
APOCALYPSE LATER
HORNS ABLAZE #1

APOCALYPSE LATER

ZINE
ISSUE #1

"The way you describe the record seems to know us personally!"
— Corona Nimbus, Brazil

"We all are really glad to read a so beautiful review that analyze each part of the music we compose in our first album."
— Blue Merrow, Spain

"Very detailed and written from a literate musical perspective"
— Hyperia, Canada

"Thank you so much for your wonderful review of our album. There's so much accuracy in here and we could've never said it better."
— Alpha Q, Romania

APOCALYPSE LATER BOOKS
BY HAL C. F. ASTELL

FILM

Huh? An A-Z of Why Classic American Bad Movies Were Made
Velvet Glove Cast in Iron: The Films of Tura Satana
Charlie Chaplin Centennial: Keystone
The International Horror & Sci-Fi Film Festival: The Transition Years
A Hundred in 2016
The Awesomely Awful '80s, Part 2
A Horror Movie Calendar

ZINES

Horns Ablaze #1

APOCALYPSE LATER ZINE #1

HORNS ABLAZE #1

MUSIC REVIEWS FROM
JULY-SEPTEMBER 2022

NEW INTERVIEWS

APOCALYPSE LATER

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Horns Ablaze Zine
https://hornsablaze.com

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Apocalypse Later Zine, which has borne the label of "coming soon" for far too long and is finally, fingers crossed, here and will stay here on out.

It's going to be a varied affair that covers the breadth of my cultural interests, primarily the films, music and books that I review at Apocalypse Later, but with some potential side trips too.

This is a *Horns Ablaze* issue, which means music. It's built on the rock/metal album reviews that I write at Apocalypse Later Music (**apocalypselatermusic.com**), with each quarterly issue collating the previous three months worth of online reviews. It also includes additional interviews that aren't posted online. Thank you to all the bands who put up with my questions!

A month after each *Horns Ablaze* will be *The Library of Halexandria*, a quarterly zine focused on books. These will be built on book reviews I write for the Nameless Zine (**thenamelesszine.org**). However, rather than simply collating my most recent reviews like in *Horns Ablaze*, they'll be themed issues focused on particular authors, series, genres or whatever else happens to spring to mind, including the runthroughs I've been doing that have a very specific focus.

The third zine in a quarter will cover film, my original subject at Apocalypse Later. At present, I'm aiming to cover *The First Thirty* films in certain careers for some of the four issues each year, with the fourth and last being a retrospective of the films released a hundred years earlier. There may be some other issues thrown in there too, such as the first of them, which will cover *Cultural References in Blazing Saddles*.

I may well throw in a wildcard issue every once in a while to cover something else. Some of these might be personal, covering who I am and where I came from, but some might tie to one of the niches in which I hang out: perhaps an Arizona Fandom (**azfandom.org**) issue here and there.

The overarching plan is for the zine to bring a lot of my online writing into print as well as providing me with a venue to write about things that I have nowhere to write about at present. Let's see how it all works (or not). I'll tweak if I need to. Nothing's set absolutely in stone.

Originally, I was aiming at a larger size for *Horns Ablaze*, as issue zero (which is a free download at hornsablaze.com) demonstrated, but I've decided to go with a published book approach with a slightly larger trade paperback template size to my books and a shift of the main text into two columns. That should give me plenty of flexibility with imagery.

I'm also going with colour. This does up the cost, but these aren't going to be huge volumes, so hopefully the price tag isn't unreasonable. I'm aiming for at least 100 pages with each issue, so that I can get a viable spine with text on it, but of a smaller thickness than my regular books. And those will still continue.

Also, like my books, these zines will be available for free download under a Creative Commons

license. Please share these PDFs wherever you want. Obscurity is the enemy.

I hope you enjoy. Constructive feedback is always good, positive or negative. I'm accessible at hal@apocalypselaterempire.com.

Specific to *Horns Ablaze* issues, please check out the bands that I'm covering. Everything that I review (unless I've given it one of my rare ratings under 6) is a release I believe is worth your attention. The higher the rating, the more essential I consider that album. 9s are the best of the best for me. 8s make my annual Highly Recommended Lists, which I archive for posterity at the Horns Ablaze (**hornsablaze.com**) website. See my Ratings page (p157) for more on my system.

Especially check out the indie bands that catch your attention! Bands like Uluru, Blue Merrow and Shadow Weaver (or, in this issue, Children of the Sün) aren't likely to cross your paths unless someone tells you about them. Right now, that someone is me and you're welcome. Check them out on YouTube or Spotify or wherever and they may just blow you away too. Buy their albums. If they're playing near you, go see them live. Many of the indie bands are on Bandcamp, which is a wonderful place to explore and support. Plenty of the best bands I review are there.

Also, I deliberately aim for variety in my coverage, both across the rock and metal spectrum and around the globe. This set is a little less varied than usual because it's been a tough year and I had a lot of catch-up to do, so I had a transatlantic week at Apocalypse Later Music where I took a look at an album from a British band and an American band each day. That sort of thing happens, but not that often. You'll usually see more South American and continental European reviews than in this issue. Check out Apocalypse Later Music (**apocalypselatermusic.com**) to get a grand view of my music coverage.

One last thing. I do a lot at Apocalypse Later, including publishing books through Apocalypse Later Press. It would make my day if you bought one of them, from Amazon or anywhere else. At this point, the most recent is *A Horror Movie Calendar*, all about horror movies set on holidays.

I also run an annual genre film festival in downtown Phoenix called the Apocalypse Later International Fantastic Film Festival (**alfilmfest.com**), and a science fiction/fantasy convention in Tempe called CoKoCon (**cokocon.org**). If you're in the area, I'd love to see you at either or both.

And I curate and present sets of international short films at conventions across the southwest. Nowadays, that generally means steampunk sets at Wild Wild West Steampunk Convention (**wildwestcon.com**) in Tucson and Gaslight Steampunk Expo (**gaslightexpo.org**) in San Diego, plus a science fiction/fantasy set at CoKoCon, but I'm always open to doing others. It would be great to see you at any of these, especially if you're there to check out the rest of those cons.

For more details, check out the About pages (p158-9) and the various images at the other end of this zine.

Thanks for being here. I hope you enjoy the ride!

— Hal C. F. Astell

RAISED ON ROCK



I highly recommend Chris Franklin's *Raised on Rock* radio show, which happens every other Friday on 10Radio 105.3FM.

It's broadcast out of Wiveliscombe in Somerset, in the southwest of the UK. If you're not within signal range, it's also an online stream at **10radio.org**.

I was honoured to be Chris's guest in the studio for an edition of *Raised on Rock* on Friday, 22nd April, 2022. I chose all the music and we chatted about current music, as well as Tommy Vance's *Friday Rock Show*, which was such an important event to us both.

You can hear this episode here:

https://www.mixcloud.com/christopherfranklin169/raised-on-rock-edition-121-friday-22nd-april-2022-featuring-special-guest-hal-cf-astell/

BANDS PLAYED:

Zaria
Demon
Dio
Blue Merrow
Marillion
Motorpsycho
Kiss
Scorched Earth
Amarok
Iron Maiden
Steve Marriott & The Packet of Three
ZZ Top
Starz
Uli Jon Roth & Electric Sun
D-A-D
Battalion of Saints
Shamblemaths



MATHRAS (ARGENTINA)

INTERVIEW WITH GUSTAVO RUBEN



AL: For those new to your music, who's in the band and how did you get together?

GR: Mathras is Sergio Marti (drums), Fernando Barreriro (bass), Charly Coria (vocals) and me (guitars).

The band was formed in 2008, with Sergio who I know from my other band, Montreal. In 1999 we recorded the first Montreal album together. In 2002 he left the group for personal reasons but at the end of 2007 we met again. We started jamming and, after a couple of rehearsals, I called Fernando. When we least expected it, we were already working on the first album.

The group has released three albums to date: *Mathras* (2009), *Alquimia* (2015) and *Sociedades Secretas* (2019). All edited by the Metal Sin Records label and distributed by Icarus Music.

The first album called *Mathras*. We recorded the album at Axel Sierra Bas's KSB Digital Studio, and the vibe to work together was very good, in addition to capturing the musical idea of the band. We entered the studio of one and it came out powerful and raw. It marked the moment of the band. Songs like *La Verdad Oculta* or *Mentes Del Pasado* mark where we were compositionally on that debut album. In addition, the CD had a very good acceptance in the media.

For *Alquimia*, the way in which work was done was totally different from the first one. It is a dark album, heavy but with a lot of dynamics. We took a long time to do pre-production and it showed in the final result. To compose *Alquimia*, we started by making some demos, looking for the songs to sound raw and strong, and then see some details and make arrangements, and when we had the idea closed we went to record with Ariel Varas on vocals.



First it was the turn of the drums in the Oseberg Ship, then the guitars, basses and some keyboards in Black Cane Records and finally the voices.

Mixing and mastering was done by Digital KSB in Barcelona, Spain. So much versatility and change of studies was also a bit due to the trust that one places in the people with whom one has already been working. For example, we did the production and other arrangements with Gerardo Abbenante and Axel Sierra Bas, with whom we already worked on the first Mathras album and with whom I have been working since the last Montreal albums. This all took us longer than expected, but we have no regrets as we achieved the sound we had in mind.

Alquimia was the album that placed us in a good place within the Argentine heavy scene and opened the doors for us to commercially reach various countries in this world where globalization sometimes complicates instead of helping. Songs like *Ars Chimica*, *Mi Ley* or *En Lo Profundo* are good examples of the band's sound. As well as the cover of *El Viejo* by Pappo's Blues, musically passed through the Mathras sieve, that is already a classic in the group's repertoire.



We started with the pre-production of *Sociedades Secretas* with the bar held high by our previous CD. The way of working was the same as with Alquimia but with much clearer and more fluid ideas, and with the logical maturation of the band in these years. Everything went naturally and in the time that we

wanted to give it so that the recording turned out as we wanted, *Tras Tus Pasos* was one of the first songs we composed and we immediately noticed that the magic when composing was intact, which allowed us to the process will flow and be easier.

We worked on a lot of songs in the studio but we also used material that for one reason or another has been around for all these years. *Hermandad*, for example; the musical part came from a base that we had with Sergio in the old days of Montreal and, when we started the pre-production of *Sociedades Secretas*, we jammed it and we didn't even doubt it: now the song was ready. *Ritual* dates from the first rehearsals we did with Fernando and Sergio. When composing, the band's style comes naturally, that cross between traditional heavy metal with hard rock, which is where we feel most comfortable, largely due to our musical influences. Beyond achieving a modern sound, we are very proud that we are an old school band.



AL: What are your key musical influences? Who did you all listen to growing up?

GR: We have many influences. Personally my leading bands are Van Halen, Rush, Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin. The boys in general are big fans of Iron Maiden, Dio, Saxon and Judas Priest. There are also many Argentine hard rock bands from the '70s and '80s like Pappo's Blues, Pescado Rabioso, Billy Bond y la Pesada del Rock and Roll, Riff...

And as for guitarists, Eddie Van Halen, Tony Iommi, Randy Rhoads and Michael Schenker or, in another style, Jeff Beck and Pat Metheny.

AL: You've been around since 2008. Does that make you elder statesmen of Argentine metal?

GR: Not at all, the hard rock and heavy metal scene, as I was saying before, started many years ago and has many pillar bands of the genre, we are happy to be part of it.

AL: You have a very '80s sound. Have you ever felt an urge to dip into more modern sounds?

GR: Honestly I'm not looking for a certain sound or copy, I express my feelings as they come out and it's more than sure that the influences are there, but I try to give it my sense. There are no formulas to make riffs or a song, everything comes from the soul and the heart...

AL: For those who don't speak Spanish, what topics do you cover in your lyrics?

GR: Both *Alquimia* and *Sociedades Secretas* are concept albums unlike the first one.

In *Sociedades Secretas*, as the title says, all the words revolve around secret societies, with all the conspiracy you can imagine involved. We also tried to give them various meanings to make them more open. *Hermandad* is the perfect song to discover the theme of the album. Even so, take it in such a way that it has many interpretations. That is why each topic has its own message from the individual point of view. We do not put ourselves directly on the side of lowering a specific political or social line beyond the fact that we can have a certain position. To give you more examples, *Futuro* talks about not letting up despite all the bad things, defending the opportunities that remain for those who come, focused mainly on the children. All the members of the band are parents, with the typical concern of forging a future for those who will follow us...

In *Después de Marzo*, we talk about the Malvinas War, but from the general perspective of the album, with all the hidden interests that led to the burning of an entire generation and that today is not understood or valued by many. As well as the cover that we chose for this album, *La Maldita Máquina de Matar*, composed by Alejandro Medina and Rubén de León, originally recorded by Billy Bond y La Pesada del Rock and Roll, which closed both musically and lyrically the theme of the album.

In addition, we also always attach great importance to cover art. *Sociedades Secretas* came from an idea between Guillermo González and me, to which cartoonist Aldo Requena later added all his



artistic magic. It's a fantastic cover with a lot of occult symbology that fits perfectly with the music and theme of the album. We have been working with Aldo since the days of *Alquimia*.

In the band we are all fans of special editions and "deluxe" versions. With each one of the albums we try to give something more than music and for those who like to buy the physical format we published *Sociedades Secretas* in three versions: CD/Poster, CD in Slip Case/Poster and the Special Edition Box with CD /T-shirt/Pick/2 Posters.

AL: How's the new album coming along? I hear you changed vocalist again?

GR: Charly Coria is now the band's vocalist. Charly comes with a great career behind him and his voice is perfect for our music. We have already released the advance single of our next album called *El Poder de la Mentira* and it can be heard on all digital platforms. The video for the song will be released shortly, while we finish recording the album.



AL: You've supported Saxon, Raven and Virgin Steele. What's your most memorable gig?

GR: Personally, the dates with Saxon, like our participation in several of the Metal para Todos festivals, one of the most important produced in Argentina.

With the people of Saxon, we were lucky to be able to play and share a few drinks and a chat about music and life in general. We played with them twice when they came to Argentina and it was a dream come true as for everyone in the band... Both times were at the Teatro de Flores and being able to have a moment to chat quietly with them are things that I don't know forget. And also other special shows were Virgin Steele, Rage, Hirax, Raven, Doogie White. They are those dates that remain in your memory...

AL: What are your favorite albums of the past five years, not including your own?

GR: I really liked the latest works by Testament, Judas Priest, Sons of Apollo and Saxon. I like the new Extreme songs, much lighter but with that rock spirit that is not seen so much in the mainstream.

AL: What are the rock/metal scenes like in Buenos Aires and Argentina in general?

GR: There are many Argentine bands, already classic: V8, Hermetica, Rata Blanca, Kamikaze, A.N.I.M.A.L. Many of them are no longer active but their legacy remains, as well as many new

ones to listen to. I would give them the advice they are looking for because there is everything within the heavy metal styles in Argentina...

AL: Name one other band not from Argentina that people should absolutely check out?

GR: There are many good bands all over the world, just open your head and let yourself go... Rock on!

Official Website:	**mathras.com.ar**
Facebook:	**facebook.com/MATHRAS-340835439527/**
Instagram:	**instagram.com/mathras.prensa/**
YouTube:	**youtube.com/channel/UCzkP-4LuJYFjm4JDCe1R7xA**



FERNANDO BARREIRO | CHARLY CORIA | GUSTAVO RUBEN | SERGIO MARTI

MATHRAS

METAL SIN RECORDS

COMPASSIONIZER (RUSSIA)

INTERVIEW WITH IVAN ROZMAINSKY



AL: For those new to your music, who's in the band and how did you get together?

IR: Compassionizer is the musical project created in 2020 by me, Ivan Rozmainsky, founder, keyboard player and main composer of the avant/sympho-prog-rock-band Roz Vitalis (existed since 2001). Other "staff" members of Compassionizer are Serghei Liubcenco (guitars, bass, drums, rubab, doira and other percussion, since 2020), Leonid Perevalov (bass clarinet, since 2020), AndRey Stefinoff (clarinet, since 2021), and also Bayun the Cat (tbilat, synth bass, kalimba, 2021-2022).

I would like to mention also two important men: Vyacheslav 'VP' Potapov, author of front covers for all full-length Compassionizer albums—and Anatoly Nikulin who was responsible for mixing and mastering of all these releases. Furthermore, I am very thankful to all guest musicians contributed to Compassionizer's stuff in different years.

Since the moment of founding Compassionizer was considered as the project based on distant interactions of musicians via Internet. No rehearsals, no gigs. Only (home) studio creativity! These "principles" were a reaction to the covid-based constraints: in those times—2020—concert activity and other forms of offline activities seemed impossible for a long period of time. I would

like to add: I live in Saint Petersburg as well as Leonid Perevalov (and AndRey Stefinoff—in Sertolovo, 30 minutes by bus from Saint Petersburg), while Serghei Liubcenco, my essential colleague, lives in Hamburg. Distant relationships matter in such situation!

Furthermore, the style of Compassionizer's music is Melodic Atmospheric World Avant Music. It tries to combine memorable/ear-catchy tunes, meditativeness, elements of ethnic music with complex arrangements, unpredictable development of musical lines, polyphony, and odd time signatures. The essential goal of Compassionizer is to contribute to the development of such human qualities as sympathy, empathy and compassion.

AL: What are your key musical influences? Who did you all listen to growing up?



IR: First of all, the British and Italian prog rock of the 1970s: King Crimson, Yes, Gentle Giant, Jethro Tull, ELP, Le Orme, Banco del Mutuo Soccorso, Premiata Forneria Marconi, Cervello, Museo Rosenbach, etc.

And much other music: from J. S. Bach to After Crying, from S. Rachmaninov to The Flower Kings, from Depeche Mode to My Dying Bride, from Dead Can Dance to Anglagard, from Supersister to Steven Wilson, from Pulsar to Univers Zero, from Miriodor to Trans-atlantic, etc.

AL: So many prog bands sound like prog. You sound like you. Is that natural or deliberate?

IR: It is both natural and deliberate. On the one hand, I have no real Hammond or Mellotron, but possess synths providing "cosmic", "atmospheric" sounds that are not always typical for prog. On the other hand, I deliberately refused—in the "framework" of Compassionizer—a "rockish" rhythm section. Due to these reasons and because of some other ones, Compassionizer's sound is unique.

AL: You build prog out of instruments like clarinet and harpsichord. What's your favourite to play?

IR: I am not able to play clarinet (in Compassionizer its sound is provided by AndRey Stefinoff). My favorites are various grand pianos and harpsichords but such stuff is not available at home, only in professional studios or some clubs. The most frequent used instruments are Roland Juno D and Korg Micro X, and—utilized not for Compassionizer, but for other projects—Roland EP 09.



AL: How wide is your audience? I imagine you reach further than just die hard prog fans?

IR: Yes! Any person with open heart and open mind is able to love music created by Compassionizer! This music is beyond prog!

AL: You play with rhythms like Philip Glass. How do you make technical music sound so emotional?

IR: Playing with rhythms and any other "sophisticated devices" should emphasize emotional sphere. Otherwise, it can be useless. I try to take it into account.

AL: Between Roz Vitalis and Compassionizer, you're prolific. Where should a new listener start?

IR: If new listener is a die hard fan of the prog rock of the 1970s or just lover of rock sound, Roz Vitalis, perhaps, will be more preferable. Otherwise, especially if you like atmospheric and/or unusual music, Compassionizer is better.

AL: What are your favourite albums of the past five years, not including your own?

IR: Order can be any, all these albums are excellent!

Homunculus Res – *Della Stessa Sostanza dei Sogni*
All Traps on Earth – *A Drop of Light*
Gleb Kolyadin – *Gleb Kolyadin*
Supersister Projekt 2019 – *Retsis Repus*
Karfagen – *Echoes from Within Dragon Island*
Magick Brother and Mystic Sister – *Magick Brother and Mystic Sister*
Eternal Wanderers – *Homeless Soul*
Homunculus Res – *Andiamo in Giro di Notte e ci Consumiamo nel Fuoco*
Shamblemaths – *Shamblemaths 2*
Ske – *Insolubilia*
Agusa – *En annan varld*
Transatlantic – *The Absolute Universe - Forevermore (Extended Version)*
Verbal Delirium – *Conundrum*
Fren – *All the Pretty Days*
Motorpsycho – *Ancient Astronauts*

AL: What are the prog/rock scenes like in St. Petersburg and Russia as a whole?

IR: If the scene is just a set of bands then the situation is ok. There are lot of prog-rock bands in St. Petersburg and Russia as a whole: Vespero, Eternal Wanderers, Vezhlivy Otkaz, Blednyj, Lunar Cape, Enine, Disen Gage, Quorum, to name a few.



If the scene is a system of close relationships and interactions between bands, labels, festivals, radio stations, clubs, promoters, that the situation is very far from perfect. Most bands appear, exist and fade away as isolated items.

In this context I would like to mention Babooinumfest, organized since Autumn 2016 by Saint Petersburg band OT&DO and its leader—keyboard player and composer—Sergey Gorchaninov; he is very good musician and promoter. This festival tries to promote prog, fusion and ambient music.

I played at Babooinumfest many times in the 2016-2022 period with such my bands as Roz Vitalis, Rozmainsky & Mikhaylov Project (aka RMP), Fair Wind Pleases, and also with some other artists and as a solo artist. Babooinumfest is like a ray of light in the darkness of wall of misunderstanding that prog artists/bands in Russia face...



Furthermore, after 2019 both COVID-based constraints and "special military operation" created powerful barriers to the development of this scene due to various reasons. I would like to remind that in Russia since March 2022 any explicit anti-military activity is officially prohibited, and I am not sure that latest release by Roz Vitalis—titled *Peace Live* and released in April 2023—would not harm its creators (famous artists like Aquarium and Zemfira are forced to play gigs outside Russia).

In the period of 2008-2019 I played with my most "long-lived" band—Roz Vitalis—7-12 gigs per year—not only in

Saint Petersburg, but also in other Russian towns (Moscow, Vladimir, Velikiye Luki etc.), and also in Finland (Turku, Tampere, Helsinki) and Baltic countries. Since 2020 Roz Vitalis plays only 2-3 gigs per year, and only in Saint Petersburg. Future seems very uncertain and dark...

AL: And finally, name one other band not from Russia that people should absolutely check out.
IR: Homunculus Res

Thank you very much for questions and for interest to Compassionizer!
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PURPLE AQP (PERU)

INTERVIEW WITH VICTOR CALVO



AL: For those new to your music, who's in the band? Is it still just one man playing everything?

VC: Oh yes, it's usually just me, but in *Forty Bitch*, it's my 13 year old daughter singing the female part. It was amazing to share part of my musical passion with her.

AL: What are your key musical influences? Who did you listen to growing up beyond Deep Purple?

VC: I've been listening to hard rock and heavy metal since I was thirteen, such as Metallica's *Black Album*, AC/DC's *Who Made Who* and later Led Zeppelin, Megadeth and Iron Maiden.

AL: Talking of Deep Purple, which era and which album are your personal favourite?

VC: I can talk about all DP albums, but if I might to choose one, it would be *Perfect Strangers* (1984), likely my all time favorite album.

AL: What's the concept behind *Rise and Fall of the Inca's Empire* or are they just songs playing on a theme?

VC: The first five songs are part of the cover concept, as you can see in the album's art. In chronological order, the album starts talking about Inca Pachacutec and the rise of the Inca's Empire; next it's talk about the arrival of the Spanish people and Atahualpa's murder. It goes with the story of a Inca warrior called Kawide, who fought and died defending Sacsayhuaman fortress until the imminent fall of the Inca's empire. After two centuries, appears the story of Túpac Amaru II, murdered in a brutal way but never broken. And the last of this five songs is an instrumental bass solo, where I put all my feelings about the stories above.

The other songs are just songs, they came to me in different ways.

AL: You cover lots of musical ground on this album. How important is it to be both rock and metal?

VC: For me it's so important, since I just listen to this (hard rock and heavy metal) almost all of my time. The rest of the time I like to listen to and play Peruvian folk music, with my father and my brother. We actually have a folk band called Mandolinas del Sur, with three albums. As you can see, music is in my veins and came from my family.

AL: How come you're more hard rock as a guitarist and more metal as a drummer? :)

VC: Ahahahaha, yes I do. I think, I always have admiration for Ritchie Blackmore, but in 2001 I was playing bass in a death metal band called Crimson Death. At first that was just at the call of an old friend, but later I like to play it and listen to death metal, especially the drums.

AL: Are you working on a second album? What can we expect from Purple AQP in the future?

VC: Oh yes, the second album is almost done; just a few things to do and I think it'll be finished in May or June. It's entirely based on a concept. Just one cover and nine songs, talking about the 1879 war of Peru and Chile. Of course, we lost, and my songs talk about that, not with hate, bad feelings or anger for the Chilean people, but simply to tell the story from our side.



AL: What are your favourite albums of the past five years, not including your own?

VC: No particular order:

Ghost - *Impera* (2022)

Accept - *The Rise Of Chaos* (2017)

Deep Purple - *Whoosh* (2020)

Iron Maiden - *Senjutsu* (2021)

Amon Amarth - *The Great Heathen Army* (2022)

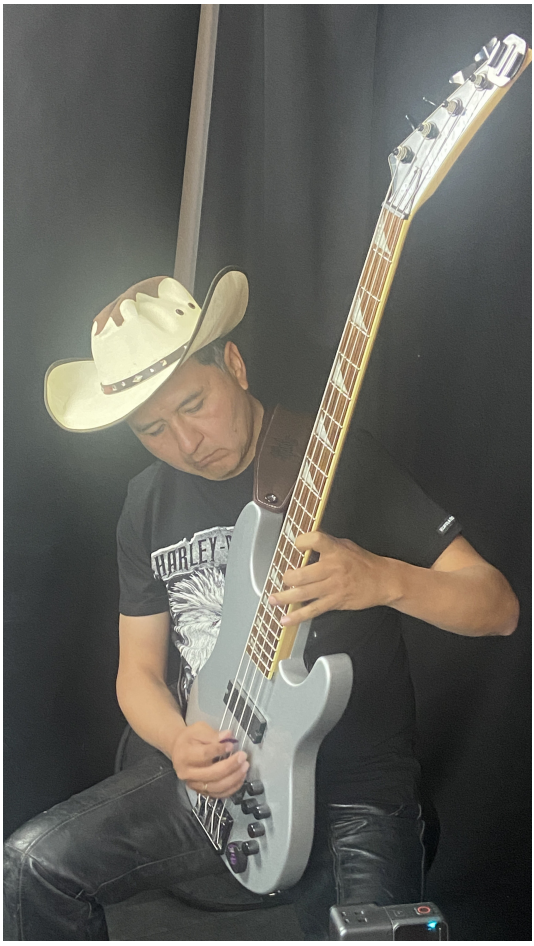
Hypocrisy - *Worship* (2021)

AL: What's the rock/metal scene like in Peru? I hear a surprising amount of great Peruvian bands.

