the pumpkin face tour map.

A little over the top?

Maybe. But “I can’t help it,” he explains. “I’m into it. I just love Halloween.”

And, yes, junior psychologists, the musician does make a distinction between Gasp!!! and Blakeslee shows.

“The songs don’t mix at all,” he says. “When I do the Halloween songs, I feel like a totally different person.”

Hmmm ... But it makes sense. He doesn’t want people calling out requests for “Wax Museum” or “The Pumpkin Thief,” two turns from “Halloween Special,” during his “normal” shows in, say, spring or summer.

Or does he?

Actually, he’s thinking about expanding the ghoulish season, putting on “spring-ollween” and “summer-ollween” shows in the future.

Hmmmmmm ...

Let the spooking begin

It all started in 2001.

Blakeslee, who studied art at the Maryland Institute College of Art, but became a fixture on the North Shore and Seacoast music scenes, had a gig at the Press Room in Portsmouth, N.H. It was a few weeks before his favorite time of year, so Blakeslee decided it would be cool to write an original Halloween tune for the show — you know, to get people into the holiday spirit.

Actually the whole thing is documented in the song “Chase, Murray, Walker and the Whites ... Faroquar,” on “Halloween Special” album: “In the microphone, shrieks and moans were captured and the whip in my hand let out a some cracks and bats took the sounds to California....”

Actually, come to think of it, the song may not be the most accurate representation of the events in question.

Blakeslee did perform his own Halloween song — “Witchtrot Road” which, although it captured the spirit of the season and immortalized, however negatively, a fascinatingly creepy part of his hometown. It was, he believes, “the worst song I had ever written.” He said as much from the stage.

But someone in the audience, perhaps with a little too much of the holiday spirit in him, said he wanted to record it. And he did. And after the bats brought the sounds to California, or however they carried out those details, a four-song EP on Spider Bite Records — pressed on orange vinyl, natch — arrived in the mail.

In addition to the Blakeslee original (“Witchtrot Road”) the album included covers of “The Monster Mash” and “The Headless Horseman,” which provides the inspiration for Gasp!!!’s vocal style — somewhere between Bing Crosby and Thurl Ravenscroft, the baritone who sang the Grinch song.

“I try to capture that low voice, but I can’t. I’m definitely digging,” says Blakeslee, who released “Lincoln Street Roughs,” his first new album in nine years in 2007 on Peapod Records.

“Halloween Special,” a full-length compact disc, followed two Halloweens later — as did a fairly frantic touring schedule. For example, in 2003, Gasp!!! did 33 shows in 31 days. This included a one-day blitz that brought him from Providence to Portsmouth to Portland in just one day. Which left him feeling, well, “like a zombie,” he says. Now he limits himself to no more than 20 Halloween shows in a season. Unless he’s trying to “draw” a jack-o-lantern.

The current tour is much more manageable. There’s only eight on his schedule right now, and none in Newburyport, where he is currently recording a new collection of Halloween songs.

As far as atmosphere goes, the Gulu-Gulu is the “perfect place” for a show.

“It has an old Europe cafe vibe — and the fact that it’s in Salem makes it even better. Everyone comes dressed in costumes. I love the whole setup. People really listen.”

The current tour includes a TBA in Sleepy Hollow, N.Y. — home of Washington Irving’s Headless Horseman and a community that has “the strangest graveyard you’ll ever see,” he says. “It winds up a hill and is kind of a maze. I can never figure out how to get out. Of course, I always go there just before it gets dark. Why do I do that?”

Hmmm, why indeed? Perhaps more evaluation is needed before we address the need for an intervention.

Doctor Gasp!!! will perform his ghoulish holiday show at 8 p.m. Oct. 18 at Gulu-Gulu Cafe, 247 Essex St., Salem. Orange Nichole opens. For information, call 978-740-8882, or log onto myspace.com/danblakesleehalloween.

