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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH “PENA HUGHES-JOHN/PENA & LETHIA’S NATORIUM”

July 13, 2022



PENA HUGHES-JOHN started writing songs when she was just 8 years old. During various times in her life, she dabbled in music. Music has always been her “safe solitude,” her “security blanket” through all of life’s ups and downs.

She does various musical collaborations in addition to her own solo work. Check out the exclusive interview below:

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THE INDEPENDENT MUSIC MAGAZINE

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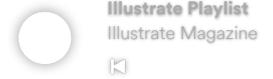
1. Can you tell us a bit about how it all got started?

PENA & LETHIA'S NATORIUM: Hi Pena here! 'Lethia's Natorium' is a music project created by myself, Pena, vocalist and singer/songwriter. Prior to 'Lethia's Natorium', I had created various music projects, my music genres varying depending on the projects I was working on and throughout the years, I was still trying to find my music identity. There was my solo work, which was a mixture of ballads, songs accompanied by a Ukulele (which I play), as well as light rock.

On the other end of the scale was a project called : 'The Angry Ukulele Lady' which was a studio project that incorporated myself playing the Ukulele accompanied by a backdrop of layered vocals with a rock/punk edge. I thoroughly enjoyed 'the Angry Ukulele Lady' project for my image was shrouded in mystery (no photos of myself, just an image of someone's back carrying a Ukulele). It allowed me the freedom to express myself vocally without the constraints of being 'pigeonholed' and being 'expected' to look and perform a certain way. Out of all my previous projects, prior to 'Lethia's Natorium', 'The Angry Ukulele Lady' was my favourite music project.

Those who knew me wanted me to go out 'on the road', to do performances as 'The Angry Ukulele Lady' but I declined as I wanted to keep this as a studio project and revealing the identity of 'The Angry Ukulele Lady' would spoil the mystery behind 'The Angry Ukulele Lady' persona. Another reason was because I was nervous of the public perception in terms of the music style.

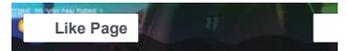
In late Summer 2021, I began writing songs for (what would soon be 'Lethia's Natorium') and found that whilst writing, the style was very similar to 'The Angry Ukulele Lady', so in many ways, 'Lethia's Natorium' is the successor to 'The Angry Ukulele Lady'. The only difference between the two is there are more guitars and hardly any Ukulele in the songs. I felt that I have found my music identity and that being : 'Lethia's Natorium'.



- 1 Bored
Laken Lambson
- 2 Pressure
Splash Downey
- 3 Chlorine Dreams
Tim Lea Young
- 4 Caramel
Dreaming Soda
- 5 Shore
waverley.
- 6 Moonrays
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works for me. There is a small close nucleus of musicians I work with during the recording process and another set of musicians for the gigs and events. 'Lethia's Natorium' is still a relatively young project and with the first gig being The Bedford River Festival on the 23rd July. Although all the musicians performing under 'Lethia's Natorium' have performed with other bands and music projects, this Festival will mark the start of bringing 'Lethia's Natorium' out on the road with a view to performing many more gigs and Festivals in the future as well new music by 'Lethia's Natorium'.

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2. Did you have any formal training or are you self-taught?

PENA & LETHIA'S NATORIUM: No training as such. Self-taught. Can't speak for the rest of the band though.

3. Who were your first and strongest musical influences and why the name 'PENA & LETHIA'S NATORIUM'?

PENA & LETHIA'S NATORIUM: During my teenage years, I used to listen to a lot of music by Siouxsie & the Banshees, Blondie, Kate Bush and Toyah. I held high admiration for these artists due to them being strong women who were not afraid of pushing the boundaries in terms of what they wanted to say and their music direction. During my late teens I became a Goth and as such used to drive my neighbours crazy playing Siouxsie and the Banshees and Toyah albums. I loved the energy of these two women, the rebelliousness and I felt that this resonated strongly with me.

Sometimes I put the name : 'Pena & Lethia's Natorium' and other times I just shorten it to 'Lethia's Natorium'. The reason for the latter is to separate this from my other projects (which are a different music genre). 'Lethia's Natorium' is really outlining that this a project involving a band and not just a solo artist.

'Lethia' in Gothic terms translates as : "Sweet Oblivion". 'Natorium' is a deliberately misspelt version of the word : 'Natorium'.

4. What do you feel are the key elements in your music that should resonate with listeners, and how would you personally describe your sound?

PENA & LETHIA'S NATORIUM: Whereas my solo work ('Pena Hughes-John') is the day, 'Lethia's Natorium' is the night. 'Lethia's Natorium' is Progressive Symphonic Goth Punk Rock.



6. What's your view on the role and function of music as political, cultural, spiritual, and/or social vehicles – and do you try and affront any of these themes in your work, or are you purely interested in music as an expression of technical artistry, personal narrative and entertainment?

PENA & LETHIA'S NATORIUM:

From a personal perspective, music can cover all of these topics. I write in two different ways. The political/social side which I allocate to 'The Angry Ukulele Lady' and now, 'Lethia's Natorium'. Forthcoming songs for 'Lethia's Natorium' include politician behaviour towards the public, fairground rides, hayfever and climate change. My solo work mainly involves personal narrative (relationships and songs about past 'ghosts'), pretty 'oh woe is me' kind of songwriting. The variation of the two types of songwriting gives me more of a challenge.