VC: Oh yes, especially in my home town, Arequipa, there are many great metal bands, like Chaska, Fervent Hate, Crimson Death, Raptor, Legion Sacra and Mudra. You can hear them on all digital platforms.

AL: And finally, name one other band not from Peru that people should absolutely check out.

VC: Ghost, truly amazing!



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BLUE MERROW (SPAIN)

INTERVIEW WITH THE BAND



AL: For those new to your music, who's in the band and how did you get together?

BM: The musicians that are currently in the band are Alberto Cid on drums, Angel Vejo on keyboards, Diego Ruiz on bass and acoustic guitar, Angel Olañeta on electric guitar and Damián Garrido in charge of vocals and percussion.

The union of the five members of Blue Merrow was born after thinking about a project with their own songs after spending a few years doing covers of classic rock bands. Damián Garrido, Angel Olañeta and Diego Ruiz were playing in Hofman's Legacy (cover group). We contacted Alberto Cid talking about a new project and he told us about Angel Vejo, they had also been playing together in another group before and the possibility of having a keyboard player was essential to achieve the sound we were looking for. We started rehearsing together in a new rehearsal space and that's how everything we are today began.

AL: What are your key musical influences? Who did you all listen to growing up?

BM: The most direct influence that touches the five of us is without a doubt Deep Purple.

On a personal level we have Creedence Clearwater Revival or Bob Seger that our keyboardist

likes, among others. The drummer listens to Mötley Crüe, Marilyn Manson or Black Sabbath. Ghost and Muse are bands that he also listens to regularly. Diego Ruiz has grown up with the music of his native country (Argentina), listening to groups like Pescado Rabioso, El Reloj or Vox Dei. Swamp Gas also likes them a lot. Our vocalist has quite different tastes ranging from African, Brazilian music and in general all the hard rock of the '70s, progressive rock and krautrock. Angel Olañeta has grown up listening to trash metal and glam metal. He is the youngest of the band but he also enjoys listening to bands like Nektar, Camel, Pink Floyd or Out of Focus.

We are naming some groups in a general way since there are a multitude of references that fill us with good ideas such as the Irish band Fruupp or even more current groups such as the Mars Volta, DeWolff or Black Mountain.

AL: How do you define what genre you play? I hear so many different genres in your sound.

BM: Well, it's difficult to establish a specific label or musical genre. I think we have pursued doing something between hard rock and at the same time trying not to be something as hard or direct as that genre, looking for musical progressions to try to complete and perhaps improve the songs that we managed to compose. They also thought about the psychedelia of the late '60s, but I don't think it's the most latent style that can be felt in the seven songs that make up Blue Merrow's first album.



AL: How do you put songs together? It sounds like everyone brings their own thing to mix up.

BM: Usually it starts from an idea that can come from one of the instrumentalists or the vocalist. It is usually a contribution that was worked with the acoustic guitar or the keyboard. Later comes the process in the rehearsal room, where each one of the five contributes something and arrangements are added in which everyone's ideas complete each song. We don't usually stay with the result that comes out first when it comes to finishing a song. The songs mature for quite some time. Even sometimes in the live performances ideas can appear that can enrich the sound in some way. We like improvisation to be part of our style so we don't try to sound the same as what was recorded in the studio.

AL: Where did you find those gorgeous tones for both guitar and keyboards?

BM: Both Angel Olañeta and Angel Vejo, guitar and keyboards respectively. They have their particular style, we think they try to defend it as best as possible. It was intense and arduous work in the studio to try to get a moderately defined sound that would suit what our band was looking for with those songs. Regarding the particular search for those guitar sounds, we have recorded with two different guitar models and also with various keyboards.

We thought it would be interesting to think about the sound of the Hammond keyboard and also about the classical music that our keyboard player likes a lot. The result of the riffs or the guitar and keyboard solos were appearing, they were found based on testing in each rehearsal and arranging them in the studio when we locked ourselves up to record.



AL: Everyone I play your album to is an immediate fan. How far from Spain are you finding fans?

BM: The fact of finding fans is something that is mainly given by social networks. The current music situation is really complicated, we are a band without managers, without record contracts and we don't have enough money to afford a really good promotion. So that the people who know us outside of Spain are convinced that they have found out about our music through the internet. We would love for the album to reach more people but it is not an easy task when the diffusion is relative. We have people like you who know us in your country and also in the UK. In

Spain there are people who follow us from different cities and also some followers in Latin America, but there is still a lot of work to be done in our country, taking the group on tour in different cities so that our music is known. This is what we are really concerned with at the moment to make our band known and to let people know that we exist.

AL: I know is only been a year, but are you working on a second album? How's that going?



This year, 2023, just like last year, we have decided to focus more on continuing to present our first album live. We are working on new ideas and trying to nail down new songs that could possibly go on an EP. Honestly we don't want to close ourselves to thinking that the first two or three new songs that come out now are going to be recorded. I think that we are going to continue composing little by little and to mature the new material well until we can decide what will be recorded or not.

At this moment, we are considering dedicating ourselves in the next year to composing new music and finishing the concerts that we have in this 2023.

AL: What are your favourite albums of the past five years, not including your own?

Honestly, there aren't too many current bands that we investigate that influence our music too much. But if we have to name some records in a personal way that some of the members of Blue Merrow listen to, we could talk about:

Roberto Iniesta - *Mayéutica* (2021)
Black Mountain - *Destroyer* (2019)
DeWolff - *Tascam Tapes* (2020)
Ghost - *Prequelle* (2018)
As current references we could also talk about Tool, The Mars Volta or John Frusciante.

AL: What's the rock/metal scene like in Spain? I don't hear as much Spanish music as I'd like.

If we have to talk about old bands, there is a fairly rich tradition in Spanish rock with a multitude of names like Leño, Triana, the Storm or Máquina! to name a few of the old ones that made school. At present, stoner rock is perhaps the reigning style and the most bands we can currently talk about in our country. On the other hand, I must also insist that there are many underground musical groups that are rarely talked about and that are very strong. More attention should be paid to it.

AL: And finally name one other band from Spain that people should absolutely check out.

We sincerely think that people should stop more with everything that was left unknown and did not come to light in the past. We really don't stop meeting progressive rock bands from different parts of the world that weren't lucky enough to be known in other countries and only released one or two albums at most. There are really good rock bands in Peru, Mexico or Finland that have wonderful records. In South Africa, Brazil or the United Kingdom. We think that the important thing is to investigate and not stop discovering new sounds. Currently it is difficult to find bands that fill us with truth because we believe that everything is invented. That's why it's hard for us to decide on a current band and give a name. It seems that everything was fresher before because it hadn't evolved and although this response seems to be something that is anchored in the past, we couldn't have released an album with the sound it has if we listened to 21st century bands.

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VELESAR (POLAND)

INTERVIEW WITH MARCIN VELESAR WIECZOREK



AL: For those new to your music, who's in the band and how did you get together?

MVW: This is actually quite a difficult question. For more than 20 years on the metal scene, I met many different people with whom I performed. Łukasz Obiegły (drummer) and Dawid Holona (lead guitar) are such people. They both played with me in my previous project River of Time, which was created after I parted ways with Radogost. In turn, Piotr Ave Pobłocki (rhythm guitar) and Michał Misiek Pruszowski (bass guitar) used to play in another band and we also met almost 10 years ago on stage. Of course, there are also our very talented girls—Ewa Kozieł (violin) and Katarzyna Babilas (flute). And this is what Velesar's current lineup looks like. A total of 7 people on stage. But it's a folk metal band, so no wonder (laughs).

AL: What are your key musical influences? Who did you all listen to growing up?

MVW: It can't be defined that way, because each of us listens to something different. From folk and rock, through heavy, thrash and progressive metal, to death and black metal. But that doesn't necessarily translate to our music. Of course, some influences can be heard in our music, but still folk metal is quite a specific genre.

For example, I really like folk music, progressive and power metal. But I also very like, for example, Pink Floyd, Queen and other similar bands. Anyway, I don't take it as inspiration. Since I

am the author of all songs, it would be better to focus on lyrics. And here I can say much more, because I am inspired by the history of the Slavs, as well as old rituals and beliefs, fairy tales, legends, stories...



Slavic traditions are very rich, although unfortunately little known. Poles simply did not take care of it in the past (as opposed to, for example, Ireland or Scandinavian countries) and only now we are discovering our own past. It is difficult because there are very few sources, but it is not impossible. In Poland, for several years there have been more and more people who speak loudly about the Slavs, reject the Polish myth that "Poland has Christian roots" and inform people that before Christianity there were Slavs who had their own beliefs and traditions. Traditions as interesting and rich as those of the Vikings. The same is done by reconstruction groups, of which there are more and more in our country, as well as folk metal bands like us.

AL: You mix uplifting folk music with metal darkness so well. How do you find the right balance?

MVW: It's not that easy to explain (laughs). That's just what folk metal is. Folk music is often very melodic and cheerful, and the combination of it with metal only emphasizes this. It doesn't always have to be dark and depressing. Of course, we also have some more serious topics in lyrics. An example is the song *Zew Arkony*, which tells the story of the fall of Arkona—the last bastion of the Slavic faith. But to be honest—when writing a song, I don't think about balance. I just write the way I think it should be.



AL: What's your writing process? All your songs feel like they're instrumentals until they aren't.

MVW: Indeed, usually the music is created, and only then lyrics. But not always. However, I do pay a lot of attention to melodies, double voices, harmonies, etc. I have two guitars, a flute and a violin, and it's important to me that each instrument is clear. But they can't interfere with each other. Each instrument is part of a larger whole and they must work together.



AL: For those who don't speak Polish, what topics do you explore in your lyrics?

MVW: As I said before, we mainly touch on Slavic themes. We tell about the old Slavs, about their history, about old Slavic gods and rituals, about Slavic legends and fairy tales.

Of course, there are other inspirations as well. For example, the song *Normanica* is about Vikings, and the song *Dzikie Pola* is about Cossacks. Our only song in English (so far)—*All You Need is Trolls*—refers to Irish beliefs (it was recorded and released on Spotify and YouTube on the occasion of the Beltine holiday). But as I said—we mainly talk about Slavs.

By the way, I would like to explain why we sing in Polish and not in English... We just think that folk metal music is the most authentic only when it's sung in the mother tongue. And what's interesting—we have a lot of fans abroad and they don't mind that we sing in Polish. But that's the nature of folk metal. After all, there are many such bands, and some are even very famous. Arkona sings in Russian, Korpiklaani are mostly in Finnish, Dalriada sings in Hungarian, Finntroll sings in Swedish... So the mother tongue doesn't bother at all. On the contrary—it increases the value of this music.

AL: How important is it that the violins and flutes get to be lead instruments, not just textures?

MVW: As I said, these are very important instruments for me. Without them, our music would not exist. This is also the nature of folk metal. Most folk metal bands also use other instruments such as the hurdy-gurdy, bouzouki, accordion... We decided on flute and violin. And I think it fits our music very well.



AL: You have two albums out now. Are they bringing you an audience outside of Poland?

MVW: Yes, we have a lot of fans outside of Poland. We constantly receive messages from people from Czech Republic, Slovakia, Germany, Brazil, USA, France, Hungary etc. 20 years ago this would have been impossible, but now the Internet makes many things easier. I remember times of my first band Goddess of Sin, which was active in 2002-2007. At that time, the Internet was a novelty in Poland and presenting music abroad was much more difficult. Now we have Facebook, YouTube, Spotify... And it actually works.

AL: What are your favourite albums of the past five years, not including your own?

MVW: And here we have a problem... I have a few favorite albums, but they are all very old. Dream Theater's *Train of Thought*, Helloween's *Keeper of the Seven Keys*, Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, Rhapsody's *Symphony of Enchanted Lands*, HammerFall's *Legacy of Kings*, etc.

Of course, I also like new bands, albums and songs, but I wouldn't call them "favorites". I guess I'm just too old... (laughs).

AL: What's the rock/metal scene like in Poland? I'm hearing a lot of great Polish prog rock lately.

MVW: There have always been a lot of rock and metal bands in Poland. According to Encyclopaedia Metallum, there are several thousand metal bands in Poland. And indeed we have

a lot of very interesting bands. Unfortunately, these are often niche bands that find it very difficult to break through somewhere higher (not to mention abroad). Media only promote the biggest bands, and big labels are not interested in bands from Poland (that's why we publish our albums ourselves). And the truth is that Poland has many really valuable bands. And I don't mean only the most famous ones, such as Behemoth or Vader, but the smaller, niche ones. Bands like us don't have any additional support and we have to take care of everything ourselves. But in Poland it has always been like this. In Norway, metal is the national music, but in Poland it has always been considered something evil... It is completely different, for example, in the Czech Republic, where metal music can be heard on normal mainstream radio. But we live and create in Poland, so we have to manage somehow. And we do it.

AL: And finally, name one other band not from Poland that people should absolutely check out.

MVW: Band from outside Poland? In fact, I can recommend one that I really like. It is the Hungarian band Dalriada. When I was still singing in the band Radogost, I had the opportunity to perform with them on a common stage and I highly recommend them. Apart from that, the second band I would like to point out is the Czech band Wolfarian, with whom we often meet on stage. They are very nice people and we like each other very much. I think it's worth listening to them.

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WUCAN

HERETIC TONGUES

COUNTRY:
GERMANY

STYLE:
PSYCHEDELIC ROCK

RATING:
8/10

RELEASE DATE:
20 MAY 2022

Shifting from a German band with world fame and six decades of history behind them to a German band that I hadn't heard of [note: my last June review was from the Scorpions], I should mention that this is easily my pick of the two albums. This one is the third full length from a Dresden-based band called Wucan that I hadn't previously heard of, but it utterly floored me. They've combined a number of easily defined influences with others I'm sure are unknown to me and stirred them up into a very potent, very energetic new sound that I'd expect to connect with certain modern-looking audiences as much as other very old school ones.

The first obvious influence is Jethro Tull, because there's a flute from the opening of the opening track, *Kill the King*, and it's played in a fashion notably reminiscent of Ian Anderson. However, the song moves in other directions and the Tull influences don't really show up until later, with songs like *Fette Deutsch*, which owes more than a little to *Locomotive Breath*. While we may think of Tull as a quieter folk rock band (remember the surprise when they won that Grammy), they rocked out often, especially on stage, and it's their heavier numbers from them that show up most here.

In between that initial flute and the real Tull influence, Black Sabbath wander in to highlight their importance too. *Don't Break the Oath* has a riff that's so Sabbath that I even recognise it as a key change in *Wheels of Confusion*. Like *Kill the King*, it moves on elsewhere but it never truly forgets that Sabbath nod. It was here that I really started thinking genre, because this is psychedelic rock without any doubt, but it doesn't venture far into the usual genres that Sabbath set into motion. It's not heavy metal. It's not stoner rock. It's not doom metal. And it trawls in sounds that come a long way from anything that Tull or Sabbath put their name to over the decades.

And here I need to go back to the beginning, because there's so much more in *Kill the King* than an obvious flute. It has strong riffs from the beginning but funky changes too; searing

vocals from an outstanding throat that promptly shifts into scat singing and other vocalisations; the tasty combo of bass runs and handclaps; and a real urgency that never leaves the album, even when it's willing to take a breather. That voice belongs to Francis Tobolsky, with whom I immediately fell hopelessly in love and admiration. What is it about German rock singers? Yes, Doro, you stole my heart first.

I should mention here that, while she's obviously listened to Janis Joplin on far more than a casual basis, her band was definitely paying attention to what Big Brother & The Holding Company did on the stage behind her as well. That sixties psychedelia, rooted in the blues of the past but pointing the way firmly forward to the new genres of the seventies, is everywhere here, as are some of the latter genres, most obviously funk but krautrock and disco too, especially on the closer, *Physical Boundaries*, a jam that takes us on a funky journey through the cosmos for twelve and a half minutes, like a combination of Can, Hawkwind and Funkadelic jamming at Monterey Pop with Ian Anderson as a special guest.

The funk was there from the beginning in *Kill the King* but the disco shows up on the two parts of *Far and Beyond*, combining that genre's incessant drive with a more recognisable rock one that I recognised from Magnum's *Kingdom of Madness*, probably not uncoincidentally another song to prominently feature a flute. Tobolsky owns everything she touches but Patrik Dröge lays down an impressive and very patient bass in *Far and Beyond* that thoroughly grabbed me long before that voice showed up to cement the deal.

The only track I haven't mentioned is the one I like least and, amazingly enough, that's the cover, because *Kill the King* is not the Rainbow song nor *Don't Break the Oath* the Mercyful Fate track. I haven't heard this one before, because it's *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, from a Soviet era band from East Germany called the Klaus Renft Combo. It wasn't even an album track, having been released as a single in 1972, not something I assume was heard widely in the west.

In this version, it's good (and it sounds even better when I listened on headphones) but it uses two singers, the other one male, and, quite frankly, anyone who picks up a mike on the same stage as Tobolsky will inevitably be compared to her and just as inevitably lose. Whoever this is doesn't try to compete in the slightest, yet fails anyway and the song is lesser for it. It's why I didn't automatically go with a 9/10 here but I may well end up doing that anyway.

I absolutely must see Wucan live. They seem like the sort of band who could get an entire stadium audience to pay attention to them, even if everyone showed up to see someone else, and then utterly lift the lid off the small club next door. It's at times like this and when I first heard the Blue Merrow album in January that I wonder why I moved to North America. All the bands I'm aching to see live are back in Europe and not even in England either but over on the continent.

Highlights: *Kill the King*; *Far and Beyond*; *Physical Boundaries*.



SEPTICFLESH

MODERN PRIMITIVE

COUNTRY:
GREECE

STYLE:
ATMOSPHERIC DEATH METAL

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
30 MAY 2022

OK, I thought I knew Septic Flesh, as they were before 2008 with a space in their name, but it's very possible that I've confused them with someone else. No, not Septic Death, as I have them clear for sure. However, I was thoroughly surprised by the sound of this album and more so than I'd have been had I actually heard some of their earlier material before. Going back to cherrypick the early stuff, I see that they've always played a form of symphonic death metal but they've kept boosting the symphonic part of that as time has gone by, eventually sharing the stage in Mexico City in 2019 with an orchestra and a couple of choirs in a memorable concert I've been enjoying on YouTube.

By this point, which is their eleventh album, that symphonic angle has been so integrated into the band's sound that it's inseparable. This isn't strings behind a rock band any more, this is a single band with a hundred members. I'd say that the best example of this is *Coming Storm*, but everything on the album is a good example and *Coming Storm* is just the track that plays with the dynamics best. And, I should point out, going full on symphonic beyond most symphonic bands is far from the end of their evolution.

For a start, there's a lot of ethnic sound on this album, starting at the very beginning with a neat and intricate intro to *The Collector*, which is not played on acoustic guitars. In addition to the City of Prague Philharmonic Orchestra and the Libro Coro choirs and a long list of choral vocalists, I'm seeing credits for folk instruments like mandolin, flute, oud and bouzouki, each of which I'm aware of, but duduk and santur too, which I'm not; they're a wind instrument and a hammered dulcimer respectively. There's a female vocalist too who sings in a wavering ethnic style on songs like *Self-Eater*. Each of these folky contributions deepens the band's sound and they're often the best and most joyous part, such as on *Neuromancer*.

For another, while the majority of vocals use the effortlessly harsh delivery of bassist Seth Siro Anton, who sounds like he's not even

putting on a demonic voice but just using the one that comes most naturally, the way they're balanced with the clean vocals of guitarist Sotiris Anunnaki V are a fascinating thing. Sometimes, it's the usual contrast between harsh and clean, which is purely for effect and the sort of thing we tend to expect in bands with that dynamic. However, here it's often something far more theatrical and the orchestration and some of the other musical changes on a dime play into that.

When listening through the speakers on my desk, I sometimes got the impression that there were things happening that I missed because I couldn't see them. Surely, this is music that's intended to be seen as much as heard, a true metal opera, and I wasn't sitting in front of a stage watching the actors play their parts. When listening with headphones, though, that feeling was enhanced to become sometimes overwhelming. I wanted to know what these people were doing visually, what stories they were telling with their bodies as well as their voices.

While *Coming Storm* stood out for me above the other tracks, none of them let the side down. This is a solid album and one I enjoyed a great deal over a few listens. If there's a catch, it's that there are also bonus tracks on this limited edition and, well, I kind of dig those more. These are entirely orchestral pieces, i.e. they keep all of that side but ditch the band, and I'm pretty sure that they'll want me to think of them as worthy bonuses. Instead, I'm digging *Salvation* and *The 14th Part* a bit more than I'm digging the rest of the album, *Coming Storm* excluded.

However, the third of these bonus tracks is *Coming Storm*, done entirely with orchestra, and I think that I prefer the proper version more. So, perhaps the question should be phrased like this: where are the heavy versions of *Salvation* and *The 14th Part*, the ones with a band and vocals and all that jazz? Answers on the back of a postcard please...

Highlights: *Coming Storm*; *Salvation*; *The 14th Part*; *Neuromancer*.



SERVAN

TALES OF THE FOREST

COUNTRY:
ITALY

STYLE:
FOLK METAL

RATING:
6/10

RELEASE DATE:
30 MAY 2022

I'm back in Italy again, it seems, this time in Trento in the south Tyrol for a folk metal album from Servan, who are debuting here in a rather schizophrenic fashion. I'm still trying to figure out quite what they're trying to do, because it seems to be two completely different things and one tends to cancel out the other.

Some of the time, they're a serious folk metal band. The evocative intro points the way, with flutes delivering plaintive melodies around bubbling brooks. Then it kicks in hard and fast, as *Tiki Land* is eager to convince us that Servan are a tasty mix of folk and death and thrash. There's a rough but not too harsh vocal and a separate clean vocal, so there's contrast and variety there, even before we factor in the constant contrast between the chugging riffs and dancing flutes. *The Forest* continues in much the same vein, slower but with the same effect. It's good stuff.

But then *The Goblins* shows up and we realise that Servan, after they do a quick change into their superhero outfits, also make cartoon theme tunes. At least, that's the impression I got here, that flute playing a Pied Piper role as it leads a procession of goblins. Don't get me wrong, this is done well, like a more accessible Trollfest, only one reason why I immediately saw it animated, all those goblins walking in step, single file, with that odd skip that cartoon characters have to have. But it's not remotely serious and damn, it's catchy.

If *The Goblins* was the only example of this, then it would just have been a prominent track and we could get back to enjoying the serious stuff. However, it's not. This quirky, extra bouncy, animated processional music with cartoon goblin vocals shows back up in *Lovegati*, only two songs later and on others as the album runs on. It's not the entire song this time but it's enough of it to matter and I can't help but feel sorry for *Ode Agli Elementi*.

What's that, you say? Well, it's the track in between those two.

Listen to it in isolation and you'll see it as

the decent folk metal song that it is. Listen to it on this album in between *The Goblins* and *Lovegati* and you'll lose track of the fact that it exists. There's nothing wrong with it, except that it's in the wrong place at the wrong time and it's hard to focus on flute melodies or guitar solos when we're focused instead on bouncing animated goblins. If *The Goblins* is the theme tune and *Lovegati* is episode one, I guess that means *Ode Agli Elementi* is the first commercial break and that's not enviable.

After these two, I struggled with the album while appreciating both sides of the band's music. It's not that one angle is inherently more worthy than the other. It's simply that one overwhelms the other when they're alternated on the same album. The best songs, I feel, are the ones that play it seriously, avoiding that cartoon mindset, but keep the extra-bouncy melodies. *Conjurers* does that and, to a large degree, so does *Drunk Troll*. That title so obviously tells us it's going to be silly that it's almost a shock when the song isn't. These are more serious songs but you just won't be able to listen to something like *Conjurers* or the flute solo late in *The Last Battle* without your toes taking on a life of their own, tapping away like a lunatic.

It's probably fair to say that this is a problem now but potentially not down the road. Servan are a new band on their debut album. They're probably new to us and we don't have years invested into their sound. Ten years and four albums from now, we might expect this and appreciate both sides for the quality music they are. We might even cherish them for it, like we cherish Bad Brains for a career in hardcore punk that just shifts into reggae at points for no discernible reason. Right now, it's harder to do that, so let's see how they're received.

For now, there's some serious talent on display. I'm looking forward to watching them grow into themselves.

Highlights: *Conjurers*; *Drunk Troll*; *Tiki Land*.



MICHAEL MONROE

I LIVE TOO FAST TO DIE YOUNG

COUNTRY:
FINLAND

STYLE:
HARD ROCK

RATING:
8/10

RELEASE DATE:
10 JUN 2022

It feels like only about ten minutes since the last Michael Monroe album, *One Man Gang*, but it's a surprising three years and, as enjoyable as that one was, this feels more consistent and, dare I say it, more mature. And that sounds flippant of me, I know, but, while that patented Michael Monroe blend of punk and glam on offer here, the whole thing feels a little less rough and loose (crucially, though, not more polished) and much more carefully thought out. The lyrics grabbed my attention last time out and they do so even more this time, starting at the very outset with *Murder the Summer of Love*.

That's a strong opener in every way, lyrically and musically, but things don't fade at all from there. Songs that, in other hands, could have become filler material, aren't here, merely taking different amounts of time to grow on us. I remember liking the up tempo songs more on that last album and they're surely the ones that caught me first here, like *All Fighter* and, most notably, *Pagan Prayer*, but then the sleazier, slightly laid back ones grew and eventually the ballad as well, which is an impressive piece in the style of Mott the Hoople that I came to really dig. Initially, it felt like an interlude but it's a real grower that has become one of my favourites. Notably, it's located right at the heart of the album and maybe that has meaning.

What I'm finding, on maybe my fourth time through, is that every song here could well end up like that. It didn't initially feel like a great album, just a good one, but nothing fades and everything grows. I'd be as hard pressed to pick the worst song as the best one and that doesn't happen too often. Most albums have a standout or three and a couple of songs that don't live up to the rest. I'd have given you examples of both after one listen but not after three. *Derelict Palace* may take a little longer to stand out than the songs around it on the first half but it's just as worthy and the same goes for *Everybody's Nobody*. The former has a really cool groove and the latter stands out lyrically.

And, just like the Latin vibe on *Heaven is a*

Free State last time, there are songs here that add an unusual angle to Monroe's tried and tested formulae. Sure, there are moments here that feel like they could have been on *Two Steps from the Move*, like the bridge in *All Fighter*, but there are also subtle shifts. *Can't Stop Falling Apart* isn't that far from his usual style, but somehow it's also half Steve Earle and half Status Quo, which is quite a cool collaboration. There's a laid back reggae vibe on *No Guilt* behind the alt rock and *Dearly Departed* is an electronic new wave song, but a very successful one. If Monroe made an album in that style, he'd find a whole new audience.

There aren't a lot of guests here and only one you'd expect me to call out. That's Slash, who shows up on the sassy title track to lend his guitar talents and to weave a solo. It's a neat team up but it's not the event that it could have been. The song is another good one, with a memorable and catchy chorus, and I'm not going to fault Slash's solo either, but it's just one of eleven tracks here. In fact, given where *Dearly Departed* goes after it, it doesn't hold our focus as long as you might think. It feels like another good Michael Monroe song, whereas *Dearly Departed* plays much more like the departure it suggests and its uncharacteristic synths seem more notable than Slash's solo.

I like this album a lot. It was always a good one and I never doubted that it would be another 7/10, just like its predecessor, but I don't think that's fair. This is an 8/10 album. It just doesn't slap us in the face with how great it is. The more I listen to it, the better it gets and the less surprised I feel about that rating.

Highlights: *I Live Too Fast to Die Young*; *Pagan Prayer*; *Dearly Departed*.





EVALS MESS

BORN OF THE FLOWER

COUNTRY:
BRAZIL

STYLE:
PROGRESSIVE ROCK

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
21 MAY 2022

Here's an unusual setup from Brazil. Evals Mess isn't one band but three, who share a name and a logo. The line-up is mostly the same across all three, but they play different genres. Evals Mess, in this form, which is also known as Evals Mess Project, play prog rock. However, they heavy up into a thrash/death metal band, Evals Mess Insane, and also lighten up into Evals Mess Acoustic. Two of the three members of Evals Mess Insane also play in Evals Mess Project but, while Andrey Cardoso has the same bass guitar slung around his neck, Sandro Maués shifts from drums to handle vocals and acoustic guitar. Samuel Wesley takes over on drums and Guilherme Andrili adds a second guitar.

This is my introduction to Evals Mess, so I haven't hear Evals Mess Insane yet, though I'm intrigued after hearing this. It's their third album and it's a generous one, almost making the eighty minute mark, though it's broken up over tracks of very different lengths, two of them under four minutes and two over ten. It's a rare album indeed where not more than two songs of the eleven on offer share the same minute length, but this is one. I like that the band are confident in letting them simply be as long as they should be, rather than cropping them down for better chances at airplay or extending them out with some unnecessary sections.

It's a neatly varied album too, ranging from the poppy commercial prog of *Cloistered* through to a heavy midsection on *Martyrdom* that's arguably metal, albeit one nowhere near thrash/death in approach. Most of it sits in between, of course, rock rather than pop or metal, and thoughtful in a lot of its dynamic play. *Witch's Fury* was easily my early standout because of that. It grows magnificently during its eight and a half minutes, thoughtful and careful becoming intense and vehement. It's a given that I'm not going be to doing anything to invoke this witch's fury any time soon, if I can help it.

Of course, I'm sure she's fictional because this appears to be a concept album based on a novel by Sandro Maués, though I may not be

translating the Portuguese properly there. It doesn't surprise me to find that this is a concept album, because it evolves like one, a shifting in tone and style as a change in the story requires it. It also explains how Maués can get so much emotion into songs like *Witch's Fury*, because he's not merely invested in these songs as a songwriter or performer, he was the creator of the characters whose stories they tell. He's this witch's mother and father and god.

While Maués sings at least primarily in English, I couldn't follow the story from his voice so got as much of its progression from the song titles, the sound effects and the general flow. It sounds to me like it's a period tale of hardship and restraint that eventually finds rebirth and freedom. The anger is met with boundaries, so the lead character dreams of peace and freedom. A melancholy tone that pervades many of the earlier songs gradually shifts into a darker tone and eventually a happier one.

I think those tonal shifts affect what the music appears to be inspired by. *Cloistered* is prog infused by sixties pop, a dream of something else. Many of the slower sections or indeed entire songs, like *Redemption*, remind of Queensrÿche's slower moments, though the ramping up is done in a different direction. The opener starts out with a western pirate vibe that segues into a very Mark Knopfler guitar, which returns on *Martyrdom* before it heavies up, when Queensrÿche come back to mind. I caught odd moments here and there of Styx, Iron Maiden and Pink Floyd, though only moments. I can't imagine that there aren't Brazilian bands in here too that I wouldn't recognise; there's a rich South American scene that I've only dipped my toes into thus far.

What impressed me most here was how lush it felt without also feeling dense. There aren't thirty layers going on at once, even when there's orchestration, but it always feels like we're surrounded by interesting things happening, with the core thrust of the album moving through them. I think that's the main reason why this never feels too long, even at eighty minutes, a length at which I'd feel safe in saying most albums would struggle. This always has something to say. Twice through is almost three hours and it didn't lose my attention once. In fact, some of the most magnetic songs arrive late, like *Death in Doubt*, with its menacing post-punk overtones and strange rhythms, not to forget its perhaps subconscious nod to *Knockin' on Heaven's Door*.

It has to be said also that everything leads up to the thirteen minute epic kinda sorta title track, a gem of a piece called *Anturiah, Born of the Flower*. At this point, you probably know whether you'll be checking this out or not, so I'll just say that, if you do, it's the centerpiece of the album. I think I prefer *Witch's Fury*, just on a personal level, but everything this album does, it does it most on the final track. And I guess that means that it's the one you should check out on YouTube if you're still somehow undecided. Enjoy.

Highlights: *Witch's Fury*; *Anturiah, Born of the Flower*; *Death in Doubt*.



WHITE WARD

FALSE LIGHT

COUNTRY:
UKRAINE

STYLE:
BLACK METAL

RATING:
8/10

RELEASE DATE:
17 JUN 2022

I'm fast coming to the conclusion that the saxophone is a highly versatile extreme metal instrument. It was not all that long ago that that I thought that, to bring it into metal, you had to go batshit insane, like John Zorn on his Painkiller releases, but that's not true. White Ward, a post-black metal band from Ukraine, prove that yet again here because, as with dark jazz outfits like Katharos XIII, their saxophone works as a contrast and a driving instrument of both mood and menace. And, as much as I enjoy the work of the musicians playing more traditional metal instruments here, it's the sax that haunts me. Dima Dudko does a magnificent job but, crucially, all the songwriting allows it too.

The sax often conjures up visuals for me, even if they're often the same ones, and that starts early on this album. *Leviathan* is a ballsy song to open with, given that it's thirteen minutes long, but it isn't even the longest track here and there are eight on offer. It starts out like a film score, water sound effects setting a scene as the keyboards grow a mood. It feels eighties, something that you might hear on a Michael Mann soundtrack. Then it gets heavy. And then the sax shows up, patient but dark. Whatever this story is, it's not going to end well. When the vocals arrive, they're raw and angry, but more like hardcore screams than black metal shrieks. Things develop and grow and the sax plays its part, until soon after six minutes in when everything fades away and we're back in the quiet rain with the sax stepping up in its more traditional film noir role.

Now, that's only half of track one, so you can imagine the dynamics in play throughout this album. It's not fair to suggest that White Ward alternate between black metal and soft jazz, but it's quite the idea and there's some truth in it, so it's a useful place to start. After all, if you haven't heard a group play in this sort of style, that's going to make absolutely no sense to you and you're going to try to conjure it up in your head and probably fail. Hopefully it intrigues you, though, and that will prompt you to check them out. *Leviathan*

is far from a bad place to start.

Probably the worst place to start is the next song here, *Salt Paradise*, because of the approach the vocals take, which presumably have meaning within the wider story. They come across to me like a monotone Nick Cave, which is awkward because so much of what magic Cave generates comes from his magnificent intonation. There's no intonation here, deliberately so, and I wonder if this is as an effort to draw a character as sociopathic. I have no idea what this story is, but the moods suggest it revolves around violence and maybe redemption and a sociopathic character would be at home in a violent story.

Given the presence of lengthy samples, taken from speeches, TED talks or maybe documentaries, in *Phoenix* and the closer, *Downfall*, which suggests their importance, I wonder if there's a deeper level in play too. Maybe it's telling a story about individuals, the ones we hear arguing bitterly in a couple of these songs, like *Silence Circles*, but it's simultaneously telling a story about something far larger, like the fate of the planet. Maybe I should go read the lyrics, but I'm not sure I care that much. I adore the instrumentation on White Ward albums. This band are incredibly tight and they have a natural sense for dynamic play that very few bands can boast.

And that's my primary focus, especially as I'm not a huge fan of the vocal approach. There are two vocalists here, Yurii Kazarian and Andrii Pechatkin, who also play guitar and bass respectively. The lead—and I don't know which is which—has a shouty voice for black metal, one that wouldn't work too well singing about demons but does in a more visceral story that's grounded in dark reality, as this album surely is. The other, usually in the background, varies. As a clean voice, it's rich and cool and engaging. As a harsh voice, it's less so, because it's a shouty growl that seems half-hearted, as if it used to sing hardcore and wants to move into death but can't quite commit to that premise.

I found myself in an odd place with this album. I gave White Ward's previous relese, *Love Exchange Failure* an 8/10 and my instinct told me to do the same here. It's an ambitious album, one that runs for sixty-six minutes and never outstays its welcome, and it flows in a fascinating cinematic way. If I hesitate, it's because of odd clashes that most people aren't going to care about, but I do find them a fascinating set of clashes because they're counterintuitive. The band seem to moving in a modern direction in some senses, with the hardcore-influenced vocals and some edgy chords at points. Yet they also seem to refuse to follow trends, many of these songs uncompromisingly non-commercial, with wild shifts from black metal to jazz and with such a prominent and varied use of saxophone.

At the end of the day, I find these clashes fascinating and part of the joy of this band. After all, this is a band doing their own thing in their own way and blazing a trail because of it. And that I dig.

Highlights: *Leviathan*; *Silence Circles*; *False Light*.



DRIFT INTO BLACK

EARTHTORN

COUNTRY:
USA

STYLE:
GOTHIC DOOM METAL

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
20 MAY 2022

I liked this album by New Jersey-based Drift into Black from the outset but not immensely, until it grew on me, which almost came as a surprise. They're on their fourth album, even though they've only been a band since 2017, and they tend to be described as gothic doom, which isn't unfair. They certainly fit into doom metal, their tempo slow and doomy. The gothic side isn't as overt but it's a noticeable angle when it vanishes, as it does briefly in *On Borrowed Time*, when its layers cascade away to expose the doom below. It's clearly there in a melancholy tone but also through use of piano and violin, albeit not as often as I'd have liked.

However, those components don't add up to Drift into Black, because there's progressive metal in this sound too and it gets more and more important as the album runs on, to the point where it's a driving force. There's prog in the prominent display of keyboards, which often comes across like prog rock rather than prog metal, but also in the way the guitars build and the sometimes copious use of sound effects. There are samples here too, not used frequently within the album, but in the intro, *Good Mourning Earth*, which collates a slew of pivotal news moments. They're negative and mostly American (9/11, Pearl Harbor, the Challenger shuttle explosion) with only Hitler representing the rest of the world.

I think the songwriting often comes out of prog metal too, especially on more subdued songs, like *The Ups and the Downs*, or in more subdued sections of others. After them, even far more overtly gothic doom tracks, like *Weight of Two Worlds*, feel like they still have a prog metal component to their construction, especially as they evolve into something else. The man to ask would seem to be Craig Rossi, the only songwriter here, who is also the band's guitarist and keyboardist and, I think, both of its lead vocalists.

I say both because there are two male vocalists here and one female, though the latter is a guest, Melissa Hancock, who elevates a handful of tracks by adding a further contrast to the one that the male vocalists provide. One of those is clean and

one harsh and I'm not entirely sure which is seen as the lead. Early on, I'd say the harsh vocal is the lead, because it's easily more prominent and it has a confidence to it that the clean vocal doesn't, seemingly content to serve in the background. As the album runs on, though, it seems to gradually acquire that confidence and eventually take over.

I prefer the clean voice, especially when it wants to be the lead. It's a decent voice and one that's able to be far more flexible than the harsh voice, which is mostly a texture, often a rhythmic one. It's limited in its delivery, so it struggles to do more than simply be the harsh contrast to the clean voice. It's almost entirely monotone and it plods, with little shift in pitch and little enunciation. It manages a little nuance later in the album, but mostly relies on the clean voice to handle any sort of melody or engagement. Sometimes it increases its urgency, but that's about it.

And so we find ourselves focusing more on the instrumentation, which is excellent and won me over far sooner than the vocals. The elegant electronica on the intro starts that and some neat, Queensrÿche-esque prog metal guitar tone on *It Fell from the Sky* adds to it, along with the contrast in vocal styles which is emphasised by the musical shifts in sections. At this point, the music outstrips the vocals, though the introduction of Hancock's voice on *The March to Oblivion* helps balance that a little, until the clean voice truly takes the lead with *The Ups and the Downs* and we reevaluate what we're actually hearing. *Ghost on the Shore* is just an interlude, but a tasty electronically focused one that allows us to refresh and see what's left in a new light.

The more we listen, the more we catch the nice touches in the background. That's often the violin of Ben Karas, from Windfaerer, but it's the electronica too and other details that sometimes hide in the background waiting to be discovered. There's some really cool jagged stuff going on at the end of *It Fell from the Sky*, for instance, that I didn't initially notice. Some of it's pretty expected, like the clocks in *On Borrowed Time*, but some of it not so much, like the tribal percussion behind *Left to the Burning Sun*.

And so I like this more than I did initially, when that limited harsh vocal tinted my enjoyment until I realised what else is going on here. I'd be interested in hearing those three earlier albums to see how Drift into Black came to this sound and how much it's developed over time.

Highlights: *The Ups and the Downs*; *Weight of Two Worlds*.



MICHAEL SCHENKER GROUP

UNIVERSAL

COUNTRY:
GERMANY

STYLE:
HARD AND HEAVY

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
27 MAY 2022

I don't want to harp on about his age, because it's far from unusual nowadays that rockers in their fifties, sixties, seventies or even beyond are still doing the business, often just as well as ever, but I have to compliment Michael Schenker for his continued work ethic. He's released more product in this millennium than he did in the last and he's still as busy ever, with this being the third album in four years that I've reviewed here at Apocalypse Later, after last year's *Immortal* and the Michael Schenker Fest album in 2019 called *Revelation*.

This continues in the vein of *Immortal*, which was a line in the sand for him as both a 40th and 50th anniversary, of the start of his solo career and his first song he ever wrote respectively, that being for the Scorpions. What this means is that there's a core band recording most of the material but a string of guests to either bolster or replace that band as needed. The quintessential example of the latter is *A King Has Gone*, a tribute to Ronnie James Dio that's performed by Schenker with Michael Kiske of Helloween on vocals and a backing band of former Rainbow musicians, Bob Daisley, Bobby Rondinelli and Tony Carey, who also contributes the keyboard intro, *Calling Baal*.

A King Has Gone is one of the highlights here, even though the lyrics aren't exactly deep, but that sentiment pervades other songs too. There's a real Rainbow vibe to *Sad is the Song* and again on one of two bonus tracks, *Fighter*, which echoes Dio's *One Night in the City* in its early phrasing. Of course, it shouldn't be particularly surprising to find Rainbow vibes here, given that Blackmore's current Rainbow vocalist, Ronnie Romero, is the primary singer here. I'm a big fan of Romero but his smooth voice feels a bit too soft here, especially on some of the earlier songs.

To my ears, this album truly gets moving when both the vocals and guitar step up in vehemence, a decision that happens more often on the songs Romero doesn't sing than the ones he does. *A King Has Gone* is one, of course, because that's Michael Kiske at the

mike, but I dug *Wrecking Ball* a lot too and that's Ralf Scheepers from Primal Fear. The most vehement song with Ronnie on it may be *The Universe*, where he's dueting with Gary Barden, the only former MSG singer to guest this time out. Oddly, it starts out as a ballad with some neatly raw guitar from Schenker, but it builds nicely and that's much to do with both voices as the guitar.

As for Schenker, he doesn't show off much here but he shines when he does. My favourite solo has to be the one that wraps up *The Universe*, but the one on *Fighter* is excellent too. There are tracks where he intends to be prominent throughout too, like *Au Revoir*, which doesn't mess around. It's sassy and lively and Romero picks up a little off that, but he doesn't compete. He does that more on *Yesterday is Dead*, which goes for a slower but heavier Accept vibe, and the other bonus track, *Turn off the World*, which also goes for a slower and heavier vibe but one that's more melodic and commercial.

All in all, this is another decent album from Schenker and friends, one that may not be quite up to its anniversary predecessor but which comes close. As with *Immortal*, there are no bad songs here but some are definitely better than others. Put the best of the two together and you have an 8/10 with a whole slew of worthy B-sides, but they're 7/10s on their own.

Highlights: *A King Has Gone*; *Wrecking Ball*; *The Universe*; *Fighter*.





FRIENDS FROM MOON

ASTRAY

COUNTRY:
INDIA

STYLE:
ALTERNATIVE

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
15 APR 2022

This came to me as a submission promising to be varied and it certainly delivered on that, a genre rollercoaster of an album full of slow ascents and scary drops that eventually flows to a satisfying halt. It's impossible to slap a single label on it, but I had to call it something so I tried alternative, because that's its first stop on the genre rollercoaster. It's alternative in *Rage On*, which is bouncy alternative rock, starting out grungy but escalating into metalcore midway. It's alternative a song later in *Rebellion Road* too, though this time it's alternative pop, a perky amalgam of post-punk, new wave and college rock. So I guess I'll go with alternative.

However, the album evolves from there and it evolves considerably further than any boundary you might draw around alternative, whether pop or rock. This is a concept album that follows a loosely defined Lovecraftian theme, that of an outwardly normal young man, whatever "normal" happens to mean, who seeks what he shouldn't, eventually finds what he's looking for and is driven mad by the experience. That's why the opening two tracks are relatively commercial, not to mention quite upbeat and even a little innocent. That goes away as the album moves on.

The Enemy is when this man's journey truly begins and it does that by moving from a traditionally drawn rock song into something far more interesting. It's told almost as a dialogue, with a routine verse followed by another with experimental chords and innovative vocal passages, almost as if it flips. This young man is seeing beyond the reality he grew up in to something different, darker. It's clearly progressive rock at these points and that leads us into the standout for me, which is *Astray*, the title track.

The press release accompanying the album plays up *Marvels Beyond Madness* as the highlight and it is a peach of a song, one in which "all things culminate", but I'd take *Astray* over it. It trawls in an awful lot of different stuff to create something thoroughly original. In its way, it's the full journey in miniature, kicking off with a *Twilight Zone*-

esque introductory passage, full of pulses and clocks and strands of melody. Then the rhythms get interesting, to highlight that we are not in Kansas any more, Toto. We're not really in Oz either, but we could well be midway on the tornado, with every snatch of normality we catch being ephemeral. This is a dark trip of a song, even if it's occasionally reminiscent of the Beatles or maybe Saigon Kick. There's carnival organ here and a quirky Danny Elfman sensibility, but it's darker than Tim Burton would allow.

I wanted *Astray* to be a lot longer than it was, but I'll happily take it as it is, just as I'll happily take the songs that follow. *Come Together* is not the Beatles song, not entirely. It's sometimes a Tom Waits-like cover of the entire Beatles output, rendered off kilter and threatening, with *I am the Walrus* and *Come Together* at the heart of it but plenty more up to Lennon's solo *Give Peace a Chance* thrown in there for good measure. Spoiler: this young man doesn't and we experience the results of that decision in *Marvels Beyond Madness*.

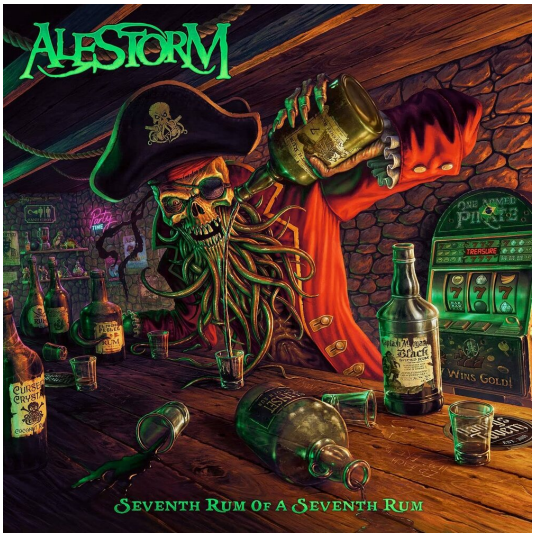
While I might prefer *Astray*, *Marvels Beyond Madness* is still a delight. It's where the album shifts from rock to metal for a while, because the appearance of an Elder God kind of needs the levels of anger that metal brings, and I presume that's what's happening. However, it's also more viciously industrial and experimental and it has a dark soundtrack mindset that's gradually taking over the album. It's as intensely visual as *Astray*, with every sound serving that purpose, not just the music, and it's often a flurry because we're on the longest and steepest part of the rollercoaster and we are heading downwards fast.

What follows, of course, if you've ever read Lovecraft (or watched *Brazil*), is the happy ending with our protagonist's connection to reality seared away. *Riverine* is Syd Barrett madness, not a raging and inconsistent Mad Hatter madness. It's the brain shutting down after a shock it can't handle to think about puppies and dandelions and anything except THAT! What surprises me here is just how long this album spends after the showdown finalé. Riverine has the least to say but it's the longest song on the album after *Marvels Beyond Madness*, and it's followed by an instrumental that's "an ending credits song", according to the press release.

I guess that works, and *Of the Spirit* is certainly a fascinating closer, but I wonder if expanding the journey between *The Enemy* and *Marvels Beyond Madness* would have been a better approach. It constitutes the core of the story in this concept album, but it's confined to the middle four tracks, with the outer four not unfairly seen as the intro and outro. But, hey, that's a quibble not a fault. I thoroughly enjoyed this journey, which viably mixes metalcore and ambient, Indian music and film soundtracks, post-punk and harsh vocals. It's ambitious stuff and it works.

The man behind it is Ritwik Shivam, who's in New Delhi, because this is primarily a one man band. He wrote everything and he performed almost everything, with a couple of guest drummers on a track each and a couple of guest vocalists also on a track each. The harsh vocals on the opener are the work of another guest. Mostly, though, this is Shivam and it's a mature release indeed for his debut album. At least I think it's his debut album, though other tracks precede on his Bandcamp page, going back a couple of years.

Highlights: *Astray*; *Marvels Beyond Madness*; *Of the Spirit*.



ALESTORM

SEVENTH RUM OF A SEVENTH RUM

COUNTRY:
UK

STYLE:
PIRATE METAL

RATING:
6/10

RELEASE DATE:
24 JUN 2022

Attempting to review Alestorm albums is fast becoming pointless. This is their seventh album and, if you've heard even one of them, well, this is another. On it, they do everything that they do as well as they did on whichever one you heard last. It's not better. It's not worse. It's not different. It simply makes their catalogue of songs eleven richer and that's about it. The only useful comment I could add to fans is that they don't try to vary their formula here, as they did a little last time out, on *Curse of the Crystal Coconut*. So, if you're a fan, you can quit reading now and return to your rum. If you've never heard of Alestorm, then read on, my friend and it's your round.

Alestorm are a pirate metal band from Scotland, which means that they play a form of folk/power metal that's rooted in sea shanties and is full of hook-laden singalong songs. And they're all about pirates, because that's all that matters in the wacky world of Alestorm. Everyone's a pirate or they don't count. And every pirate has a hook hand, a wooden leg and a fondness for rum, or they don't count either. Oh, and their lyrics, as generic as they often become, are alternately blisteringly clever and pointlessly puerile, which is something that probaby divides fans more than anything else.

For instance, this album opens up with *Magellan's Expedition*, where they deserve huge kudos for getting "proud Lusitanian shores", "the Castilian throne" and "Tierra del Fuego" into its lyrics, not to forget even managing to rhyme "Fernão Magalhães". That's ambitious and clever and it's a solid indication that these pirates aren't idiots. Another is the fact that, while they sing mostly in English, *Magellan's Expedition* also features a section sung in Latin; *Wooden Leg (Part III)* is in a combination of Spanish, Japanese and English; and, of all things, *Magyarország* includes a few sections in Hungarian, including a moment where they rhyme "Velence" with "Csöröge". I raise my glass in admiration!

And then there's the chorus of *The Battle of Cape Fear River*, in which we learn how foul mouthed Blackbeard was and, just to escalate

even further, the chorus of *Cannonball*, which prompts a good deal of self-examination as to why we keep listening to Alestorm. Sure, they do this well, but it's an awkward business model to market your band to eight year old prepubescent boys who giggle at a mention of the C word in a song. I remember when Viz started *Rude Kid* and it was funny for being so irreverent and unexpected, but it did its job after one panel. Forty years on, it's just stupid.

And that means that my reaction to this album is roughly 70% me enjoying Alestorm sounding exactly like Alestorm; 5% grinning at really clever bits or really cool moments that I wasn't expecting; and 25% rolling my eyes at either how juvenile a song is or how generic. As I mentioned earlier, this is a seventh album for Alestorm. How many songs are we going to get about how fantastic it is to be a pirate because you can steal stuff and get drunk in good company? If that didn't get old on side A of their debut album fourteen years ago, it got old by Side B. Another half dozen albums later and we could write some of these lyrics while they're playing the song.