7. Do you feel that your music is giving you back just as much fulfilment as the amount of work you are putting into it, or are you expecting something more, or different in the future?

PENA & LETHIA'S NATORIUM:

In the past I would have said : 'No' but that was down to me not knowing how to progress with my music. In the past, I'd make the classic mistake that many artists made, which was to release a song, badger everyone to download/buy it and wait in the hope that some record label or manager somewhere would sign me up. Today's music business does not work that way and it took me many years to work it out. It's a business with the creative process only forming part of it. Having adapted a different approach, I am starting to notice the fruits of my hard work starting to come into fruition. I do feel positive about the future but mindful that it will not be easy to get to where I want to be on my music but believe in time that I will eventually achieve it.

5. For most artists, originality is first preceded by a phase of learning and, often, emulating others. What was this like for you? How would you describe your own development as an artist and music maker, and the transition towards your own style, which is known as ROCK?

PENA & LETHIA'S NATORIUM: Back in my late teens, I used to go to one of these group singing lessons in South London. What I found disheartening was this 'one size fits all' type of teaching where we were given music (for homework) in order to 'try and sound like' artists such as Whitney Houston,

want to sound like anyone but to be myself but unfortunately the music business has this idea that because you have a certain appearance that you are expected to be pigeon-holed because of it.

During the years, I had dipped my toe in and out of music, mainly because 'life' had got in the way of things. After a breakup from a long-term relationship, I returned to music in 2016 and even then, I still was not sure which music direction I wanted to follow. 2017, I picked up the Ukulele, mainly because I wanted something that was easier to learn than the guitar. I then began performing at Open Mics, mainly performing heartbreak songs and ballads. From the Open Mics, I gradually went into the Steampunk scene, performing at some of the Steampunk events in and around London and the Surrey areas. A few single releases followed under 'Pena' and 'Alutepeña Hughes-John (my full name)' with an album titled : 'Ghosts of My Past' which was released in January 2021.

Other music projects were also being recorded including : 'Heartfelt Dreamland' (which was a collection of music following the Phil Spector's 'Wall of Sound' but with a modern day twist) as well as 'The Angry Ukulele Lady'. Whilst creating these other music projects, I was still trying to find my 'own' sound as the feedback I was getting was getting my music and songs were too diverse and could confuse a lot of people as to where I am heading on the music side of things. Despite my other projects, I still found myself returning to punk rock and this I feel is my calling in terms of my music development as an artist. You could say that my music has gone full circle from listening to (and inspired by) punk rock and gothic music of my teens to the music I am creating for Lethia's Natorium.

tune, a beat, or a narrative in your head? And do you collaborate with others in this process?

PENA & LETHIA'S NATORIUM:

When I first began writing songs, it used to be the lyrics followed by the music but the past couple of years, I found myself having a rough idea of the tune, with the lyrics written around it. For Lethia's Natorium, the songwriting process went as follows:-

I would record a rough chord sequence playing my Ukulele onto an audio recorder. From this early stage, I have a vague idea as to what the song is about and the majority of the time, the title that I give the song sketch becomes the final title of the song. Once the lyrics are written, I do a home recording with my guide vocals and Ukulele chords against a very basic drum track. Once these are recorded, I forward the song over to Josh of JGE Studios in Dorset who adds the bass and guitar parts, using my Ukulele chords as a guide. Fortunately, Josh knows where I'm coming from in the creative process as the mood of a particular song.

With Josh's guitar and bass parts added to the track, I remove the Ukulele chords and take the rest of the music over to Max at the Lodge Recording Studio in Northampton. This is the studio where the song will complete its production. I re-record my vocals as well as any additional instrumentation (keyboards for instance) added to the song.

Sometimes a song may require strings and this is when I send the instrumental of the song over to Peter, a violinist/viola player who is based overseas. I have worked with him on a past album for my solo work and was very pleased by the emotional way he plays the individual strings, so had no hesitation in involving him with Lethia's Natorium's creative process. Once I receive his individual strings back, these are then taken to The Lodge to be incorporated within the song.

Before the song goes through the final mix, the drum loops are replaced by real drums which are played by Karl at the studio. After the drums are recorded, the song goes through final mix down, ready for release and/or its inclusion onto the debut album (which is due to be released later on this year).

9. What has been the most difficult thing you've had to endure in your life or music career so far?

PENA & LETHIA'S NATORIUM:

The most difficult thing for me is 'money'. I'm of the opinion that the deeper your pockets, the more success you'll achieve from your music. Whereas in the past the record labels would have financed all these different factors behind an artist, these days those of us who are unsigned have to finance these ourselves. In addition to the recording, you have to finance the marketing and promotion, merchandising as well as working with PR Companies which again, is more money. I know of a few musicians who are seriously considering giving up on their music journey. This is even more so when influential people in the business are more interested in the number of 'Likes' and 'Follows' than the actual quality of the song or hard work of the musician behind the work.

10. On the contrary, what would you consider a successful, proud or significant point in your life or music career so far?

PENA & LETHIA'S NATORIUM:

My proudest moment that based on just two releases so far, interest in 'Lethia's Natorium' is growing. This gives me a good feeling that starting and 'Lethia's Natorium' and the music under this project is my calling as an artist.



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