If that all sounds overly critical for a band who don't take themselves remotely seriously, I should add that Alestorm still do this really well. Every song is an opportunity for a singalong and, if you happen to be drunk and in good company, all the better. If you threatened me with keelhauling if I didn't pick a highlight, I'd go with *Under Blackened Banners*. It's one of the most generic songs on the album lyrically, but it's particularly bouncy with particularly good hooks and it features a duel between keytar, guitar and keyboards that's a lot of fun. There's also a breakdown with a fiddle, a narrative section and some great exscalations. We can forgive generic lyrics.

If you don't like that one, well, you're out of luck then. The other ten songs aren't far off being the same thing, just not done quite as memorably. There are little touches that you might enjoy in one song or another, like the 8 bit nods in *Cannonball* and *Come to Brazil*. Maybe you'll dig *P.A.R.T.Y.*, a song that's so commercially aware that it could have been a cover of a Spice Girls single with a different stylistic filter on it. And yeah, that may or may not make you want to listen to it. But, at the end of the day, this is Alestorm being Alestorm and you're either into it or not.

Highlights: *Under Blackened Banners*.



ARMORY

MERCURION

COUNTRY:
SWEDEN

STYLE:
SPEED METAL

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
22 APR 2022

I should admit from the start that, even though I'm rating this 7/10 from a critical standpoint, this is so far up my alley that I haven't been listening to anything else for a couple of days and it needs to move on so I can review something else. Armory are a speed metal band from Gothenburg and, as perhaps you expect from their chosen genre, they play things old school. They're a decade into their career and this is their third full length, a sci-fi concept album because apparently everyone is into making concept albums nowadays and I missed the memo.

It's not just the science fiction side of this that prompts comparisons to Agent Steel, because that band are all over the opening track, *Message from the Stars*, and, while not everything here follows in their footsteps, some of it absolutely does, perhaps most obviously *Deep Space Encounter*, especially after the opening solo. The vocals of Konstapel P. are lower than those of John Cyriis, of course, though some higher notes are reminiscent, not least the very first one on *Message from the Stars*, and they're rougher as well, perhaps midway between Cyriis and John Connolly of Nuclear Assault. The guitars of G. G. Sundin and Ingelman, however, are right out of the Agent Steel playbook and they are the greatest success of this album.

In fact, I get caught up in those guitars so much that I keep forgetting to take notes. I keep putting the album on afresh, hearing that Agent Steel comparison and suddenly acknowledging that forty-two minutes have passed and I need to start over. I'm not falling prey to outside distraction. It isn't dropping into the background. I'm falling prey to inside distraction because it's the band doing it. I can't complain from the standpoint of a listener but it doesn't help me as a critic!

While most of this is pure speed metal, technical and intricate but mostly put in place to serve the need for speed, it's not all breakneck stuff. There are also plodders like *Journey into Infinity*, and many slower sections in many songs where the band shift a gear or three down but continue to be technical and

intricate. The guitarwork drives everything here, though it's reliant on the tight rhythm section of Anglegrinder on bass and Space Ace on drums, who sets the tone in the album's earliest moments. There are more interesting touches too, here and there, as parts of the story require them.

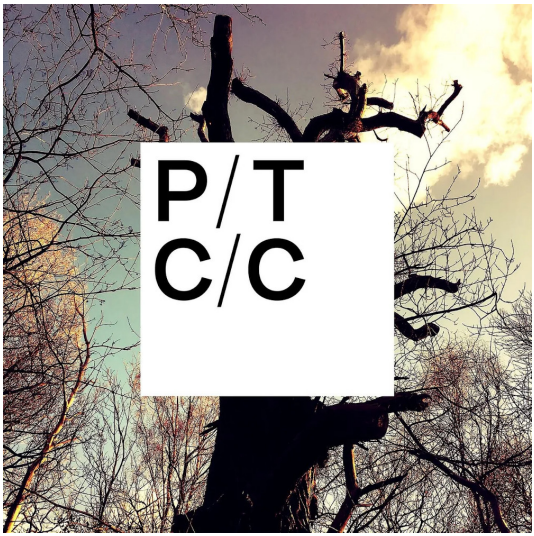
The most obvious is the way that *Void Prison* begins, because it sounds like the beats are built out of the sounds of a space age prison gate being firmly shut with us on the wrong side. Other intros are simpler but often just as effective, like the way that we're sucked into *Transneptunic Flight* as if we just leapt into hyperspace. There are odd narrative sections, but none get in the way, and an occasional choral part too, especially late in *Event Horizon*. In its way, the space war in the middle of *Deep Space Encounter* is a narration too, but it's told with keyboards rather than voice.

The most interesting stuff is reserved for the second half of the album and I'd say that the variety ramps up all the way to the fascinating way that *Event Horizon* ends, as if each musician wraps up their part in proceedings in turn and then proceeds over some threshold that takes them into the unknown. Maybe we'll learn something about what's beyond that threshold on their next album. I have no doubt that John Cyriis is watching the skies so he can keep an eye out for their return.

It's the final two songs that get really interesting. There's power metal in *Music from the Spheres*, both in vocal lines and slower sections, a nod to someone like Gamma Ray, even if they play a much smaller role here than Agent Steel. That song also features some keyboard swells right out of the seventies, which feels odd given that Armory are clearly otherwise so rooted in the early to mid eighties. There are Megadeth riffs on *Event Horizon* and it also flirts with prog metal often, right to the end.

And I'll shut up now because I just want to immerse myself in this album again. I think that 7/10 is a fair rating, but speed metal freaks like me will want to add another point and interpret that as an 8/10. I must be on my tenth or twelfth time through and it's not getting old. In fact I keep catching new little details each time through, even if I'm too engaged to write them down. Perhaps I will up this to an 8/10 at some point after all.

Highlights: *Message from the Stars*; *Deep Space Encounter*; *Music from the Spheres*; *Event Horizon*.



PORCUPINE TREE

CLOSURE/CONTINUATION

COUNTRY:
UK

STYLE:
PROGRESSIVE ROCK

RATING:
6/10

RELEASE DATE:
24 JUN 2022

Porcupine Tree are one of those bands I managed to miss out on completely, as the deep dive into rock and metal that I'd begun when I found the *Friday Rock Show* in 1984 started to fade at the end of that decade for a slew of reasons, not least real life asserting itself. I've seen the name often, a constant influence on later bands that I've appreciated and a constant reminder that I should get round to checking out their work. However, by the time I started paying attention, they'd given up as a band, because pivotal founder member Steven Wilson had shifted into a solo career. Until this album, my experience with them has been entirely confined to *The Future Bites*, Wilson's most recent solo album, which was excellent.

This one, on the other hand, is underwhelming. It's not bad, let me emphasise right from the kick off, but it is underwhelming and I think it was inherently going to be, based on the approach that it takes, because what it does best is subtle and what it does worst is grab us and keep us. It drifts away into the background very easily, unless we're listening through headphones in the dark, and the tracks blur together for the same reasons. However, it does reward those of us who pay attention.

The opening track is a fantastic example of this. It's called *Harridan* and it plays with urgency in an interesting way, but you have to pay attention to catch it. It's an eight minute song where the bass and drums are more important than the guitar and the vocals are sparse and somehow distant. It has dynamics in play that take it from funky Primus to sassy Nick Cave, from Pantera groove metal power chords to acoustic Barclay James Harvest, all of which work well, but they aren't the point.

The point seems to be to convince us that there's something really urgent going on but they're too busy sipping cocktails by the pool to tell us what it is and that's as frustrating as it is fascinating, a pair of feelings that merge during the second half with its frantic beats and soft jazz vocalising. It happens on *Rats Return* too, with the drums consistently more

urgent than the soothing vocals or swirling keyboards. It's like the message is to speed up and slow down at the same time. It's fair to say that much of the joy for me here is trying to reconcile those diametrically opposite ideas but it doesn't make for a simple album.

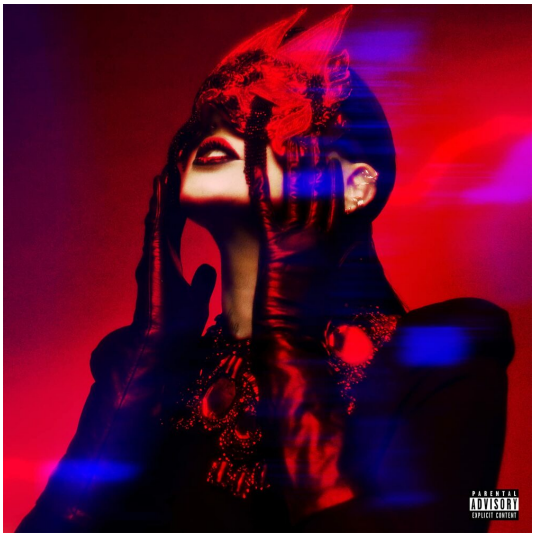
And maybe we shouldn't look at this as an album, even though it's what it is and there are a whole slew of consistent approaches that make it appropriate to talk about as one. From the random listener's perspective, it probably helps to listen to it as seven isolated tracks, maybe even with gaps between each and on shuffle. Most obviously, *Of the New Day*, with its glorious melodies that feel utterly effortless, plays much better when it isn't just a coda to *Harridan*. *Walk the Plank*, a quirky piece of soft new wave glitch prog, only finds itself in isolation.

But the band seem determined that we should listen to this as an album. The first fifty seconds of *Dignity* almost aren't there and it moves through sections that could be different songs, as does *Herd Culling*. These prompt us to wonder if the breaks between songs are purely arbitrary. Is *Herd Culling* one song or a set of eight outtakes from recording one song? Are there songs that start in one track and finish in another? Is this a puzzle box of an album that we have to figure out?

The only song that stands out on its own is the last one, *Chimera's Wreck*, because it's as active as most of the rest of the album is passive. Everything else wants us to listen to it but feels too shy to ask us to pay attention. *Chimera's Wreck* commands us to listen, from the opening chords that are reminiscent of Pink Floyd's *Hey You*, through the first verse that's phrased like the end of *Wish You Were Here*. It's clearly designed to build and it wants us to guess at what's coming next. It's a good thing that it's last, because almost everything else here would fade into the background if played after it.

So, there's a lot here to discover and prog fans are used to unpacking their favourite albums, so it may well find an audience. However, with the exception of that one final track, it isn't going to let us in easy. We have to fight our way through the barriers it sets up and others that we've placed in the way ourselves, just to get into the right state of mind to pay attention. Then we have to figure out what it's doing and why. Eventually we'll be rewarded but I wonder how many of us are willing to exert that much patience to get there. So I think I have to stick with a 6/10 but you should add an extra point if you have that sort of patience.

Highlights: *Chimera's Wreck*; *Of the New Day*.



DOROTHY

GIFTS FROM THE HOLY GHOST

COUNTRY:
USA

STYLE:
ROCK

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
22 APR 2022

This is a third album for Dorothy Martin, the Hungarian-born American singer who dominates this sound without her huge voice. I say her rather than the band that carries her name, because she's so obviously the focal point that it feels more like a solo project. What's more, I don't know who's in the band right now; while Wikipedia lists a current line-up, one including a guitarist who joined after their previous release, I can't find confirmation that they're on this record. The names that I see in the press release, like Jason Hook of Five Finger Death Punch and Keith Wallen of Breaking Benjamin, may be writers or producers or guests or... well, I don't know.

What I know is that whoever's playing instruments here is mostly supporting that voice. There are strong riffs everywhere and some decent solos, but it's oddly difficult to focus on anything but the voice. Occasionally, a bluesy slide guitar grabs my attention but it's not long before it's back in the background and I'm back following the vocals. In fact, there are songs here that feel as if they were designed to be showcases on a TV talent show. *Rest in Peace* and *Close to Me Always* both do that and it's almost weird to not hear the studio audience's response to being wowed.

What's odd is that, as much as it's all about the voice, the music behind Dorothy trawls in quite the range of influences. *A Beautiful Life* opens up sounding like it has a lot in common with the British New Wave of Classic Rock, but with a tinge of southern rock. *Big Guns*, on the other hand, is clearly a pop song dressed in rock clothing, very contemporary in outlook. There are pop moments everywhere here, an unexpected Phil Collins keyboard moment late in *Top of the World* hinting at the electronic drums that take over for *Hurricane*, a song whose drive ends up feeling rather like Robert Palmer with a guest vocal from Pat Benatar.

And everything here has a drive. Every one of the ten songs is urgent and Dorothy often wants us to try to sing along with her, all the more often as the album runs on. The most anthemic song here may be *Black Sheep*, one of three tracks released as singles thus far. Not

unusually for this album, it's a glam rock-inspired anthem with a spiritual mindset. It's followed by *Touched by Fire*, with a couple of chant-along sections and a hand clapping "hey hey" part, easily the most overt audience participation bit in an album with plenty of them. The title track that closes out the album is a singalong too.

I should add that much of this makes sense, given certain behind the scenes details that flavour it all. The poppier songs, not just the ones that feel like diva showcases but the ones with their very contemporary, more artificial backings too, make sense when we realise that Dorothy is signed to Roc Nation, which is owned by Jay-Z. The spiritual flavour isn't surprising when we discover that a guitar tech overdosed on heroin on her tour bus three years ago and Dorothy watched him die. By her account, he was gone but he returned to his body when she prayed for that to happen and the experience was quite the spiritual awakening for her.

She's certainly full of life here but I wonder where the invisible band is going to go from here. It's worth remembering here that Alice Cooper used to be the name of a band too, and a damn good one, but it soon became the name of its lead showman and the stage behind him quickly became full of a revolving door of musicians. I can see Dorothy going the same way, if not the full distance to a Gwen Stefani reinvention from lead singer and face of a band to solo diva, with the musicians and songwriters hired as needed and every other release featuring someone or other. Only time will tell.

Highlights: *Black Sheep*; *Gifts from the Holy Ghost*.





BELPHEGOR

THE DEVILS

COUNTRY:
AUSTRIA

STYLE:
BLACK/DEATH METAL

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
24 JUN 2022

This makes a dozen studio albums now for Austrian black/death metal legends Belphegor and it has an uncharacteristically subdued title for them. After all, this is the band behind memorable album titles such as *Necrodaemon Terrorsathan*, *Goatreich - Fleshcult* and, of course, *Bondage Goat Zombie*. *The Devils* simply doesn't have the same oomph to it. Fortunately, that oomph is still there when it comes to the music, at least for the most part. There's an abiding patience to the opening title track that feels out of place to me and it returns a number of times throughout the album, but *Totentanz* nails its groove immediately and the album is off and running.

Belphegor is only two people nowadays, founding member Helmuth on lead vocals and guitar; and Serpenth on bass and backing vocals, as he's been for over a decade and a half now. The drums are provided by a guest musician, David Diepold of British deathcore band Cognizance, among others. They bulk up with a second guitarist on tour, but Molokh apparently doesn't appear on this album. That makes them a kinda sorta power trio, I guess, and I've always found it fascinating to hear the depth of sound that only three people can conjure up. That goes double for a band who delve into black metal so deeply, that trio being responsible for the wall of sound we hear.

And there's some deep black metal in *Totentanz*, which is a glorious blitzkrieg of a track that feels like it simply couldn't be generated by three musicians. Sure, two of them have double duty but it seems like there are a lot more than two voices in play and a lot more than three musicians. Their layering of vocals, or whatever it is they're doing here, is the primary reason it feels deep, but the songwriting helps too.

Glorifizierung des Teufels is seriously stripped down in comparison, plenty of it told with acoustic guitar and growled vocals, but it gets notably choral. It feels like a piece of operatic music adapted into an extreme metal framework, all the way to the strange narrative bit at the end for a female voice crying out in

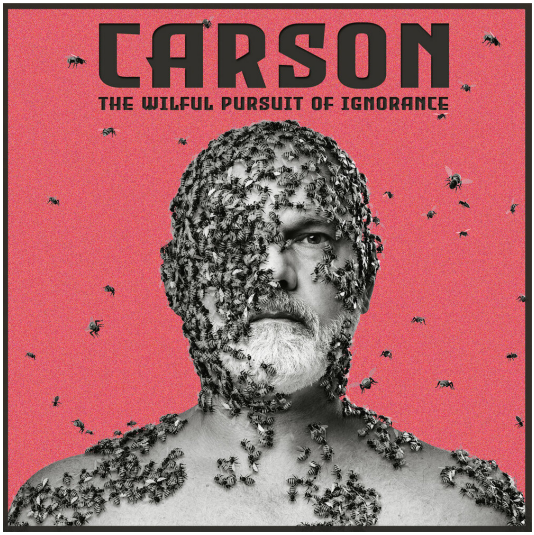
English in what may be a sample.

Those may be my favourite two songs here, as utterly different as they are, and they point the way to the other highlights of the album that are either fast and frantic but with a memorable groove, though only *Kingdom of Cold Flesh* attempts to match *Totentanz* on that front, imaginative and bursting with dynamic play, a standard approach here. The songs that don't do much for me, such as that title track, are those that don't do either. The ones that do both and occasionally more are still growing on me after quite a few listens.

The most obvious example is *Damnation - Hollensturz*, which wraps up the first half. It has a frantic section here and there, especially during its bookends, and I love those. It has dynamic sections as well, where it bounces back and forth between calming and heavy. And it adds a fascinating ethnic vocal in its second half that doesn't sound Austrian at all, more Turkish (it returns on *Creatures of Fire*, where it's just as tantalising). Yet this has also some of the patient bits that sometimes lose me, so I'm thoroughly enjoying it but I'm stuck in two minds about whether it ranks up there with *Totentanz* and the fascinating *Glorifizierung des Teufels*.

I'd have liked more frantic pieces but I'm happy with the dynamic play and the choral mindset that mixes the mild black shriek and rich death growl but layers them for effect with clean vocals which conjure up images of a choir of monks joining in song with a couple of demons. *Virtus Asinaria* has this and *Ritus Incendium Diabolis* too, almost reaching a plain chant behind the crunch. And this is enough to make me wonder if *The Devils* is a metal oratorio. It doesn't feel like full on opera so I'm not visualising the whole performance. It's pure music.

Highlights: *Totentanz - Dance Macabre*; *Glorifizierung des Teufels*.



CARSON

THE WILFUL PURSUIT OF IGNORANCE

COUNTRY:
SWITZERLAND

STYLE:
STONER ROCK

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
15 APR 2022

I'm not sure what I was expecting from this band, but I expected something worthy of note, given a strange location shift; Kieran Jones, the singer and guitarist, is from New Zealand and this band's origins are there, but he moved himself and the band to Switzerland. There's nothing Swiss in this sound that I can discern, but they combine their very American sounding stoner rock, played with a commercial level of fuzz, with a Ian Astbury passion for melodies. *Dirty Dream Maker*, the opening track and initial single, is relatively easily described as Queens of the Stone Age meeting the Cult.

Carson, as so many stoner rock bands tend to be, are a power trio, with Elina Willener on bass and Jan Kurmann on drums, and that power is on display on the opening couple of tracks. There's real energy to it, which is recognisable to fans of any antipodean music, but it's tampered down a little bit to make it more patient and commercial and it's fair to suggest that both openers had plenty of chances at reaching a mainstream audience. Everything they need is there except luck and that famous lady is notoriously hard to find, apparently even in Lucerne.

Siren is where they shift gear, because it's almost two minutes longer than anything else here and so it has plenty of time to breathe. It starts mellow but perky and returns to that at points, with a not all the way back to the Cult's primary influence, the Doors. It ramps up, of course, with energy to spare, even when it finds a patient heavy and dirty riff halfway through, but that's not where a kind of inevitable Black Sabbath influence creeps in, at least not really. That doesn't show up until later, when they drop down to a trippy liquid instrumental section reminiscent of *Planet Caravan*.

So yeah, there are surprises here. They're technically a Swiss band nowadays but they don't sound remotely Swiss. They're playing an American style of music but with a very recognisably British flavour to it. And, while every stoner rock band on the planet owes a debt to Black Sabbath, theirs isn't at all the

usual one for much of the album; the most overt Sabbath influence shows up on *Outbound Tide*, which is the last of eight tracks, even if there are undercurrents of *You're So Vain* in there as well. Yeah, Sabbath are notable there throughout, through osmosis, because this is nineties stoner rock a lot more often than it is its seventies roots, except on *Siren.*

In fact, there are other more modern sounds to be found here too. *Gimmie* is a punk song, edgier and fuzzier than its obvious modern pop punk comparisons but not as edgy as their predecessors. There's a control in play here that Carson don't want to give up. They're absolutely crafting songs here, rather than just jamming for the pleasure of the moment. Even the songs that find the most effective grooves, like *No Joy* with its excellent bouncy riffs, never feel like they would ever go off the rails into a drawn out instrumental section. It's just not who this band are.

At least, it's not who they are on record, though I have to confess that I'm judging that from this, a follow-up album to 2017's *Drown the Witness*. It wouldn't surprise me to find that they're a looser, heavier and faster band on stage. I'd love to see what some of these songs become when played by an urgent live band.

Highlights: *Siren*; *Dirty Dream Maker*; *No Joy*; *Outbound Tide*.





HOLY DRAGONS

JÖRMUNGANDR:
THE SERPENT OF THE WORLD

COUNTRY:
KAZAKHSTAN

STYLE:
HEAVY/POWER METAL

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
1 JUL 2022

This may be a surprising album to show up as my second review of the day, given that I try to post a new and often indie band first but follow up with an established and well known outfit. So who are Holy Dragons, because I hadn't heard of them before and you may well not have done either? Well, they've been around since 1995 under this name—and were known as Axcess for a few more years before that—and this is between their sixteenth and twentieth album, depending on how we count. I think a few may be re-recordings of earlier albums with new singers. Whatever the number, they certainly count as established and it would seem that the Kazakh metal scene started with them.

I really dig this album, but it's a couple of different things rolled into one and it takes a little while to get used to that. For a start, the best thing about the band at present is surely the guitarwork, which is prominent and outstanding. Jürgen Thunderson and Chris Caine, usually called Thorheim, are both founder members, though the latter wasn't in Axcess before that. I'd state that, however much I enjoyed any particular song here, every single one of them is elevated at the point that the rhythm section settles into a groove and Thunderson and Caine trade solos with each other. I could listen to The Toothless Wolf forever. Even bassist Ivan Manchenko gets in on the act.

These guitars are firmly rooted in heavy/power metal and often acquire a speed metal edge when they shift into solo territory. The biggest shift I heard was when *Somebody's Life* showcases an old school AC/DC style riff, right out of the Bon Scott era, but everything else here is pretty consistent in approach. Even when soloing fast, however, Thunderson and Caine never lose sight of melody, a potent combination and one that I've adored since I found rock and metal in 1984. However, I must add that, while Caine has been playing guitar in Holy Dragons since 1995, she didn't step up to the mike until 2015, suggesting that she's far more comfortable as a guitarist than a vocalist.

And that makes sense, given that she sounds more accomplished as a guitarist than a vocalist. I'd better mention here that I really dig her vocals, but they're not going to be for everyone, because her shriller, more emphatic take on the Doro style works better the faster they go and the fastest of all the bits here are instrumental sections, when she's wearing her guitarist hat. I think that fans of the pure heavy metal style that don't like speed metal may find her voice too raucous for them, while speed metal fans will love her voice but wish the band would speed up to match it. It's people like me who appreciate both styles and remember Doro when she was Doro Pesch, the lead singer for Warlock, that will dig this, even if we take a song or two to adjust.

I believe this is a concept album that spins a story out of the rich vein of storytelling in Norse myth. If it isn't, then that's certainly a common theme. *Jörmungandr* is certainly right out of the Eddas, being the sea serpent who surrounds the Earth. It's one of the children of *Loki*, another title here; a sibling of Fenrir, the *Toothless Wolf* of that song. When *Jörmungandr* lets its tail go, it'll be time for *Ragnarok* that will take place at the field called *Vígríðr*, the name of the intro here. The outro is *Iðavöllr*, which, like *Midgard* in another song title, are places and, well, pretty much everything here ties in somehow.

I didn't follow the concept as it ran through, but I did appreciate the music, in the vocal sections and especially in the instrumental ones. Bassist Manchenko and drummer Zabir Shamsutdinov provide a solid backdrop for Thunderson and Caine to strut their stuff and they do that well. This album squeaks a second past a full hour and I didn't find it remotely long. I could listen to these guitar solos all day every day. This is old school stuff, reminding of Warlock, Exciter and Detente. It's not what most of the metal bands in the world are playing but that's just another plus point for me. And now you're familiar with the biggest metal band in Kazakhstan. You're welcome.

Highlights: *The Toothless Wolf*; *Sinister Piper*; *On My Watch*; *Jörmungandr*.



AARLON

DAFAN

COUNTRY:
INDIA

STYLE:
ALTERNATIVE ROCK/METALCORE

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
27 MAR 2022

After I reviewed the new Bloodywood album earlier in the year, I received submissions from a few other bands from India and that makes me happy because I haven't heard anywhere near enough rock and metal from that country and I'd love to catch up more. In fact, the more I hear, the more I want to hear more because the bands who I have heard are often interesting and uncategorisable. That holds for bands as varied as Prophets of Yahweh, Cosmic Circle and Friends from Moon and it holds true with this album too, perhaps unsurprisingly, as all of the music here was composed by Ritwik Shivam, the man behind Friends from Moon.

In fact, I now realise that, while Shivam played almost every instrument on that *Astray* album, the five guest appearances included two members of Aarlon with a third, Guarav Basnet, a guest here too. When Shivam needed a harsh voice, he asked Pritam Adhikary to provide it, who's the vocalist throughout this album, except for Basnet's guest spot on *Rok Lo*. Shivam had two guest drummers on *Astray*, one of whom was Prankreet Borah, Aarlon's drummer. Clearly, this is a solid opportunity to hear what Shivam sounds like as only one musician in a band of five, each of which can also call a few shots. Sure, he composed all the music here, but his fellow guitarist, Piyush Rana, handled the lyrics and I'm sure the other musicians each made their creative contributions too.

This may not be as wildly varied as *Astray*, but it continues to keep us on the hop until the end. The genre is very hard to nail down, because they have two very different styles, some songs playing in one and some in the other, with the most interesting moving between them. The first of the styles that shows up is metalcore, because the opener, *Vidroh*, kicks off hard and heavy but very modern. In fact, the first part of the song is just like Bloodywood, merely without ethnic instrumentation in the drop spots. Adhikary even sounds like Jayant Bhadula when doing his gruff voice. However, the band don't drop into Raoul Kerr-esque raps when they need to

provide contrast, Adhikary softens up instead.

And that's where the other primary style comes in, because that's alternative rock, far softer and with clean, characterful vocals. Even on *Vidroh*, Adhikary delivers in a number of styles, but on the next song, *Panchhi*, he sounds like a completely different singer, because we move from an urgent metalcore sound to a pastoral one that makes us wonder in Donovan ever recorded in Hindi. They literally go from clanging metal behind a sonic assault to an acoustic guitar over a bubbling brook and tweeting birds in as short a time as it takes for your jaw to drop.

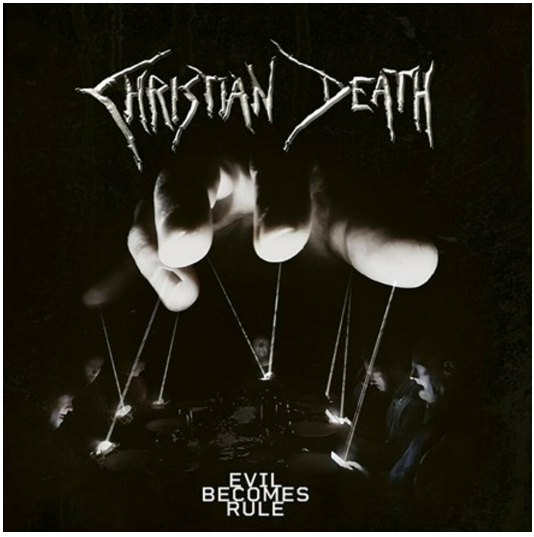
Now, to be fair, the heaviest part of *Vidroh* was its ending and *Panchhi* does build considerably, but it feels difficult to reconcile the two tracks as being by the same band. Even when the second goes into its heavier section, it still can't compete with what Aarlon started out with one track earlier, a breathy groove taking over instead that had me rocking in my office chair. That's impressive and I would suggest that, if you don't like the first track, stick around through the second one. There's a lot going on here and you don't want to miss any of it because one style isn't to your liking.

After a few listens, I think it's fair to say that my favourite songs find a different vibe again, as they come early in the second half with an older take on alternative rock. *Saavan* and especially *Aaina* could both have done well during the post-punk era in the UK, as ethereal and haunting dark pop music. Somehow, *Aaina* has a Japanese flavour to it. *Tu* is more in line, I'd suggest, with their alt rock mode and, like so many of these songs do, builds really well, finding a point where we think it has to have peaked but continuing to build for a little while longer.

If you want the heavier Aarlon, that does return on *Inquilaab*, but it features a playful kind of rage that doesn't feel quite so angry to me as *Vidroh* did. The best merging of the two sides of the band may be found on *Rok Lo*, with Basnet's smooth, sometimes perhaps auto-tuned voice a fair counter to Adhikary's harsh approach, just as the catchy and commercial alternative rock counters the urgent, in your face metalcore. I think it probably overwhelms it, as it skews more to the alt rock side as it goes and it may end up a little unbalanced.

I'm still in two minds as to how the album as a whole balances those two main styles. As much as I'd usually go for the faster, heavier material, I prefer the softer styles here, especially the post-punk. That said, the songs that shift from light to heavy, and it tends to be that way round, are surely the most interesting. I may be all about *Saavan* and *Aaina*, but *Tu* and *Panchhi* won't leave me alone. It bodes well for a band when they leave me arguing with myself about what worked best, because it means they're doing interesting things.

Highlights: *Saavan*; *Aaina*; *Panchhi*; *Tu*.



CHRISTIAN DEATH

EVIL BECOMES RULE

COUNTRY:
USA

STYLE:
GOTH ROCK

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
6 MAY 2022

I've had a taste for goth since before I found metal, because I was fascinated by the indie charts in *Smash Hits* when I was listening to bands like Adam and the Ants. However, I didn't have access to a lot of it back then and, by the time I did, I'd moved into much heavier material, so I've kind of stuck around on the fringes of it ever since, bumping into it again and again when other interests have a goth adjacent status, especially steampunk. So I've been aware of Christian Death for a long time without actually hearing more than an odd track here and there. This is my first album of theirs.

I find their sound very interesting, because it's clearly goth rock but with obvious nods to a slew of other genres. *The Alpha and the Omega*, which opens up the album, is a great example because it plays Valor Kand's deep and rich vocal over a slow and melancholic backdrop of strings, reminding of Nick Cave, back when he was still with the Bad Seeds. It doesn't have the elegant poetry of Cave though, and when it heavies up, it isn't strictly to a noisier emphasis, as Cave did on *Loverman*; it's almost electro-industrial in a Nine Inch Nails vein.

They stay slow and melancholic, but keep enough of a bounce in their step to avoid getting overtly doomladen. Everything is dark but nothing is suicidal dark. It's characterful dark and it's simple to track the sound back to the beginnings of the genre. And, quite frankly, they were there, in quite a different form to be fair, but Christian Death dates back to 1979 when Rozz Williams founded them as a teenager. It's obvious that they were listening to Bauhaus and Siouxsie and the Banshees but also plenty of the American underground too. I hear the Swans here, not least because Maitri has quite the vocal presence here in addition to her work on bass and keyboards, but I'm sure there's a long list of others that I'm not qualified to recognise.

By the way, Maitri is one of two long term members of Christian Death. Valor Kand is the other, an acquisition in 1983 when Williams ditched his entire line-up and brought in

another band, Pompeii 99, which Kand had co-formed, to become the new Christian Death. He took over at the point that Williams left in 1985 and Maitri joined in 1991. I'm not even sure who the drummer is this week but it doesn't seem to be a long term position for anyone. It's worth mentioning that Williams formed a separate version of the band in the early nineties, releasing three albums, before sadly taking his own life. So this may be the seventeenth or twentieth album for Christian Death, I think, depending on how you count.

There's enough here that three listens isn't remotely enough for me to choose a favourite track. I dig most of what they're doing, though the experimental title track gets a little much. There are a few groove-ridden songs like *Blood Moon* that remind me of the Sisters of Mercy meeting Inkubus Sukkubus. There are quirkier Nick Cave-like songs, *The Warning* leaping out as a pristine example. Beautiful sounds more like Siouxsie and the Banshees, which may underline why I prefer Maitri's vocals to Kand's, not that I don't appreciate the latter too, especially on more subdued songs like *Who am I*, a two part piece that wraps up the album. *Pt. 1* is acutely Nick Cave, but *Pt. 2* is stripped down, wilder and experimental. It captivated me on a first listen and did the same thing with each fresh repeat.

Clearly I should listen to more Christian Death. I know I have a bunch here, so it's just comes down to finding the time. I have no idea if this is representative of what they've done for so long but, if it is, it's easy to see why they're considered the founders of American gothic rock, or deathrock or whatever else they want to call it. It's also easy to see their sound influencing alt rock darlings like Trent Reznor and Marilyn Manson, though I prefer Christian Death's older school sound certainly to Manson, who I've never got into. I think that suggests that this album is a good place to start. I hope so.

Highlights: *Beautiful*; *New Messiah*; *Who am I, Pt. 2*; *Blood Moon*.



ALPHA Q

PARALLEL UNIVERSE

COUNTRY:
ROMANIA

STYLE:
PROGRESSIVE ROCK/METAL

RATING:
8/10

RELEASE DATE:
29 JUL 2022

I only know about Alpha Q because one of its two guitarists is Waqas Ahmed and I've reviewed two of his releases in the past, the *Doomsday Astronaut* album and the *A Perpetual Winter* EP. In case he's new to you, he hails from Lahore in Pakistan but he lives in Sibiu, Romania, which surely has a very different musical scene. While those releases focused very specifically on him and his guitar, which means that they're almost entirely solo efforts, Waqas kindly sent me a copy of this too, which is a different setup entirely.

Alpha Q are a six-piece band and this is their debut album. While they clearly appreciate what this one guitarist brings to their sound, they just as clearly appreciate the slew of other influences the other five musicians bring to the table too. Clearly they're not all Pakistani shred guitarists living in Romania. While I don't know where they're all from, I'm guessing that they're not all Romanian either because this is quite the melting pot of a sound.

For a start, I spent quite a while wondering if they're a rock band or a metal band because they're frequently one or the other or both at the same time. *Darkness* opens up the album, for instance, with a solo female voice, which is appropriate because I'd call their lead vocalist MeeRah a highlight of this entire band. When she roars, her voice isn't too far from Dorothy Martin's, whose new album I reviewed earlier in the week. However, MeeRah is much more interested in dynamic play, so she roars when she wants to roar and croons when she wants to croon. She's great at both approaches and a slew of others, because she's equally at home with pop, rock and metal, even trying a rap over the funky beats of *Make a Wish*. I've been checking out her other projects and they're highly versatile.

What's special here is that the band is also versatile, which is why their sound is so hard to define. When MeeRah roars in *Darkness*, they ramp up from alternative rock to almost groove metal and, when she's done for a while, they shift into a sort of seventies guitar work-out, like Mark Knopfler playing with Wishbone

Ash. The song isn't as schizophrenic as that might suggest, but it does take quite the leap from one section to another. I enjoyed it a great deal, but think I connected with its successor on the album, *Ballad of a Ticking Clock* quicker, because its movements flow deceptively well and its groove is more immediate.

I'd call this one a prog metal song that's frequently prog rock. It feels bigger and more epic, but it actually runs a little shorter, maybe because it fades out just when I didn't want it to. I wanted it to keep on going for a lot longer. It's probably worth stating that five of the eight songs on offer last between five and a half and seven minutes and that's a good sweet spot for Alpha Q, because they always want to do at least a couple of things within each song and they need to transition between them and back again.

I like some of these shifts more than others, but I appreciate all of them because they're conjured up with plenty of thought about what those contrasts mean. I like how *Unbreakable* is both one of the heaviest songs here and one of the most commercial. I like how *Angels and Demons* drop from prog metal into a neatly peaceful section halfway with a vaguely ethnic acoustic guitar, then goes right back up the emphasis scale into a guitar solo. I like how *Make a Wish* shifts from jagged djent into a heavy groove, then goes all funky with an old school rap, the sort of thing that Blondie used to do when they played with genres. It's a story song too with MeeRah as a sort of genie.

Long story short, I like what Waqas Ahmed does on his own, just as I like what MeeRah does on her own and I'll probably like what all the other members here do on their own. I have homework to do when I can find some time. However, I have a feeling that I'll like what they all do together a little more than any of them solo. They click well, as diverse as they are, and they each bring something different to the Alpha Q table. There's folk here and shred and dance and groove and a whole lot more. I look forward to their next album.

Highlights: *Ballad of a Ticking Clock*; *Darkness*; *Unbreakable*; *Make a Wish*.



SAOR

ORIGINS

COUNTRY:
UK

STYLE:
ATMOSPHERIC FOLK/BLACK METAL

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
24 JUN 2022

Saor's fourth album, *Forgotten Paths*, was one of the earliest albums that I reviewed here, when I had only just started up Apocalypse Later Music in 2019, and it was an eye-opener for me, because it demonstrated to me that black metal, which I was well aware of as a relatively confined genre with a penchant for shrieked vocals, frantic drums and wall of sound guitars, was far more versatile than I thought. The past four years have taught me that, on the contrary, it's one of the most malleable genres out there, bands like Katharos XIII, Oranssi Pazuzu and Cân Bardd taking it into all sorts of places I never expected it to go: jazz, psychedelia and folk respectively.

Now, I'm playing up my ignorance a little much there, but I remember well the early rivalries that pitted black metal against death and thrash that were only trumped by metal vs. glam. It was not seen as appropriate to defect to a different camp or, crucially, to be in more than one at the same time. I knew intellectually in 2019 that those times were mostly gone, thank goodness, but it's fair to say that Saor helped me realise not that genres could merge but that it was already happening to a serious degree, because this is as much folk metal as it is black metal and it would be almost a heresy to attempt to separate them.

This fifth album does a similar job to its predecessor in merging those two genres, enough that I'd know precisely where Andy Marshall, the one man behind this project, hailed from even if I hadn't looked it up first. Maybe I wouldn't have been able to identify that from the opening track, *Call of the Carnyx*, though there are firm hints, but I wouldn't have any doubt by the time *Fallen* wraps up five minutes later. The last minute and a half is certainly black metal, blistering along at a serious clip, but it's also unmistakably a Celtic jig. The title track that wraps up the album returns to this a great deal, so it's there fresh in mind when the whole thing ends too.

And, once we've heard it, it's never that far away. We might not recognise the folky

melodies and rhythms in *The Ancient Ones* as Celtic if we were given that song and that task in isolation but, in the slot right after hearing *Fallen*, it's impossible to miss, especially halfway through when it finds a bagpipe-like drone or later when it adds a plaintive flute. Once we have the wide open spaces of Scotland in our minds, everything depicts them.

The Ancient Ones begins and ends quietly, with that flute. It fades out slowly behind wind, and I'm talking about the wind that shifts air around rather than wind instruments. The natural world and other outdoor sounds are a frequent element here. *Fallen* begins with a crackling fire, *Aurora* with a heartbeat, *Beyond the Wall* with a storm. There was even more of this on *Forgotten Paths* and it lasted longer too, leading me to suggest two primary tones of pastoral and aggressive. That holds here, but there are fewer and shorter pastoral sections and more aggression. It's a heavier album and perhaps an angrier one. The choice of cover art reflects that too.

It's not entirely dark though. Even a song like *Aurora*, very possibly my favourite track here, which starts out angry and aggressive, calms down at points. It's like most of the song unfolds under an impressively dark and overcast sky but the clouds clear and the sun shines through at points, with a massive effect on the mood of the track. *Beyond the Wall*, which starts with a storm, does much the same thing and with similar quality, the primary difference being the tantalising presence of a guest female voice, initially as ghostlike whispers and later as a harmonising partner.

I like this album and I liked the previous one too, but I'm not sure which I prefer. I like the heavier, more aggressive feel, but I also wanted longer pastoral sections, so I'm in two minds. Other than that, it's very consistent with *Forgotten Paths*, with few things standing out for special notice. The one I will comment on is the bass on *Aurora*, which kicks in early and reminds of Peter Hook's work for Joy Division. I dug that a lot, maybe as much as I dug the monk-like choral chants on the same song. So perhaps I like this as much as last time but not more, so it's another reliable album from a busy musician.

Highlights: *Fallen*; *Aurora*; *Origins*.



BLACK ROSE

WTF

COUNTRY:
UK

STYLE:
HEAVY METAL

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
24 JUN 2022

Here's another band I didn't expect to see new product from. Black Rose hail from Middlesbrough and were part of the NWOBHM era, though they didn't release an album until 1984's *Boys Will Be Boys*. I have a couple of their albums but remember them mostly for the session they recorded for the *Friday Rock Show* in 1986, during the era when I was recording that show religiously. It's good to see them back with what's their fourth album rather than the third I expected, as *Curse for Your Disease* was released in 2010 when I wasn't paying attention.

What's immediately obvious here is that this is a much heavier album than I remember them ever being. That's not a bad thing, of course, but it doesn't seem like a Tokyo Blade situation where the labels pushed them in musical directions they shouldn't have taken and, now that they're playing for the sake of the music rather than the money, they're doing what they want. Black Rose were a lot more consistent in style back in the day, but have chosen to heavy up, even though three of the four current members were in the band back in the eighties. This isn't a hard and heavy album. It's heavy metal pure and simple.

To be fair, the heaviness is initially most obvious in the bass, which was contributed by the newest member of the band, Kiko Rivers, who joined in 2003 when the band officially reformed after over a decade out. That bass fits very well with the drums of Paul Fowler, the newest recruit, though he was there at the tail end of their original run, and it fits pretty well with the guitars too, which I'd say are downtuned quite a bit from their old days. Steve Bardsley's vocals remain clean though, as Black Rose aren't going extreme here, just heavy.

How heavy you might ask? Well, they flirt with doom on *Devils Candy*, but it's too lively otherwise to warrant that easy categorisation. *Under My Skin* opens up rather in the vein of Anthrax's *Medusa*, which is not remotely as fast as I remember it. That feel's there on the title track too, though the tone of the guitars

as the song goes into the middle solo, reminds more of *One* by Metallica, albeit not as frantic. *Detonator*, which sounds like a speed metal song just from its title, has an urgency to it I'd associate with speed metal, though it never ramps up to that sort of pace.

So there's the new Black Rose sound, for the most part. It's heavier than it used to be, still rooted in the NWOBHM era but with at least a toe in doom and with firm acknowledgement of speed and thrash, if not actually venturing into those genres. I say for "the most part" because it's easily the majority of the album, but there's a bit more here that diversifies their sound. I wouldn't say that they're really just winding back the clock to 1985 anyway, even if so much of what they're doing is a fair estimate of what they could have done back then. But it's a couple of songs that feature much more modern elements that highlight how deliberate that approach is and how it's not absolute.

The easiest to grasp is *Tattoos and Lipstick*, which is pretty consistent with earlier songs but finds a fascinating cross between a *Shout at the Devil*-era Mötley Crüe vibe and a heads down Pantera riff assault. The riffs are a bit more groove oriented, the solos and melodies are a bit more flashy and the result is a bit more American party than British pub. It's a departure but it's not a big one and it plays well alongside the earlier stuff.

A harder one to figure out is *Pain*, which comes right after the title track early in the album, as we're getting used to this new Black Rose sound. And *Pain* has a very different approach, reminding of a band as utterly unlike every comparison I've mentioned thus far as Creed. This isn't that different from a Creed single, merely using a mix that has the instruments turned up and the vocals down. I have to admit that the recognition took me aback, but it sounds good, perhaps because the song is far perkier than Creed ever were and it really is a song, not a therapy session dumped on a crowd.

I like this new Black Rose. They were a good hard rock band back in the day and, while I can't recall the last time I listened to *Walk It Like You Talk It*, I actually played the repeat of their *Friday Rock Show* session very recently, preferring it to the new one that week by the Alliance. I wondered, as I do often listening to those shows forty years on, whatever happened to them. Well, they got the band back together and they're arguably better now than they've ever been. That's my good news for the day. And that's got nothing to do with the fact that my next book will also be called *WTF!?*

Highlights: *Devils Candy*; *Armageddon*; *Under My Skin*.



KING GIZZARD AND THE LIZARD WIZARD

OMNIUM GATHERUM

COUNTRY:
AUSTRALIA

STYLE:
PSYCHEDELIC ROCK

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
22 APR 2022

Every time I blink, it seems like King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard have knocked out a new album. I reviewed both their 2019 albums, *Fishing for Fishies* and *Infest the Rats' Nest*, missed *K.G.* in 2020 but caught *L.W.* in 2021. I completely failed to notice *Butterfly 3000*, also a 2021 release, and *Made in Timeland*, which came out in March of this year. Only a month later, they knocked out this one, a wildly varied eighty minute trip through pretty much every style they've ever played in, plus a few more for good measure.

Just to highlight how long that is, *The Dripping Tap* is an opener that runs a frantic eighteen minutes but the album would still exceed an hour even had the band left this one off entirely. Fortunately, they kept it in, as it's a pristine example of the core King Gizzard sound, a dense psych jam of epic proportions with relatively simple, repeated vocals that became almost hallucinatory, as well as an interesting spiritual pop theme that opens the song and returns every once in a while. It's exactly what someone new to the band and bewildered by their diverse output should start with, though I would still suggest their *Polygondwanaland* album first.

The problem here, should we see it as a problem and I think I'm leaning towards doing that, is that *The Dripping Tap* doesn't sound like anything else here and that's a solid trend. While, in the past, the band has tended to do their genre shifting from album to album, so that *Infest the Rats' Nest* was internally consistent but very different from *Fishing for Fishies*, for example, there's a heck of a lot of genre shifting going on within this one. That makes the album's title appropriate, because *Omnium Gatherum* translates from the Latin as a miscellany, the collection of different things into a single new package.

The psychedelia of *The Dripping Tap* does give way to more psychedelia in *Magenta Mountain* and that's followed by still more psychedelia in *Kepler-22b*, but the former is a rock jam and the latter pair are dream pop songs. They actually work well together as a reminder that psych is a versatile genre, but

don't expect this to stay even that consistent.

For instance, having gone through two different styles in three songs, *Gaia* shifts clearly from rock to metal. It has a completely different tone throughout, it's built on riffs rather than grooves and jams, and the vocals flirt with harshness. It's a decent song and there's some psychedelia in its midsection, but it mostly feels like someone switched the radio station on me and I couldn't find where to switch it back. *Predator X* is another song that leaps towards metal but doesn't quite get there, remaining in a trendier, more modern American territory, like Static-X than the Voivod meets Pantera style of *Gaia*, so explaining the song title, I presume.

And yet *Gaia* rolls into *Ambergris*, a funky lounge song that feels like it ought to have seen release on some obscure album on a laid back jazz label in the late seventies. What's important is that it's the fourth King Gizzard on this album in only five songs and that shapeshifting is only beginning.

Sadie Sorceress incorporates rap, which I haven't heard anywhere in the King Gizzard sound before, though I have to say that it's a fascinating piece of music that I'd actually call out as a highlight. They return to this on *The Grim Reaper* and that's a thoroughly enjoyable song too. I appreciate the skill that's needed to rap properly than I enjoy most of the results, but these are fun and vibrant songs.

Wherever King Gizzard goes musically, though, psychedelia is never too far away, something that's isolating to a song like *Gaia* that just doesn't want to do that. *The Garden Goblin* keeps a rap beat but adds a quirky scenario-based lyric approach that reminds of Madness of all people. It's almost like the Cardigans took acid to cover *House of Fun*, but wrapping up with a squealy jazz saxophone. *Blame It on the Weather* sometimes sounds like a mashup of John Kongos and the Bee Gees. Both have psychedelia in there too and Red Smoke returns to the dream pop psych from earlier, almost like a twee cover of the Doors, especially once it gets to the keyboard solo. *Candles* is even softer and *The Funeral* finishes up in that vein too as a short coda with an ethnic flavour.

The big question that hangs over this album like the Sword of Damacles is whether it manages to find a way to make all this admirable diversity feel consistent enough to make sense. That's a tough call. Much of it, sure. It's just psychedelic pop/rock exploring its boundaries. But some of it's harder to reconcile. *Gaia* is a jarring change, as good as it is, and so's *Presumptuous* in a different way because it's lounge and funk, a chillout with its psychedelia explored with a flute. Where I see the album coalescing best is *Evilest Man*, a blurring of much of what's going on with these varied songs. It has its psych jams and its dream pop but it's ramped up towards acid-drenched disco and, on occasion, space rock.

I'm going with a 7/10 here because everything's done really well, even if it doesn't fit, but I realise that I'm stretching. It would be just as valid to give it a 6/10 for including material that would have played better on a different King Gizzard album or as a separate EP. After all, there's maybe forty minutes of consistent material here that would seem both diverse and consistent if the other half was shifted out and the band chose not to do that. I'm seeing it as a mistake. Maybe you won't.

Highlights: *The Dripping Tap*; *Sadie Sorceress*.



PROTECTOR

EXCESSIVE OUTBURST OF DEPRAVITY

COUNTRY:
SWEDEN

STYLE:
THRASH METAL

RATING:
8/10

RELEASE DATE:
1 JUL 2022

When I was listening to Black Rose on the *Friday Rock Show* in 1986, my favourite band was shifting from Metallica to Nuclear Assault because, while I was eagerly listening to everything that might possibly have any connection to rock music, thrash metal had captured me. I don't recall Protector from that era, even though they formed in 1986 and knocked out their first two albums in 1988 and 1989. Maybe they were a little late, but I was listening to a lot of German thrash. Protector was a German band in those days, based in Wolfsburg, but they're apparently in Sweden nowadays.

I see them listed as thrash/death metal pretty much everywhere I look, but there's not a heck of a lot of death here at all, especially for a country that invented melodic death metal. Maybe that's where they were back in Germany in the nineties, when thrash was out and death was in. They put four albums out by 1993 before splitting up, but it took them a decade to actually do the latter, an inconsistent line-up performed occasionally without issuing any new product until 2013, with their reformation only a couple of years earlier, though they'd been playing live as Martin Missy & The Protectors for five years by then.

There's a darkness to the bottom end of their sound that could be seen as death and there's some harshness to Missy's vocals, but it's really just a hint towards a death influence. For the most part, this is thrash metal, whether it's mostly fast and frantic like the opener, *Last Stand Hill*, or mostly mid tempo like *Open Skies and Endless Seas*. They move between the two often but stay fast more often than not, which works for me. Their style is technical without being progressive and the slow sections add depth to the sound, especially through their transitions being so clean and tasty.

They also sound very German for a band who are technically three quarters Swedish now. Michael Carlsson's guitar as *Pandemic Misery* opens is straight out of the Destruction playbook and that's not the only time that

buzzsaw guitar comes out to play; my favourite song in that vein absolutely has to be *Perpetual Blood Oath*, but it has competition. That sound isn't there throughout but the guitar remains agreeably Teutonic, whatever it's doing, and I love it. The only negative thing I can conjure up is that I do wonder what Protector would sound like with a second guitar, but that's not a reflection on what Carlsson does here, just an acknowledgement that he's only one person and can't duel with himself.

It's worth pointing out here that *Last Stand Hill* is an impressive opener, but *Pandemic Misery* is a clear step up again. It's almost a deliberate double intro, like Kreator provided on *Hate über alles*, but they don't stop there the way the Germans did. They start strong with *Last Stand Hill*, then up the ante with *Pandemic Misery* and just keep on going. The more I listen through the album, I find the tracks starting to rank themselves because, while everything is excellent, not everything has a little bit more, like *Perpetual Blood Oath* does. What's interesting is that the ranking changes, as the songs turn into old friends. *Infinite Tyranny* caught me quickly, but *Shackled by Total Control* is a real grower.

And I mentioned Kreator, so I should talk about the Big Three, even though I don't really want to. I get that there are three bands above all others who really forged the Teutonic sound and they do deserve the credit for that, but that doesn't mean that they're the best or the most endearing or the the most consistent or, quite frankly, the most anything. Never mind Tankard as a fourth, why aren't more people talking about Angel Dust, Exumer and Sieges Even? Just because they were a little later and they weren't as prolific? Based on this, I should add Protector to that list.

Of course, I need to check out their previous work. I get the feeling that, while this is clearly thrash and thrash done very well indeed, this is a musical shift for them, maybe a purification. If I dig into their previous seven albums, four from the first era of the band and three from this new one, I'm expecting to hear far more death than the echoes of it that appear here. And that's fine, because I dig thrash/death too, but it does put them into a different box.

For now, this is a much better album than Kreator's *Hate über alles* and a much more traditional thrash effort too. I'd call it a step up on Destruction's *Diabolical* too, and they've always been one of my favourites. Sodom are only releasing re-recorded stuff of late so the surface fans must look deeper for their fix and here's a great place to start. I'm going to be playing this a lot and I think my son is in for a treat when I let him in on the secret.

Highlights: *Pandemic Misery*; *Perpetual Blood Oath*; *Shackled by Total Control*; *Last Stand Hill*; *Infinite Tyranny*.



RONNIE ATKINS

MAKE IT COUNT

COUNTRY:
DENMARK

STYLE:
MELODIC/HARD ROCK

RATING:
8/10

RELEASE DATE:
18 MAR 2022

My gaps this year for COVID and research trips and whatnot have put me behind on some releases that I don't want to miss, so I'm going to knock out a bunch throughout August. This one came out in March, a year to the week since Ronnie Atkins's previous (and first) solo album, *One Shot*, which got a rare 9/10 from me and was just about a coin toss from being my Album of the Month. It was a peach of a melodic/hard rock album and this really isn't far behind it. The man has always been an immense talent, as his forty years for Pretty Maids have proven, but he simply can't do any wrong right now, even though he has stage four lung cancer and is living day to day.

The songs just keep on coming. *I've Hurt Myself (By Hurting You)* is a pristine opener in the patent Ronnie Atkins style, which means that it's a hook-laden song that's clearly all about melody but doesn't skimp on the oomph behind it. There are AOR songs written for maximum appeal on radio that don't have hooks this strong or this numerous and they usually don't have the power behind them that this does. It's so good that we wonder how Atkins will follow it up.

So he throws out *Unsung Heroes*, which is easily as good and might even be better. Then it's *Rising Tide* and *Remain to Remind Me* and we start to wonder when we're going to hear something that, never mind average, might be just a notch down in quality. What's perhaps most telling is that, on the few songs where we think we've found that, they build into killer choruses that we can imagine might warrant them becoming our new favourite. Maybe the quality finally dips on *Grace*, which is the beginning of the second side, were this a vinyl album. And that's a pretty damn good song! It's the sort of track that some bands have been trying and failing to record for years. Here it's a drop from holy crap to merely excellent.

Easily my least favourite song is the next one, *Let Love Lead the Way*, not because it's a ballad and just a ballad, not really even a power ballad until its second half, but because of keyboard tinkling that spoils the first half

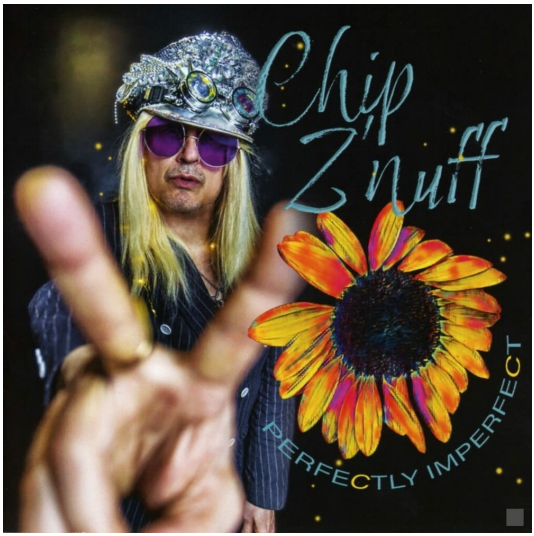
for me and doesn't quite vanish during the second. *Blood Cries Out* starts with keyboards too and they don't quite convince me. The songs ramps up nicely—and I mean that with bells on—just not to become another new favourite, that mindset being confined to the first half of the album.

The line-up is pretty consistent with that on *One Shot*, with producer Chris Laney providing guitars and keyboards, as indeed he does in Pretty Maids nowadays, Pontus Egberg on bass and a pair of former Pretty Maids colleagues on drums and keyboards, those being Allan Sørensen and Morten Sandager respectively. There are guests too, mostly on guitar, but I don't recognise all the names. Pontus Norgren is certainly a guitarist for HammerFall nowadays; Oliver Hartmann is a busy man who fronts Hartmann and guests on what seems like every other European album being released; and Anders Ringman co-wrote a Lovecraftian rock opera with Chris Laney.

I took those notes on my second listen through and I've had a couple more since, enough that I am comfortable saying that the thoroughly consistent first half of this is worthy of another 9/10, not a typical thing for me to say. However, the second half definitely drops in quality, not to the point of being a problem for someone wanting to just listen but easily enough to affect that score. It's less consistent, both in approach and quality, but it's still dotted with greatness. *Blood Cries Out* gets there eventually and the title ballad that closes out the album is epic grandeur even before it hits the power disco escalation button halfway through.

So this isn't quite another *One Shot*, ironically given that name, but it comes damn close for half a dozen tracks and finishes out with style too. The lesson we should take from these albums is that if we see the name of Ronnie Atkins on anything, it's going to sound amazing. At this point, he could sing the phone book and make other singers and songwriters jealous. All the best for a strong and lasting recovery, sir, and I look forward to another album from you next March.

Highlights: *Unsung Heroes*; *I've Hurt Myself (By Hurting You)*; *Make It Count*; *Rising Tide*; *Remain to Remind Me*.



CHIP Z'NUFF

PERFECTLY IMPERFECT

COUNTRY:
USA

STYLE:
POP/ROCK

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
18 MAR 2022

I think there's a mindset, if anyone actually thinks about it, that pop music and rock music are two separate things and the modern split between the two was epitomised in the rivalry between the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. The former were pop and the latter were rock and you kind of had to choose sides back then, even though I'm sure most people really didn't. Generally speaking, it's certainly a lot easier to see the Stones in rock and metal, even if you have to really trawl through a long lineage if you listen to Impaled Nazarene. Here's a great example why that isn't always true.

Chip Z'Nuff is, of course, the bassist and rhythm guitarist with Enuff Z'Nuff, a band who showed up at exactly the wrong time and got unfairly associated with the glam metal genre, which they had a tiny amount to actually do with. He's their lead singer nowadays too, but this is a solo album and a mindset that has seen Enuff Z'Nuff gradually morph into a modern American take on the Beatles infuses this solo album too, even with a line-up that features members of Whitesnake and Guns n' Roses.

The Church nails that primary influence on the door in a mere forty-nine seconds of intro. This is a late Beatles era album, between *Sgt. Pepper* and *The White Album*. The songs that follow confirm that but also highlight that Z'Nuff is updating that sound to a more modern setting, via a bundle of other Beatles-inspired pop/rock bands, some of which are gimmes and others that seem a little more surprising. From the former category, Cheap Trick are namechecked on *I Still Hail You*.

Heaven in a Bottle reminds just how much Cheap Trick owe to the Beatles, so it's not too shocking to discover that Daxx Nielsen plays acoustic drums on this album. Daxx is the son of Cheap Trick's lead guitarist Rick Nielsen, of course, but he's also their current drummer, with a full dozen years behind their kit. *Roll On* reminds just how much ELO owe to the Beatles too. There's plenty of ELO in *3 Way* as well, though that also points the way to the Mott the Hoople cover to close things out, which is

a perky take on *Honaloochie Boogie* that owes as much to T Rex and Tom Petty as it does to Mott.

There are other sounds here, especially early on, after the intro gets us in the mindset. *Welcome to the Party* is rather like the Beatles playing Nirvana (the nineties one, not the psychedelic band from the sixties), because they just wouldn't be able to lose that perkiness even if they're playing deliberately non-perky material. For much of its running time, *Doctor* is a typical *Sgt. Pepper* era song but there are points where it drops into Saigon Kick. *Ordinary Man* adds some Living Colour-esque riffing midway, which I'd like to have heard more often.

The lead guitar here is played by Joel Hoekstra, who keeps showing up on a variety of albums I'm reviewing—not just his own band, Joel Hoekstra's 13, but albums by Michael Sweet, Rob Moratti and Whitesnake, which I guess we could call his day job—and, as that suggests, he's a thoroughly versatile guitarist who can play this material any way Z'Nuff wants him to. What I like about what he does here is that it doesn't seem to be much at all, if we don't think about it. There's guitar on the album where it should be but we don't really notice it. Until we do. And then we start to grasp just how much Hoekstra is doing without it seeming like he's doing anything.

I can't say this is going to be my favourite album of the year, but a good part of that is because I've always been a much bigger fan of the Stones than the Beatles, even if I like the latter too. I have a feeling that the more you skew the other way, the more you'll like this. It's a solid pop/rock album, even if the best songs may show up late. I'd call out *3 Way* as the best, with *Heroin* chasing it, if you pardon the pun, with its tasty western harmonica, and they're the last two until the *Honaloochie Boogie* cover closes things out. It's a good way to end an album, even if I'm not the target audience.

Highlights: *Heroin*; *3 Way*.



MESHUGGAH

IMMUTABLE

COUNTRY:
SWEDEN

STYLE:
PROGRESSIVE METAL

RATING:
5/10

RELEASE DATE:
1 APR 2022

I've never felt particularly drawn to Meshuggah, the so called accidental founders of djent, mostly because I'm not a fan of djent or a lot of that modern style of metal that treats guitars like drums or percussion. Add in the lead vocals of Jens Kidman, which are delivered in a metalcore shout and they're just not my thing. That doesn't mean that they don't do what they do incredibly well. They do and that's why I'm listening to this, their ninth studio album, to see what I think of it nowadays.

To give this further context, I can't remember what the last Meshuggah album I listened to was. It may not have been their debut, *Contradictions Collapse* in 1991, because I think it was their follow-up, *Destroy, Erase, Improve* in 1995, probably around its release, which was the point when I was a young man drifting away from the metal scene towards the pub and life and a much wider range of music. So, given that I'm aware that their sound developed over time, my take on them up till now may be more based on my own musical prejudices as any actual merit.

That said, I'm not particularly enthused here and for exactly the reasons I expected. Meshuggah's sound is very much their own and it feels like they're staking out close boundaries to defend it in a vaguely post-apocalyptic setting. This isn't industrial, but it's stripped down to the essence of the band so emphatically that it's almost industrial adjacent for how mechanical it all sounds. All the instruments are really playing rhythm, just like this is a band of drummers who happen to have an array of different tones on their kits. Many of those tones sound like machines, especially on songs like *Phantoms*. Is that a bass or an industrial rivetting machine? Is that a keyboard backdrop or an array of industrial saws in the distance?

And these sounds combine to find a groove and a rhythm and then continue in a mostly monotone fashion for a long time. Most of the songs are in the four to six minute range, only *Black Cathedral* shorter at exactly two minutes and only *They Move Below* is longer at well over

nine. However, the album is long, running notably over an hour, and there just isn't enough here to warrant that. Coil would have done more in twenty minutes.

I have to give some praise, because none of these rhythms are typical and that's why this gets the progressive metal label, and, if the point is to persuade us into some sort of trance state where an hour goes by without us really noticing, then they come close to succeeding. I found this less music to actively listen to and more music to by hypnotised by and feel instead. That probably warrants a further tag of experimental metal, which would serve much better than prog metal, because this is a long way from someone like Dream Theater, which is what prog metal conjures up in my mind.

Is industrial metalcore a thing? Maybe it should be. This Meshuggah isn't a huge distance from an early Einsterzende Neubaten covered on actual instruments by a metal band, instead of whatever metal pipes they could find to hit with other metal pipes. In fact, compared to something rhythmic and chaotic like *Abfackeln!*, this starts to seem almost conventional, and that song is almost forty years old. What I'd like to have seen, on a ninth album no less, is more invention, more melody and especially more variety. Unless you can fall into these humungous grooves, there's not much here to find.

And, crucially, it just keeps going. My thoughts after a few songs didn't change after a few more, a delightfully subdued guitar intro to *They Move Below* the first point where I heard something that went beyond percussion. That's track seven, over half an hour into the album, but it's also the first to actually grab me. It gets less interesting when it goes into the now expected rhythmic mode but it's more interesting, even then, than anything that went before or indeed most of what is still to come. That mostly has to do with the texture behind the rhythms though and the song still goes on too long. There are moments of imagination on *The Faultless. Armies of the Preposterous* is much more aggressive. *Past Tense* is a dark and interesting outro and easily my favourite piece here. That's not a lot to go on, I know, but it's something.

Were this a regular forty minute album, I'd probably go with a 6/10. Each song finds its groove and I doubt that the band's core fans aren't going to be too concerned that those grooves aren't much different from each other. However, at sixty-six minutes, this really dragged on me. Now, if you're into experimental metal or drone metal and you're OK with monotony, feel free to add a point. I'd prefer to see Sunn O))) live again and they hit fewer notes in their entire set when I saw them than any one song here.

Highlights: *Past Tense*.



KRISIUN

MORTEM SOLIS

COUNTRY:
BRAZIL

STYLE:
DEATH METAL

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
29 JUL 2022

Brazilian death metal band Krisiun have been around since 1990 with a consistent line-up across all twelve of their albums, perhaps because it comprises three brothers: Alex Camargo on vocals and bass, Moyses Kolesne on guitar and Max Kolesne on drums. They used to have a second guitarist in their demo days and they've included one on stage, but in the studio they're a power trio. I'm not familiar with their work, unless I heard some of their early material in the mid nineties when I was drifting away from death metal.

Krisiun do this well in an old school manner, as much as the opening notes of *Sworn Enemies* sound modern and I'd bet that the drums weren't this fast back on their debut album in 1995. The tone is pretty consistent throughout and the vocals, delivered in a deep rich growl, usually follow the riff in play at any particular moment. Camargo is clear enough that I could tell that he sings in English but not so much that I could follow the lyrics. The song titles are typical enough that I feel like I've heard this sort of material many times before.

And I could say the same for the music, as there isn't anything new to the genre on offer here, but, while that's true, it would be a little misleading, because it suggests that they're a one trick pony and they're not. There's a lot of variety on this album; it merely all happens to unfold within those long established boundaries that more progressive bands routinely cross. That Krisiun clearly feel comfortable within those boundaries isn't inherently a negative because they're doing quite a lot within them.

For a start, while the tone is consistent, the pace isn't. They don't just blister along at a set speed for forty minutes, as many old school bands do (hi, Cannibal Corpse), because the songwriting has more in mind to allow these songs to distinguish themselves from each other. Every song here has a consistent tone with every other song, but it doesn't take a hundred listens to tell the difference between this one and that. There's no doubt that *Serpent Messiah* and *Temple of the Abattoir* are by

the same band, for instance, but they're not easily confused. They're both highlights here.

Krisiun are clearly masters of the intro too, because pretty much every song here benefits from an easily distinguished and very capable intro. some are slow and effective, like *Necronomical*. Some start slow but ramp up quickly like *Temple of the Abattoir* (which also has a separate track labelled as an intro—and the middle eastern-infused *Dawn Sun Carnage* is easily the most original piece of music on this album). Some are faster, like *Tomb of the Nameless*. All of them work.

Even the less ambitious songs, like *Swords into Flesh* and *War Blood Hammer*, that do cruise along at the same speed for entire sections, alternate tempos between them to keep them interesting. The fast sections work, the slow sections work and there are bridges between them that highlight just how good a drummer Max Kolesne is. So even the lesser material on offer is solid and the best songs are excellent.

Because the mid-twenties version of me was bored with death metal back in the nineties, I tend to expect little from bands who play death metal without any of its subgenre prefixes. I might like an immersion for a while, because I do like the sound, but they often lose me pretty quickly because I want more than they're willing to give. What's surprised me most over the last couple of years is a discovery that there are death metal bands in the 2020s that are working exclusively within an old template but conjuring something interesting out of it. Krisiun are definitely one of those. I might even up this rating yet.

Highlights: *Serpent Messiah*; *Tomb of the Nameless*.





JOE SATRIANI

THE ELEPHANTS OF MARS

COUNTRY:
USA

STYLE:
INSTRUMENTAL ROCK

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
8 APR 2022

As with any Joe Satriani album, and this is his eighteenth, there's a lot here, but it plays far more consistently for me than last time out, on 2020's *Shapeshifting*, and it has a lot more soul too. Yes, it's still very carefully produced indeed—and I'd prefer a Satch live in the studio approach, even if there's going to be a lot of overdubs done afterwards to complicate things—and thus always feels at least a little artificial, but there's a lot more soul here than last time.

Mostly, the variety here is in the backing tracks, which can almost be separated from what Satch is doing over them. Those backing tracks run all over the musical map, from rock to dance to metal to funk to jazz to classical to ethnic; you name it, it's probably here in some form. Every track sounds different to the one before it and the one after it and I'm sure that was done deliberately enough to affect how the track listing was built. However, the solos are far more consistent in tone, even if Satch is experimenting with guitars and pedals and effects throughout. He's definitely fed through some sort of synth on *Pumpin'* for a start.

It's telling that this is a long album, twenty minutes longer than *Shapeshifting*, but it feels shorter because it's never boring for a second. Could it be shorter? Sure. Do I care? No. There are fourteen tracks on offer and they do a great job of exploring the album's overall vibe through a mountain of diversity. *Sahara* starts out Indian and adds a driving bass riff; there's a further sitar feel later on *Doors of Perception* that sounds like a raga turned film soundtrack. They feel just like Joe Satriani songs with a different flavour added to the usual recipe. And so it goes.

Where *Sahara* is laid back and evocative, *The Elephants of Mars* is sassy and urgent, though it has a neat shift to quirky and unusual in its midsection. The most quirky and unusual is surely *Dance of the Spores*, a classical piece filtered through the circus, especially during its second half. It's the highlight of the album for me, not least because it shines at both quirky chaos and a mellow groove. These apparent contradictions are eveywhere here.

Night Scene could be Vangelis until it erupts onto the dancefloor. *Blue Foot Groovy* is slow and funky, but ends up in chicken pickin' southern rock territory.

Joe Satriani has been influenced by as many great guitarists as he's gone on to teach, but two are quick to mind here. Jeff Beck is one, because of the sheer variety on offer; Beck never sounded the same from one album to another, beyond being breathtaking. Satch emulates that in microcosm in the different approaches he takes here. The other is Allan Holdsworth because there are swathes of this album that leap headlong into jazz fusion, especially as the second half starts, with *E 104th St NYC 1973* and *Pumpin'*.

And that leaves some pieces that get more unusual the more we think about them. There are two that leap out for me. The first is *Tension and Release*, which sounds like Black Sabbath but played in a completely different way, stripped of its distortion and reverb and turned into a backdrop for a guitar solo. I've never heard a song before that sounds so much like Sabbath without emulating the tone that they invented. The other is *Through a Mother's Day Darkly*, which is more ambitious than anything else here, with the guitar more closely entwined with the backing music, especially during the narrative sections. There are no singers on this album but this one has a lot of words.

So, hey, there's a lot here. I know, you're shocked, right? What's important to know with this one is that it a) sounds completely like a Joe Satriani album so, if you're a fan, you'll want to pick this up, and b) it works much more consistently than last time so, if you're not a fan, you may want to give this a go, unlike *Shapeshifting*. It might convert you from non-fan to fan. That's underlined by the fact that, while *Dance of the Spores* easily remains my favourite piece even after multiple listens, I couldn't tell you what comes next and there are thirteen choices to pick from. Maybe that means I should give the album an 8/10 instead of a 7. I'm almost there.

Highlights: *Dance of the Spores*.



SINNER

BROTHERHOOD

COUNTRY:
GERMANY

STYLE:
HEAVY METAL

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
15 JUL 2022

I missed Sinner's 2019 album, *Santa Muerte*, so this is my first time hearing them in maybe twenty years, though I did review an album from Voodoo Circle last year and the latest from Primal Fear in 2020. Voodoo Circle are the side band of Alex Beyrodt of Primal Fear, which also features Sinner bassist and drummer Mat Sinner and Markus Kullman amongst its line-up. Sinner himself is also a long-standing member of Primal Fear so there's obviously a lot of cross-pollination going on in the metal community within the German state of Baden-Württemberg, Sinner hailing from Stuttgart and the others from Esslingen only ten miles down the road.

The three bands have different but allied sounds. Voodoo Circle play hard rock, while Sinner are a heavy metal band and Primal Fear more power metal. Beyond that, each band has its own certain sound that it sticks too consistently and they share a solid level of quality. If I tell you that the two best songs from the first half of this album are called *We Came to Rock* and *Brotherhood*, you may be able to conjure up something close to what Sinner do without even listening to them. That said, Sinner do what they do very well, and this is an enjoyable twentieth album for them, four decades on from the first.

Bulletproof sets the stage right from the beginning with a tasty slice of hook-laden metal, but *We Came to Rock* is a step up again, a hard and heavy song with an excellent riff and a catchier chorus. *Reach Out* and *Brotherhood* echo that opening pair, but with even more overt nods to Ozzy or Dio guitarists from the eighties on the former and a more AOR based hook on the latter. It all makes for a good first half with the suitably inexorable *Refuse to Surrender* wrapping it up, but, I'm going to suggest that the album ramps up again with *The Last Generation* at the heart of the album.

There's a grandeur to this one that elevates it above everything else here, not all the way to, say a Sabaton level, but it comes close. It's bombastic and anthemic. There's some solid twin guitar work as well from Tom Naumann and Alex Scholpp, something that I enjoyed

throughout the album but especially on this track because it has a couple of minutes on everything except the closer and that gives it time for a more concerted instrumental section. I dug the emphatic intro too, something that the majority of these songs don't have, and the different vocal approach.

The Last Generation is my favourite song here, but it's followed by *Gravity*, which also follows it on the album. This one amps up the urgency, almost suggesting that the band hadn't been giving it a full eleven thus far. It's hardly speed metal but it's faster and I've felt the need to turn it up every time through. It also prominently features Giorgia Colleluori, who's here throughout, I believe, on backing vocals but rarely to the degree that I could distinguish her contributions. It's easy to hear what she can do on *Gravity*.

Talking of that closer, it's called *40 Days 40 Nights* and it's the most atypical song here, turning the power back down after *Gravity* turned it up, to go for a Thin Lizzy power ballad approach. Sinner do it well, especially whoever is impersonating Phil Lynott's vocals. I believe there are no fewer than six guest vocalists joining the fray at some point on this album, as well as Sinner and Sascha Krebs, who may or may not actually be part of the band at this point, but I'm not finding any credits that say where. These guests include such luminaries as Ralf Scheepers of Primal Fear, Tom Englund of Evergrey and Dave Ingram of Benediction, not to forget Ronnie Romero of almost everyone else.

I liked this on a first listen but it didn't blow me away. I liked it more on a second time through and I have to say that it's growing nicely on me. I don't think it's going to reach 8/10 growth but it's an impressive 7/10.

Highlights: *The Last Generation*; *Gravity*; *We Came to Rock*.



ALAN PARSONS

FROM THE NEW WORLD

COUNTRY:
UK

STYLE:
PROGRESSIVE ROCK

RATING:
6/10

RELEASE DATE:
15 JUL 2022

For someone who seemed to be retired from the music business, Alan Parsons seems pretty set on releasing a lot of new music. I reviewed his most recent studio album, *The Secret*, in 2019, but I last encountered him as an actor, in an unusual short film called *Galactic Fantastic!* in 2020. However, I see that he's issued not just one but two live albums since then, with *One Note Symphony: Live in Tel Aviv* released in February. *The Secret* arrived no fewer than fifteen years after its predecessor, *A Valid Path*, but only three years on and here's another one.

I have to say that I liked this a lot more than *The Secret* immediately and for a few songs, but that faded as everything softened up. That previous album often felt more like a collection of musical numbers to me than a rock album and this ends up there too, albeit not quite so overtly. Certainly for a while, it's more like the rock albums that we remember from Parsons, the early songs full of his instantly recognisable style, with keyboards and guitars merging together before a drop into soft rock with smooth vocals and careful but soaring guitars.

As with *The Secret*, Parsons brought guest vocalists on board here, which seems unmistakable on transitions like the one from *Don't Fade Now* to *Give 'em My Love*, two vocal songs that feature a pair of completely different voices. There are fewer guests here though, the seven from last time reduced to three this, with one caveat that I'll get to later, the three being Tommy Shaw of Styx on *Uroboros*, but James Durbin of *American Idol* on *Give 'em My Love* and David Pack of Ambrosia on I *Won't Be Led Astray*. Shaw's contribution fits comfortably with his background, but I know Durbin from harder, heavier material, such as his stint in Quiet Riot and his solo Durbin album from 2021, *The Beast Awakens*.

As that might suggest, this does play very much on the softer side. *The Secret*, which I surely ought to wonder was written for the previous album of that name, is bouncy, while *Uroboros*, which I first heard separately as a single, is the sort of mildly progressive rock

that I know Parsons for, but then it gets softer and softer. Sure, there are effortlessly strong guitar solos dotted throughout, which shouldn't surprise anyone, but we can't help but wonder what Parsons would sound like if he took a more daring, less safe approach to his music nowadays.

There are moments early, such as with *Uroboros* and they show up later too. *You are the Light* has a perkier outlook, with nice Fleetwood Mac-esque harmonies. *Halos* brings up the keyboards, in a progressive pop fashion and I liked the new wave rhythms and the samples on a first time through but it got better with every repeat. It's this track and, to a lesser degree, *Uroboros*, that reminds us of just how great the Alan Parsons Project was on so many albums in the seventies and eighties. Had Parsons filled this album with songs like those, I'd be celebrating a return to form rather than highlighting a second underwhelming release in a row.

What else I should mention here is that there's a folk element here that I wasn't expecting. That's there on *Don't Fade Now*, which feels like a British folk song we might hear someone singing on a stool in a rural pub, and it's especially there later on *Goin' Home*, merely one that happens to be orchestrated with keyboards. It's an odd departure from the two styles in play here but there's a reason for that and it ties to it being a song dating back to 1922 that became the base for Antonín Dvořák's *New World* symphony.

I'm sure there are deeper ties here, beyond the album's title, but it's been a while since I've heard that symphony and don't recognise anything beyond the melody on *Goin' Home*. Certainly, that's not as odd an inclusion here as the closing track, an incredibly accurate cover of a Ronettes' single, *Be My Baby*, with vocals from a female vocalist I can't find a reference to but who's certainly up to the task at hand. And here's the caveat I mentioned earlier, because as good as this song is and as good as this vocalist is, it feels utterly out of place here.

So, this is definitely better than *The Secret* but it's a strangely structured album. The best tracks, a combination of the rockier and folkier material, are early and late, with a bundle of soporofic stuff in between. This would have been better with its middle eviscerated and its closer ditched, maybe to be released separately as the tribute to Ronnie Spector I presume it was meant to be, given her passing in January of this year. However, putting that all together means some easy 7/10 material and some easy 5/10 songs too, so I'll split the difference and go with another 6/10.

Highlights: *Halos*; *Uroboros*; *Don't Fade Now*; *Goin' Home*.



KARTHAGO

MÁTÉ PÉTER IN ROCK!

COUNTRY:
HUNGARY

STYLE:
HARD ROCK

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
17 JUN 2022

Four years of deep diving into international rock and metal at Apocalypse Later Music has brought me in touch not only with the new stuff that's coming out everywhere but also with old stuff that's either still going strong or being brought back into the light. If I'm translating websites correctly, I think this album counts as two cases in point: both the hard rock band Karthago, who recorded for a few years in the early eighties and the music of a Hungarian pop singer called Máté Péter, a cult figure in his native country for a couple of decades from the mid-sixties to his death in 1984 at only thirty-seven years old.

Now, Karthago aren't entirely new to me but I've only heard one of their songs until now, courtesy of Milan Hubláček from the then Czechoslovakia who kindly sent Tommy Vance a copy of their first album in 1982, from which he played *Do Not Stop* on the *Friday Rock Show*. I didn't hear it until recently on a shared recording, as I didn't find that show until 1984, but I enjoyed it and other Euro-rockers that Tommy hauled out for that particular episode. It looks like they released five studio albums in the early eighties before splitting up in 1985, but they got back together in 1990 and eventually found their way back into the studio for *ValóságRock* in 2004. This is their second studio album since then.

However, if I'm still understanding correctly, none of this one is original material. Everything here is a Máté Péter song, reinterpreted within a rock framework. This works surprisingly well for me, even not knowing nothing at all about Máté and not a heck of a lot more about Karthago. At least I have Discogs to hand, so I can see that there are four tracks here from Máté's 1976 debut album, *Éjszakák és nappalok*, nothing at all from its follow-up, *Magány... és együttlét*—which does seem telling—but a trio of songs from each of Máté's two other albums, *Szívhangok* and *Keretek között*, the latter of which was released in 1982 at a time when Karthago were active. The rest, I presume, were originally singles.

What matters is that this material rocks, whether that was inherent in the originals or

whether it was infused during the translation between genres. *Zene nélkül*, which opens up the album, is like Deep Purple taking on a Scorpions power ballad, and *Elmegyek* seems like that too. *Egy darabot a szívemböl* is a hard rocker out of the gate and stays that way, while *Minden szónál többet ér* ramps up nicely. To keep the variety in play, *Otthonom a nagyvilág*, which is old school bluesy rock 'n' roll.

Other tracks feel more like the ballads I'm assuming they were to begin with, even rocked up with a strong guitar like *Most élsz* or a harmonica like *Szülöi ház*. Some end up with a Nazareth feel, an epitome perhaps being *Azért vannak a jóbarátok*, but they're all powerful, even when they're not delivered with as much emphasis. Part of that is that Takáts Tamás's lead vocal, which didn't grab me on the opener, is particularly strong on these power ballads. It's interesting how he went from my least favourite aspect of the band to my favourite literally from one song to another.

It's fair to say here that by power ballads, I don't necessarily mean *Still Loving You*; many of these are closer to *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, especially *Ott állsz az út végén*, which features a highly recognisable four note section on the piano, even if it's also little bit country, as if it's translated a second time. It's not a million miles from a Johnny Hallyday cover of a Merle Haggard cover of the Simon and Garfunkel song.

I should mention here that the entire band is clearly very capable, even though I don't know if any of them have been with Karthago for their entire run or just the last five minutes. The guitars are by Szigeti Ferenc and Gidófalvy Attila, the latter of whom also provides the excellent keyboards, a background instrument here for sure but one that manifests in different ways throughout. There are delicate piano parts over here, texture swells over there, Jon Lord here and there and even a bit of Dire Straits on *Szülöi ház*. There's a neat bass section on *Egy darabot a szívemböl* too.

So Kathargo may not have stayed the course like Ossian, but they've hung in there and remained relevant over four decades. On an important Hungarian national holiday last year, the members were given the Máté Péter Award, which is presumably why they decided to record this album. I'm very happy that they did, because it was a discovery for me.

And that may be another reason why the most emotional song is the closer, *Emlékezz rám*, which I noticed was also the closer on *Keretek között*, Máté Péter's final album before his death. It really doesn't need three reasons to be there, the third being that it inherently sounds like a memorial, even if it never was until now. And, hey, it did its job, as did this album.

Highlights: *Egy darabot a szívemböl*; *Azért vannak a jóbarátok*; *Most élsz*.



WOLFSBANE

GENIUS

COUNTRY:
UK

STYLE:
HEAVY METAL

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
5 JUN 2022

For all that Wolfsbane are a heavy metal band and I'm not arguing against that in the slightest, it has to be said that they don't sound like most, if any, of their peers. They didn't when the eighties were ending on their debut album and, if anything, they're even further apart from the norm now on their first studio album in ten years and fifth overall. The easiest way to describe this is to call it simply another Wolfsbane album. If you know what that sounds like, you're already golden. If you don't, then check it out.

They're an unusual band in that it's hard to define their sound by comparing them to others, but I think everything is fundamentally based in the seventies, whether any particular song owes more to Thin Lizzy or the Ramones or the New York Dolls. I heard each of those bands on multiple tracks here. However, they build on that with more modern sounds, whether that's alternative rock, pop punk, glam rock or some other genre, whatever might be vibrant and energetic enough to make a song feel even more like it was spontaneously jammed on the spot.

It's as much in their attitude as their music, because this is a band who feel like they're here to be entertained as much as to entertain. Maybe the two things are the same to them. They seem to be primarily having fun and only secondarily actually playing music, so there's a constant feeling that everything might go horribly off the rails in about three seconds time. Every song has to be a first take, right? Of course, it never falls apart because these four musicians are so highly capable and they know each other so well that this somehow ends up loose and tight at the same time.

Blaze Bayley actually sounds less like Bruce Dickinson now after his five year and two album stint as the Air Raid Siren's replacement in Iron Maiden than he did back in 1990 on one of my favourite Wolfsbane songs, *All Hell's Breaking Loose Down at Little Kathy Wilson's Place*. He's maintaining a solo career nowadays on top of fronting Wolfsbane and his fifth solo

album, *War Within Me* last year was excellent. It didn't sound like this, though, because much of this band's sound is found in the guitarwork of Jase Edwards, who never seems to do what anyone else would at any given spot. He always has his own ideas about what to do instead and he's usually right.

And that means that a song like *Rock the Boat*, with its heavy staccato riffing that takes it from a somewhat Meshuggah level to Bauhaus, can be followed by a mainstream alternative rock song such as *Small Town Kisses* that's almost the Foo Fighters covering Thin Lizzy. And hey, both of them can be followed by the nearly rockabilly vibe of *Things are Getting Better*. *Rock City Nights* is straight ahead glam punk that ends up in Sex Pistols territory. *I Was Born in '69* is even a ballad, I guess, but one that doesn't feel out of place in this company.

What's important is that all these different sounds feel natural together because every one of them is connected by its live in the studio energy. Opener *Spit It Out* is surely the most energetic song on offer when it's in full motion, but there's plenty more to spare for the other nine tracks. I know these guys aren't young because they're older than I am and I'm not young, but this feels as if it was recorded by eighteen year olds eager to show the world what they can do. Respect to the band for that and welcome back! It's been a while.

Highlights: *Rock the Boat*; *Things are Getting Better*.





CHILDREN OF THE SÜN

ROOTS

COUNTRY:
SWEDEN

STYLE:
PSYCHEDELIC ROCK

RATING:
9/10

RELEASE DATE:
18 MAR 2022

I adored *Flowers*, the debut from Swedish psychedelic rock band Children of the Sün, in 2019 and it only missed out on being my album of the month for August 2019 by a heartbeat. This follow-up is a peach of a difficult second album. Sure, it didn't wow me as much as its predecessor but that has more to do with me being hip to their game now than any lack of quality. I know what they can do. They're not going to surprise me, but they're certainly going to entertain me.

It feels like a more mature release to me, as the band admirably diversifying their sound without losing any of their power. And that power is in full effect on the opener, *Reflection*, not only in the amazing voice of Josefina Berglund Ekholm but in the band behind her too. This one builds from a soothing start through a searing midsection to a soothing finish. It reminds me in fewer than four minutes why I love this band so much.

If *Reflection* is typical for them, their range is admirably highlighted over the next three tracks, in which they cover a lot of ground, some of it new. *Leaves* kicks off with an early seventies hard rock riff but the vocal shifts from Joan Baez through Dolores O'Riordan to Abba, so it's not all heavy. It isn't dark either, which *Blood Boils Out* is, from the very outset. It looks forward too, adding some eighties into the very sixties mix, even if it feels like it could always been a cunning cover of a Nina Simone song that we've never heard before. It's built out of small things: a minimal piano line, an omnipresent shaker, hand claps, some percussion. It grows magnicently.

It's where we hear something new in the Children of the Sün sound and that's backed up by what's in *Gaslighting*. There's still a lot of sixties here, a strident Grace Slick vocal leading the way, but it has plenty of eighties too. There's Siouxsie in here and post-punk in its gorgeous energy, even as it builds to a neat guitar solo from Jacob Hellenrud. It's loose in an Inkubus Sukkubus style and, if it's at all hippie, it's a much later All About Eve neo-hippie vibe rather than the old school Woodstock one we might expect.

And so we go. There are thirteen tracks here, though a couple are brief instrumental pieces, one an *Epilogue* because it says so and the other an interlude even if it doesn't. That's *Willow Tree* and it leads into the title track, which is hypnotic pagan ritual, even if it evolves into something more, as so many of these songs do, not least another vocal workout for Berglund Ekholm. She gets quite a few of those here, though I'm as impressed by her delicate moments in between as the spotlights. There are plenty of those, in songs like *Eden*, *Man in the Moon* and *In Silva*.

Really, there's plenty of everything. Those delicate songs feature an acoustic guitar that I'd swear at points is played by Jimmy Page. *The Soul* is a wild spiritual with a John Kongos groove. *Thunder* lets us believe it's going to rumble along like a heavy blues song but then switches gear on us as it finds a Heartless Bastards sort of vibe. *Reaching for Sun* may be the best example of the mix of old and new, because it has an old rock sound, like Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, but filtered through a tighter, more modern groove that's sometimes reminiscent of Nick Cave.

I've been playing this album all day and I'm still discovering little details, as if it's an old coat that I bought used that fits perfectly and I keep finding new pockets with little treasures in them. These songs wax and wane on me, different ones standing out on each listen. *Blood Boils Hot* and *Roots* may be relatively static as my top favourites but others come and go. Right now *Eden* is rising and *Man in the Moon* falling, but the only song that I don't adore is *In Silva*. It's still a good song but it introduces a male voice that tries to match Berglund Ekholm's and inevitably fails, however much it tries. It's not a bad voice but it would need to be a special one to survive here.

And so I think this is my first 9/10 for the month, which means it's leading the way to the Album of the Month slot that its predecessor so narrowly missed out on. Let's see in a week's time.

Highlights: *Blood Boils Hot*; *Reflection*; *Roots*; *Gaslighting*.



AGATHODAIMON

THE SEVEN

COUNTRY:
GERMANY

STYLE:
GOTHIC BLACK METAL

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
18 MAR 2022

I haven't heard Agathodaimon since my EMusic days a couple of decades ago when I discovered an array of favourites on Napalm Records. It's been long enough that I don't remember exactly what they sounded like but I believe that they've evolved a little from more symphonic black metal into a gothic flavour of black metal. Both those sounds are in evidence on the opener, *La Haine*, which starts out as a grandiose form of black metal but shifts midway to a more emotional gothic sound midway, and it's a highly appropriate way to kick things off.

Initially, the black metal side of this bled through the deepest and I liked it, even though it didn't blow me away. Gradually, the gothic side of it came into focus and I liked it more, with the harsher black metal side an interesting contrast to keep this heavy. Gothic metal can often feel like gothic rock simply heavied up somewhat but this never feels like it's anything but metal, the harsh voices and frantic drums an unmistakable manifesto of extreme metal and their agreeable taint always floats there keeping its evil eye on us, even when the sound gets slower, richer and darker.

The song that emerged as a standout first was *Wolf Within*, which again starts out black but finds its way to a more evocative gothic sound, with a strong riff and an ambience of whispers, even before the achingly slow and dark section. There's some sort of narration late in the song that sounds like it's delivered by a pissed off witch. Maybe it's a sample and maybe not, but it's evocative however it was sourced. Putting all those elements together makes this quite the potent song.

And, while I'm not sure anything else here matches it, others gradually highlight similar qualities. I rather like the middle of the album, *Mother of All Gods* and *Estrangement* the logical end to one side and the beginning of the other. The former is the better song but the latter is interesting, as it's the least black metal song on offer, though there's plenty of double bass drumming going on and it keeps on speeding up until its finale. However, that

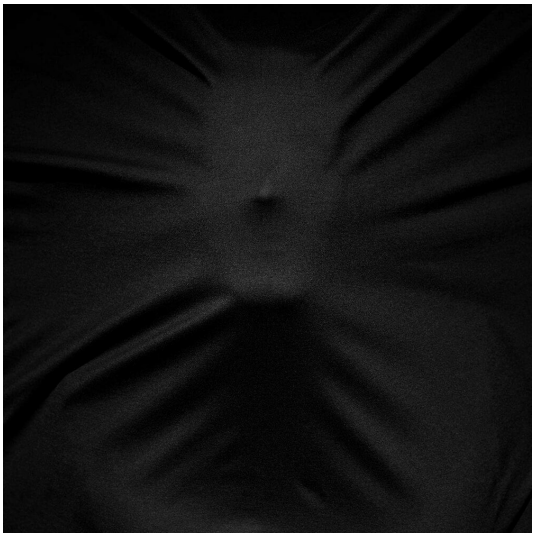
doesn't necessarily mean that it's the most gothic, because the rich textures evident elsewhere don't show up much at all.

In fact, there's more velvet and mahogany in the sub-two minute prelude to *In My Dreams* which follows it than in this entire song, with *In My Dreams* proper kicking off with neat whispered sonic cobwebs before launching into a faster and more frantic tempo. The question really becomes what songs are the best place to start for the new listener. I'd say start with *La Haine*, just as the album does, and, if you like what you hear, follow up with a double bill of *Wolf Within* and *In My Dreams (Part 2 - In Bitterness)*. If you're not convinced by them, this isn't for you. If you are, then you're all set and you can explore from there.

Oddly, my least favourite song is the one they've made a video for, which is *Kyrie / Gloria*. It seems too deliberate for me, as the spotlight section runs too long, a sonorous gothic voice playing a sort of counter to a variety of voices, some shrieky, others very different. It's an interesting idea, but it didn't work for me and the rest of the song doesn't make up for it. That's probably down to choice, which is a personal thing, so you may dig it. The band are very capable, so this ends up being about how the black metal merges with the symphonic and gothic aspects and which songs do that best.

I certainly like Agathodaimon more as a gothic metal band than a black metal one and, while they're a bit more of the latter than the former, they're moving my way. I would suggest that it'll be interesting to see how they develop over their next couple of albums, but they haven't been particularly busy of late. They split up in 2014, after a couple of decades as a band and half a dozen studio albums to their name, but they got back together in 2020 and this is the first output since then. So, welcome back, folks! The Seven is their seventh album. Let's hope it's a lucky one for them.

Highlights: *Wolf Within*; *La Haine*; *Mother of All Gods*.



SATYRICON

SATYRICON & MUNCH

COUNTRY:
NORWAY

STYLE:
DARK AMBIENT

RATING:
6/10

RELEASE DATE:
10 JUN 2022

And there was I thinking that Satyricon had lost all their extreme metal edge and shifted well into mainstream heavy metal with admittedly killer riff-driven singles like *K.I.N.G.* This is not remotely that and, in fact, it's edgier than the black metal they started out making. The Munchmuseet says that this fifty-six minute track, "carries Satyricon's unmistakable signature yet breaks away from anything they've previously created through its format, length, and expression." They're right.

And why would the Munchmuseet, an Oslo museum dedicated to the art of the famous Norwegian painter Edvard Munch, have any relevance in an album review? Well, because this single piece was composed to accompany a selection of Munch's paintings and graphics at the Munchmuseet, in an innovative collaboration between two artists of different media. This is therefore less of an album and more of an installation piece. Which explains why it's so weird.

Satyricon & Munch, which is also the name of the exhibition, certainly isn't black metal or even metal at all, but it's difficult to label it. There's a lot here that's dark ambient, but it starts out abrasive, almost like a subdued industrial piece, pulsing over a repeated mechanical riff. It evolves from there, through the use of imaginative instrumentation, some of which provides what is clearly music and some of which is content to serve as sound effects. Rarely does it come close to what we tend to expect in a Satyricon album, making it a worthy piece of music but a surprising one to boast their name.

The first instrument to emerge from this dark soundscape, as everything thus far fades into it, just like the cover art, is an elegant cello that manages to be both traditional and experimental, as I'm pretty sure the strange noises around the expected rich sound are also cello-derived. It's the next section that comes closest to the Satyricon we know and love, with a black metal guitar delivering a neat riff, albeit entirely without the blastbeats that normally accompany it. Instead, there's

an oddly upbeat percussive backdrop, that's half industrial and half circus music, a clarinet joining in for good measure.

And so we go, the motif developed thus far explored in a variety of instruments and timbres. This is certainly constructed like a classical composition, but with strong use of electronics and pulsing mechanised sounds. Of course, there's a serious crossover between classical music and metal in an array of different subgenres, but it's rarely delivered in such a form as this. In fact, it's probably a greater likelihood that you might hear this on a niche modern classical radio station than on rock shows. And really, whether that piques your interest or not is the most likely indicator of whether you might dig this or not.

I do, but then I like dipping my toes into the often avant-garde world of modern classical music. I'm not an expert and don't even have a complete grounding but I find it fascinating. Now, just like the modern art world, I don't always like it or understand it, but I find it fascinating nonetheless, just to hear instruments that I do understand doing things that I haven't heard them do before or in a way that I haven't heard before. To anyone who thrives on discovery, it's a fascinating place.

And it's that sort of listener who might dig this. You should certainly approach it with your mind as open as possible. You'll need to be patient, not only because it's one fifty-six minute track but also because it's often slow and ambient and it warrants multiple listens to fully appreciate. It's almost the opposite of an ear worm like *K.I.N.G.* in just about every way. This is rarely catchy, though a few sections find a groove that modern Satyricon fans might recognise, usually the ones that bring in a metal guitar and generate a riff to play with for a while. Of course, even when that happens, the cello remains a prominent instrument, often the prominent instrument.

So, if everything I've said makes you wonder what's wrong with the world today, then this isn't for you and, if you like Satyricon, you're definitely going to be pissed that they labelled it as such. But if you have a more open mind and are intrigued as to what Satyr and Frost have done here, then I do recommend that you check it out. You may still hate it and you'll still be puzzled about why it's identified as a Satyricon album, but it will, at least, have a shot to impress you. Maybe it will.

Highlights: there's only one track; figure it out!



TED NUGENT

DETROIT MUSCLE

COUNTRY:
USA

STYLE:
HARD AND HEAVY

RATING:
6/10

RELEASE DATE:
29 APR 2022

Sure, Ted Nugent is a right wing whackjob and he's about as subtle as the muscle car engines that introduce his sixteenth solo album or indeed the rendition of the *Star Spangled Banner* that closes it. He's a loud and obnoxious personality, but that doesn't mean that he doesn't rock. If you don't buy into that, just go check out *Double Live Gonzo!* and we'll talk. Songs such as *Wang Dang Sweet Poontang* are about as loud and obnoxious as he is but there are few ever released that rock much harder.

Sure, it would be easy to dismiss him into a right wing whackjob category with people like Kid Rock and that's fair on a single front, but only one. I didn't review Kid Rock's album, *Bad Reputation*, in March, because it's just awful, an embarrassment that should never ever be mentioned again, led by a real cringefest of a single, *Don't Tell Me How to Live*, that beggars belief. This isn't. It's not Nuge's best but it's a rock 'n' roll record that doesn't embarrass anyone, least of all him.

And, of course, given how opinionated the man is, I should probably talk about lyrics before music. Surprisingly, they're not controversial at all, even if there are a few veiled references that we see through. We might look at song titles and cringe at their lyrical content in advance, like *Come and Take It*, *Just Leave Me Alone* and *Feedback GrindFIRE*, but there's nothing much to them. Mostly, I would call them generic and uninspired, as if Nugent simply didn't want this to be an instrumental album so had to come up with some words. *Come and Take It* has forty lines and over half of them are literally just the title repeated.

Frankly, I'd have preferred this to be an instrumental album, because the best thing about it is the guitar. Nugent rarely unleashes his instrument and rips the way we know that he can, but he plays it well and in an interesting fashion throughout. In fact, he lets us wait for the blistering stuff, the *WinterSpring SummerFall* instrumental a real highlight but through subtlety rather than a gonzo genius. The wild guitar waits for *Feedback GrindFIRE* no fewer than ten songs in, one that I'm sure he's

going to absolutely blister through on stage, and it's still there on *Star Spangled Banner* to close things out. I wanted a lot more of the Motor City Madman and I didn't get it, but I see reasons why.

One is that *Feedback GrindFIRE* is the only vocal song here where the guitar truly plays a lead role in that it's higher in the mix than the vocals. On this one, those vocals are suitably wild too, mostly because I presume they're delivered by Nugent himself rather than his bassist, Greg Smith, who is a far more deliberate and controlled singer. He does a decent job and he's a better singer than his boss, but he feels out of place to me on a Ted Nugent album and he left me wondering if the guitar was more deliberate and controlled to complement his delivery.

And so this becomes a little underwhelming, even if the best, most raucous material is left for last and so makes us want to immediately start again to see if we misjudged it. But no, we didn't. It seems a fair observation that the muscle cars heard on *Detroit Muscle*, one of two paeons to Nugent's hometown, are actually a sample, even though we know full well from *Feedback GrindFIRE* that he could easily have generated that sound in a far more interesting fashion from his guitar. To not do so was a deliberate choice and it underlines those first nine songs. He even gets a bit sentimental on *Alaska* and it doesn't work for me.

Of the pre-*Feedback GrindFIRE* songs, the most interesting to me are the ones that find a groove. *Born in the MotorCity* is another paeon to Detroit with cheaply banal lyrics but one that's performed as a blues song in ZZ Top style. That little old band from Texas do it better but it's neat to hear Nugent take on the groove. There's a southern rock undercurrent to *Drivin' Blind*, beyond the lyrical nod to Molly Hatchet and others, that's neat to hear too. They're decent, but it's the wild closing pair and the unusually introspective instrumental that I'd call out as highlights.

Highlights: *Feedback GrindFIRE*; *Star Spangled Banner*; *WinterSpring SummerFall*.



NIK TURNER & THE TRANCE DIMENSIONALS

SYNCHRONICITY

COUNTRY:
UK

STYLE:
SPACE ROCK

RATING:
6/10

RELEASE DATE:
30 MAY 2022

It would be fair describe the prolific space rock saxophonist and flautist Nik Turner as an acquired taste and pretty much everything I said about his prior album, *The Final Frontier*, holds on this one, credited to Nik Turner & The Trance Dimensionals. This is a more personal version of the style you might know from Hawkwind, the legendary British space rockers with whom he performed for a decade or so during their most successful period, albeit in two stints. He certainly hasn't moved too far adrift from their sound, referencing their *Space Ritual* album by name in both *Destination Void* and *The Enchantress*, the first two tracks here.

When Turner sticks to making music, he sounds great. I love his instrumental work, because it's as trippy and weird as anything Hawkwind put their name to but more exploratory. Turner has stated that he's more interested in the feel of songs than any particular structure or components within them and that makes sense. Instrumentals like *Sphinx Dancer* are joyous journeys that I wouldn't mind continuing for hours. I wonder if this one was extracted from a longer jam, as it fades in and kind of fades out after its six minutes in the spotlight. It could have been as endless as the sands it evokes and which are so vividly depicted in the cover art.

However, when Turner takes the mike, the quality drops because he sounds less like a vocalist and more like an old man reading poetry, which I'm pretty sure he is on songs like *Sekhmet*. On others, I think the point is more to narrate an introduction, like on *Destination Void*, which also opens the album, and *Thunder Rider Invocation*. Even when he tries to sing, he sounds like he's providing the narration rather than singing a song. Fortunately, he hands over actual singing duties here to the various guests. *Angel Flame*, the dancer in Turner's Space Ritual band and also the Crazy World of Arthur Brown, provides excellent narration on a couple of tracks too.

I talk about Turner like this is his band, but it isn't. Last time out, on *The Final Frontier*, it was and I'm assuming that all the creative

decisions were his. That's not really the case here, because this is a Trance Dimensionals album, with Nik Turner a guest of sorts, even if he's an acutely prominent one. The Trance Dimensionals are the band of Steve Hillman, who provides the guitars, keyboards and synths here, as well as writing all the music and lyrics, except for a couple of those overblown narrations, which are the work of Terry James Hawke, and the final song, *Children of the Sun*, by a partnership of Nik Turner and Dave Anderson of Amon Düül II, the Groundhogs and, inevitably, an album by Hawkwind.

So this is really a Steve Hillman album, with Turner adding his saxophone and flute and, occasionally, vocals. Oddly his sax is relatively subdued in the mix, so I had to focus hard to hear it on favourites like *Night of the Jewelled Eye*, the longest piece here, which starts out folkier and ends up almost in carnival territory when it gets frantic, though it never ceases to be space rock and really good space rock at that. His flute is much more obvious, especially on a beautiful but much calmer instrumental called *Cloudlands*, but also on *Sphinx Dancer*.

It's telling that all my favourites here are instrumentals and very possibly jams. It wouldn't shock me to discover that this line-up, which includes a couple of musicians Hillman performed with in a prog rock band called *Ra Rising*, Clog on bass and Dai Rees on drums, could just jam for hours and never cease to be interesting. When vocals show up and aren't just recited poetry in some form of collaborative performance art, it's the guests who shine, especially Eleanor Rees, who provides a memorable vocal on *Children of the Sun*.

And so, this is another 6/10 for me, though really that's a midpoint between a lot of 7/10 material and a lot of 5/10 material. Guess which side of that is almost entirely instrumentals? I see that Nik Turner has also released a collaborative album this year that I should check out, featuring a slew of enticing names, including Robby Krieger, Chris Poland and Steve Hillage, along with legendary jazz drummer Billy Cobham and others. It's called *Space Fusion Odyssey* and I guess it underlines a rather busy period in Turner's career.

Highlights: *Sphinx Dancer*; *Cloudlands*; *Night of the Jewelled Eye*.



ARCH ENEMY

DECEIVERS

COUNTRY:
SWEDEN

STYLE:
MELODIC DEATH METAL

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
12 AUG 2022

I've enjoyed Arch Enemy for years, partly because they were one of the few bands who I noticed in my nineties period of not noticing much because life had taken over from music for me for a while. Maybe the fact that they famously hired a woman as a harsh vocalist helped to grab my attention, but that novelty wore off quickly once that unlikely glass door was broken and Angela Gossow was able to become simply the singer, worthy of note for her musical talents not just her gender.

Their current singer, Alissa White-Gluz, is probably a better vocalist, but I still have a fondness for Gossow's voice. She spat out lines well and she's still who I see when I think of commercial melodic death metal. Now, this is a less commercial album than say, *Anthems of Rebellion*, with faster and more technical shifts, but the melodies are still there and clearly come from the same band. I may not have heard that album in a decade but listening to it alongside this one highlights just how much this is *Anthems* with crisper production and harder and cleaner edges.

I really like the balance that they've found here between an extreme death metal sound, with its double bass drumming and harsh vocals, and an older school power metal sound, with slower riffs, guitar solos and melodies. There are reasons why *Handshake with Hell* is the opener, because it's quite a lot of things all at once. It's a melodic death metal song, of course, but White-Gluz sings a line here and there clean, as if it's a straightforward heavy/power metal song too, and she drops into a tasty section in the second half with clean vocals that are almost folky, over a sort of dark ambient backdrop. Then a guitar duel between Michael Amott and Leff Loomis brings us home.

It's the most varied song vocally, because White-Gluz does stay harsh for the vast majority of the album, though she did impress me thorougly with what she did there. However, the music remains varied throughout. In the *Eye of the Storm* is slow and powerful and it's a firm nod to Judas Priest, even though White-Gluz's voice is a few octaves below Rob

Halford. Priest had a few songs with *Deceiver* in the name, so I was almost expecting that nod, given that there's a kinda sorta title track called *Deceiver, Deceiver*, but they shifted it elsewhere.

They speed back up on *The Watcher*, the elegant twin guitarwork of the intro soon giving way to a speed metal blitzkrieg, but it slows down for the choruses and wraps up with keyboards that flow smoothly into the strings that open *Poisoned Arrow*. And the choruses on both those songs, as on most of the ten songs proper on offer here, are epic in sound. It would only take a change in vocal style for Arch Enemy to become a pure power metal band. They don't even need to lower the bass in the mix, because that's already been done, which I'd suggest is the only flaw to the production.

Some of the songs don't even need the choruses to feel epic. My favourite here after *The Watcher* may well be *Sunset Over the Empire*, which has orchestral sweeps in it that may well be keyboards but which endow it with a timeless quality. The lyrics aren't particularly deep but it feels like they ought to be. Certainly it's about a pivotal moment in time, with talk of holy war and an end to one era with the promise of another ascendant. It's the sort of thing an epic metal band tends to sing about and I don't doubt that Arch Enemy would acknowledge that. The orchestral/choral section that closes out *Spreading Black Wings* is just another example of pure epic, almost a soundtrack.

I wonder whether the naysayers after the hiring of Angela Gossow are still dissing on Arch Enemy. They didn't like how commercial and mainstream the band's sound was getting, especially on the breakthrough *Anthems of Rebellion* album, and wished for the more technical, more intense days with Johan Liiva at the mike. White-Gluz may be a little more traditional with her vocal but all the complaints about Gossow's era are applicable here. There are catchy melodies everywhere. There are "hey, hey" sections in both *Sunset Over the Empire* and *Spreading Black Wings*. *Mourning Star* is a brief instrumental that wouldn't feel out of place on a Pink Floyd album.

But Arch Enemy seem to be shifting units, so plenty of people aren't upset about their sound. This is often powerful, fast, heavy, emphatic. Is it what the band were doing with Liiva? No, not particularly, but music is fluid and evolving. It seems somehow disrespectful to challenge a band who pioneered one genre for moving into another. It ought to be just as valid to challenge why they haven't changed more in the past couple of decades. Me, I'm just enjoying a quality melodic death metal album that, sure, may often be a quality power metal album instead.

Highlights: *The Watcher*; *Sunset Over the Empire*.



PANZERFAUST

THE SUNS OF PERDITION -
CHAPTER III: THE ASTRAL DRAIN

COUNTRY:
CANADA

STYLE:
BLACK/DOOM METAL

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
22 JUL 2022

I'm not convinced that I've ever heard Panzerfaust before, though I have heard the Darkthrone album of that name, which I presume was the source of the band's name rather than the Nazi anti-tank weapon. After all, they're Canadian and not associated with the NSBM movement, though they do write lyrics about war. This is their sixth album in total and the third in the series that's occupied them over the past few years, *The Suns of Perdition*. Chapter I was *War, Horrid War* in 2019 and it was followed by *Chapter II: Render unto Eden* a year later. I believe there are to be four albums in this series, so this is the awkward third before it wraps up.

That said, it doesn't feel particularly awkward. I haven't heard either of the first two chapters, so I can't speak to how it compares, but this is an impressive album that makes me wander to find that pair and experience the whole thing (at least, thus far) in entirety. If there's anything awkward to mention, it would be the presence of experimental interludes in between the five songs proper that I don't see have a real purpose except to separate the tracks. Maybe that's all they intend to do, but they have an industrial tinged sound effect vibe to them that suggests they ought to achieve more than they do.

I knew Panzerfaust played black metal but that didn't prepare me for their sound here. There's as much doom metal here as black and much of the point seems to be texture, atmosphere if you will but I'd say that's a misleading word in this context, as this isn't really atmospheric black metal as a genre. Sure, there's atmosphere in the sound effect laden backdrops; every song starts and ends with one of those, as if we're listening to a Krautrock album. But then the guitars show up and the drums and we're into black metal territory.

If anything, the textures have a gothic flavour to them, due to lush feel and firm confidence, but I wouldn't remotely call this gothic metal. It's always surprisingly slow black metal, deliberate and dark and with rare enough ramps up in tempo that they're always

noteworthy when they appear. I would say only one song, *The Far Back at the River Styx*, spends most of its time at the traditional black metal sort of speed, because it ramps up quickly and never slows back down again.

The songs aren't short, as we might expect from such a slow take on black metal, but only the first of them, *Death-Drive Projections*, could really be called long, clocking in at over ten minutes, with the others lasting a comfortable six or seven minutes each and change. They're patient creatures, the doom element dictating the tempo and the texture often suggesting ritual. There's a hypnotic quality to the music that I appreciate and I'd like to see how that manifests in the earlier chapters.

I have no idea what the overarching story is here, though I presume there is one, given that this is surely a single concept album spun over four full length releases. I'm enjoying this for the feel, an approach that's probably still in mind from yesterday's Nik Turner album, and every component is on board with the feel. Even the vocals play ball, because there are two singers here, Goliath, who only wears the one hat in the band, and Brock Van Dijk, who also plays guitar, and they hand off to each other as if it's important somehow for the lyrical delivery to continue without any pauses for breath.

Death-Drive Projections is just patient, steadfastly refusing to speed up, though it somehow gets a little more intense as it goes. *Bonfire of the Insanities*, on the other hand, rumbles along like it's an unstoppable creature, utterly confident in its eventual victory that it doesn't have to exert any more effort than it feels like at any point in time. It's a surprise when it ramps up to more typical black metal speed with less than a minute to go, but maybe that unstoppable creature is pouncing. *Tabula Rasa* is bludgeoning, not insanely fast but ultra-powerful and with a seriously hard hitting beat from a very impressive drummer called Alexander Kartashov.

After a few listens, I'm still not sold on the interludes, which range from only thirty-eight seconds of *The Pain* to almost six minutes with *Enantiodromia*. Almost ten minutes of interludes seems just a little excessive on a forty-seven minute album and this would be a safe 8/10 without them. Were they just not happy with thirty-eight minutes?

I think the songs get better too as they progress, the first two solid but the last two even more so and maybe *Bonfire of the Insanitise* right at the heart of the album above them all in my thinking. But this is all new to me. Clearly, I need to check out the first two chapters in *The Suns of Perdition* tetralogy. Maybe I've found another favourite black metal band from North America, after Wolves in the Throne Room.

Highlights: *Bonfire of the Insanities*; *The Far Bank at the River Styx*; *Tabula Rasa*.



JOURNEY

FREEDOM

COUNTRY:
USA

STYLE:
MELODIC/HARD ROCK

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
8 JUL 2022

Latest in the growing department of "let's release a new studio album after... holy crap, how long has it been?", this is the fifteenth by American melodic/hard rock legends Journey—if we're strict—or the sixteenth, if we count their underrated *Dream, After Dream* soundtrack from 1980. Either way, it's their first new album in eleven years and it's a generous one, running almost an hour and a quarter, without ever seeming too long. That surprised me, though it should be pointed out that anyone who only listens to them on classic rock stations is going to get three serious shocks here.

The first is that, while Neal Schon and Jonathan Cain are still in the band and in strong form after decades of service—Schon was a founder member way back in 1973—that's not Steve Perry on lead vocals, because he left in 1998. The second is that the current singer is Arnel Pineda, who's Filipino and discovered by the band singing cover songs by Journey and others on YouTube in a band called the Zoo. So far, shocking but maybe not too shocking.

The third is that, given that Pineda joined in 2007 and has been with them consistently for the past fifteen years, performing on their previous two studio albums and a live one, he actually has more years with the band than Perry did. Sure, Perry had a twenty-one year stretch, but they were split up for almost a decade of that, which ought to count. Oh, and fourth just to throw in a bonus, you are not going to care. Pineda sings just like Perry did and he sounds fantastic.

That's evident on the strong opener, *Together We Run*, which sounds just like Journey should. The band's sound is pretty intact here for much of the running time, whether it's that obvious starter, a grower like *Don't Give Up on Us* or a ballad like *Still Believe in Love*. Journey have always done a good job with ballads, though they've never been my favourite songs by them. This one is soft but it's meant to be. I still liked it more than *Live to Love Again*, which feels like something taken from a musical. At least *Don't Give Up on Us* has

a searing guitar solo from Neal Schon, however soft it gets.

There's a lot of music here, across fifteen substantial tracks, and I'm not going to run through that list one by one. Let's just say that nothing is bad, little is just OK and the highlights for me are *You Got the Best of Me* and *The Way We Used to Be*, with *All Day and All Night* following in their wake.

You Got the Best of Me is a clear standout. It's a relatively subdued rocker but its hooks got stuck in my brain quickly and effectively and the band milk those hooks well enough that it's the longest song here except for the epic closer, *Beautiful as You Are*. Now, that's only five and a half minutes, just to be clear; the closer is the only long song on offer at a breath over seven. I liked this one on a first listen but it kept standing out more on every repeat, until I was plucking it out for separate plays.

The Way We Used to Be is an odd song because it feels like it ought to slip into the background as a filler track, but it just refuses to stay there. I think it succeeds not because it's inherently great as a song but because it utterly nails its groove. It feels absolutely right. I prefer *You Got the Best of Me* as a song but this one just gets into my bones and I can't not move to it. *All Day and All Night* is another groove-oriented song. It feels loose, a lot looser than it really is, because there's no way this wasn't constructed very carefully. Again, it just feels right and that's enough for me.

What I ought to wrap up with is that the line-up isn't quite what it ought to be. Behind Schon, Cain and Pineda, there's Randy Jackson on bass and Narada Michael Walden on drums. Of course, both of them also provide backing vocals, because every member of Journey does that, including Jason Derlatka, who doesn't play an instrument otherwise, even though he's a keyboardist in the usual line-up. Jackson was the bassist at the time the album was released but left before its release, so anyone going to see them on tour will see Todd Jensen on bass. Stranger still, the band's drummer is Deen Castronovo, who's only here to sing lead on *After Glow*, because Narada Michael Walden is the drummer on everything here and he's particularly emphatic at the end of *Beautiful as You Are*.

And I'll add a further surprise. Given that almost every quality melodic rock album nowadays is on the Frontiers indie label from Italy, it's an eye opener to see this one come out on a major label, a suggestion that maybe BMG are realising how vibrant the genre is right now. After all, their prior album, *Eclipse*, in 2011, was a Frontiers release, at least in Europe. Whatever the reason, Journey are back and on top of their game. This is probably longer than it needs to be, but then it's been a long eleven years. I'm not going to complain about how much music there is here, even if it affects the overall rating.

Highlights: *You Got the Best of Me*; *The Way We Used to Be*; *All Day and All Night*.



ANIMALS AS LEADERS

PARRHESIA

COUNTRY:
USA

STYLE:
PROGRESSIVE METAL

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
25 MAR 2022

Animals as Leaders will never be my favourite band because they take that djenty approach where every instrument becomes a percussion instrument and I'm just not a fan of that. If I want to focus on percussion, I'll listen to Hossam Ramzy's Egyptian rhythms or a gamelan orchestra or even John Cage's compositions for prepared piano.

You may be asking at this moment why I'm reviewing the new Animals as Leaders album, their fifth thus far and first in six years, if I'm just going to hate it. Well, I may not be a fan of that particular approach but this band are wildly inventive and do a lot more than just the djenty thing, so I'm open to hearing what they have to do. How much so I just found out.

Case in point: the opener, *Conflict Cartography*. Sure, there's a rhythmic element to both the bass and the guitar but this one goes everywhere. It reminded me of a far more traditional progressive metal band, or at least their offshoot, Liquid Tension Experiment. It's wild and it's complex but it's also melodic and ambitious. While it drops into a djenty section halfway, it also develops beyond it relatively quickly into more of the playful intricacy that it began with. It's easily my favourite song here and it feels as fresh on a third time through as it did on the first.

On the other hand, *Monomyth*, which follows it, simply doesn't want to depart so far from rhythm based everything, and most of the song is grounded in that percussive approach. There are synth melodies and guitar soloing over the top of it, but not as much or as notably as on the opener. The thinking is much more limited and the song suffers for that, at least in my opinion, in ways that I'd say don't apply to *Red Miso*, which is acutely rhythmic but in a fascinating way, making it feel like a success but *Monomyth* a failure. Sure, Loudwire listed it, in its single form, in a top twenty metal songs of 2021 chart, but that shows how far adrift I am from mainstream American tastes.

And, as with so much, it comes down to a matter of taste, though more so here than on the recent Meshuggah album, I would think.

Animals as Leaders are incredibly talented musicians and they're doing incredibly intricate work, so the question boils down to whether we enjoy what they do or not. Mehuggah are also incredibly talented musicians but they didn't seem to be trying on that album, which made it monotonous to my ears. Taste allows for a lot, but it seems to me that people who dig what they do would prefer other Meshuggah albums over that one. But hey, what do I know? I'm not much of a fan there either.

Of course, that leaves everything else on this album in between those two polar extremes, which I can't say I'm too shocked to discover. The question I had coming in was always going to be primarily about where the balance would be and the answer is that it's a lot closer to the opener than what comes next, meaning that I enjoyed this a lot more than I expected to. Then again, I've only really experienced Animals as Leaders through odd tracks on YouTube, rather than complete albums. I'd be lying if I wasn't surprised by some of what I heard here.

For instance, there's a large amount of keyboard work here that I didn't expect, presumably from Misha Mansoor, who isn't an official band member but who produced this album, played bass and arranged the synth work. He's a djent pioneer himself, best known for founding Periphery. Plenty of songs here, especially during the middle of the album, felt like seventies jazz fusion because of that, merely with occasional more contemporary bass overdubs, rather like what Frank Zappa did on *Rubber Shirt*, taking an old guitar solo and having a new bass part played over it.

Gestaltzerfall is where that approach largely comes in, sounding somewhere between Colosseum II and Herbie Hancock. *Asahi* is a swirling piece of atmosphere, its noodling guitars over keyboard swells serving as an interlude where one doesn't seem to be needed. That's because the next song is *The Problem of Other Minds*, more jazz fusion but with the repetitive bass overlay that annoyed me by distracting me with banal simplicity away from all the admirable complexity going on in the background, which I felt ought to be the foreground. *Micro Aggressions* is more 21st century but in a similar vein, with the keyboards often leading the way and sections sounding like they were sped up artificially, returning us to Liquid Tension Experiment territory.

It's telling that I enjoyed this rather a lot, especially given that I'm not a hardcore fan of the band. It means that it's accessible to outsiders, even for music so progressive and often experimental. It doesn't feel remotely mainstream, not least because they're an entirely instrumental band, but I can't fail to acknowledge how important and influential they've become. This is jazz as much as it's metal and very possibly more so. There's funk here too and I'm also well aware that most of what I hear as bass is really an eight-string guitar. The bottom line is that they sound like themselves and comparisons aren't easy to conjure up. After all, Parrhesia means "freedom of speech" and that's something they're definitely exploring musically. I should listen to them more.

Highlights: *Conflict Cartography*; *Gestaltzerfall*.



DARE

ROAD TO RUIN

COUNTRY:
UK

STYLE:
MELODIC ROCK

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
1 APR 2022

I remember Dare from the late eighties, when they put out a killer debut album called *Out of the Silence*. After that 1988 arrival on the scene, I'm not convinced I heard anything more. I probably thought they'd split up and gone their separate ways. They kind of did, but after a second album in 1991, they returned in 1998 with a third and they've been at it ever since. This appears to be their eighth studio album of original material, with two others reworking earlier releases. Their prior original album was *Sacred Ground* in 2016, so it's been six years. I'm glad they're still around.

What I remember most from *Out of the Silence* was the warm, inviting voice of Darren Wharton, a former keyboard player for Thin Lizzy, and their melodic approach, which was notably against the trends of the time, when bands were getting heavier and moving into extreme metal. Of course, a certain Nirvana album the same year as Dare's follow-up was just a further reminder that people wanted something different. Three decades on, I'm happy that so many bands impacted by such a volatile moment in time kept at it anyway and are still putting out strong material today.

While Wharton was initially known for his work in Thin Lizzy, he sounds more like David Coverdale than Phil Lynott, his voice breathy, honeyed and soul-infused. However, his tone is different and he doesn't deliver every line with a knowing wink in his eye. That grounds him and it shifts the overall effect closer to someone like Bob Catley of Magnum. In fact, the longer I listen to this album, the more it sounds like a janglier, subtly folk infused version of Magnum and it's that folk angle, which isn't a huge one, that delineates them.

Born in the Storm is a Magnum-esque opener, and it's a peach too, but *Cradle to the Grave* sounds folkier, because of the way the vocal line unfolds. If Runrig had tried to emulate U2 in the eighties, they might have ended up sounding like this. On the other hand, those folk melodies are there in the title track too, but they're phrased very much like Magnum would phrase them. In between is a real grower of a track, *Fire Never Fades*, that's as

good as the songs around it even if it took me a couple of listens for me to realise it.

That's four excellent tracks out of four, four varied tracks as well that underline how powerful this album is. To me personally, it's another reminder that, while I was focusing on increasingly heavy material in the eighties, there was so much softer and quieter rock music that I should have found worthwhile too. It's not just Wharton's fantastic lead voice, it's also the guitarwork of Vinny Burns that adds consistently elegant solos and solid riffs like the one on *Fire Never Fades*. Ironically, for a band founded by a keyboard player, there's not a lot of keyboards early on.

The catch is that this album promptly softens up after those first four tracks and, while it remains good stuff throughout, I'm not going to praise the rest of it the way I've praised the four openers. *Lovers and Friends* is too soft for my tastes and, while *Only the Good Die Young* and *Grace* aren't, I have to say that they're not far away. Suddenly, the obvious comparison ceases to be Magnum and starts to be Bryan Adams. That's especially notable on I Always Will, though it's there to a greater or lesser degree on all four of those songs, surprising me to realise that there's a light to heavy line running from Bryan Adams and Magnum.

To my mind, things pick back up with *The Devil Rides Tonight*, which fits so well with those first four tracks, even with a quiet opening, that I couldn't help but wonder why it wasn't shifted up to play alongside them. That choice would have created an album of two sides, one hard and one soft, and listeners could easily choose which they wanted to replay, depending on their tastes. As it is, it only serves to remind us how impressive the album was early on and how much it had softened up since that point.

I think that means another split the difference rating. Half of this is at least 7, often 8/10. And half is 6 out of 10, well constructed and well played but missing the oomph of the rest. So I'll go with a 7/10. If you're a big fan of the softer end of the spectrum, then you may want to a point to that.

Highlights: *Born in the Storm*; *Road to Eden*; *Fire Never Fades*; *Cradle to the Grave*.



SATAN

EARTH INFERNAL

COUNTRY:
UK

STYLE:
HEAVY METAL

RATING:
8/10

RELEASE DATE:
1 APR 2022

There are all sorts of odd little observations to make and contradictions to highlight when it comes to Satan. The band, that is. For a start, they hail from Newcastle upon Tyne and yet didn't start out on Neat, like so many others. Instead, they released material on labels like Roadrunner and Steamhammer that were more prestigious than Neat but didn't have such a grounding in the NWOBHM era. The other observation from me is that I seem to have a lot more of Satan when they weren't called Satan, under which name they have existed for four out of the seven eras of their existence.

That's partly because they changed their name to Blind Fury in 1984, when I discovered rock music. So, while I've heard and thoroughly enjoyed the debut Satan album, *Court in the Act*, from 1983, I first heard them as Blind Fury, on yet another strong *Friday Rock Show* session (the 31st May, 1985 show on which it debuted is one of my most frequently played recordings). Somehow I failed to notice their 1987 album as Satan, but did pick them again under another new name, Pariah, who played a heavier, thrashier form of metal. I remember their second album, *Blaze of Obscurity*, fondly. Now I see that they're back to being Satan again, and I realise that I've missed more of their work than I've heard.

It's good to hear Satan again, whatever name they're using this week, and this album took me way back to those days. Sure, there's nostalgia to that, because this is new music that fits right into my comfort zone. I kept expecting Tommy Vance to back announce the track I'd just played. And that's because the style they adopt here is emphatically the NWOBHM era one that they played early in their career, with deep and warm vocals from Brian Ross, who's on his third stint with the band. It would be fair to say that he's the most characteristic aspect to their sound, a clean hard rock vocal over a heavy metal backdrop.

The metal aspect manifests through the twin guitar assault of Steve Ramsey and Russ Tippins, the heart of the band. Each is on their fourth stint with Satan (not forgetting one

with Blind Fury and two with Pariah), and they're just as capable as Ross, even if they're a little less iconic. They add a metallic edge to the band, ironically because they hint back to seventies Wishbone Ash as much as that band's most overt metal disciples, eighties Iron Maiden. Both of them manifest together on the first side's closer, *A Sorrow Unspent*, which is up tempo without ever quite becoming speed metal. I could listen to this pair of axemen duel all day. I've actually repeated *Burning Portrait* three times just now only to listen to them.

With such a grounding in seventies hard rock, as so many of the early eighties British heavy metal bands had, it's perhaps not too surprising that I should hear some Demon here, along with the more expected Angel Witch. Satan are a little heavier, for sure, but everything is still built out of melody, whether it's the vocals or the guitars. They also have a sort of epic feel, like Demon had, that isn't reflected in the length of their songs. None of the ten songs here make it to the six minute mark, though a few come close, but quite a few feel like they're epics anyway, not least the closer, *Earth We Bequeath*.

Of course, both Satan and Demon shared the side effect of appearing to be a Satanic band, which was cool and edgy until it became a problem when listeners expected them to sound as raucous as Venom. There's nothing worse than to disappoint people for no better reason than not being what they expected you to be. What surprised me here is that they seem to have embraced that Satanic angle again. Sure, they've hardly joined the Norwegian black metal elite, but songs such as *Twelve Infernal Lords* and *Luciferic* betray the interests that prompted their name to begin with.

It's actually hard to pick a favourite song here, because everything plays very consistently, even on a second or third listen. Maybe, if you twisted my arm, I'd reluctantly call *From Second Sight* out as the best song here. But I might say *A Sorrow Unspent* instead. Or *Twelve Infernal Lords*. Or, any of the ten songs on offer. On my current listen, I'd say *Burning Portrait*. And that just underlines how consistent this is. Nothing really stands out above anything else, not because this isn't good stuff but because it's all good stuff, from *Ascendancy* to *Earth We Bequeath*. And that's why I've cut my paragraph talking about why I'm giving this a 7/10 and going with a highly recommended 8/10 instead. Hail Satan indeed!

Highlights: *Burning Portrait*; *Twelve Infernal Lords*; *Ascendancy*; *From Second Sight*; *A Sorrow Unspent*.



SOULFLY

TOTEM

COUNTRY:
USA

STYLE:
GROOVE/THRASH/DEATH METAL

RATING:
8/10

RELEASE DATE:
5 AUG 2022

While I was a big fan of early Sepultura with co-founder Max Cavalera, both the early death metal stuff and the later stuff that brought in tribal rhythms, I haven't been as fond of Soulfly, which he founded in 2007. Sure, they had an interesting genre-melding approach and they were far heavier than most of the alternative stuff I was hearing from the States at the time, but it didn't connect with me. Now, I haven't followed their career religiously, but I have heard a couple of albums and some odd other stuff here and there, enough to know that it just wasn't my sort of thing.

Maybe I should have kept listening, because this isn't what I remember at all. This is much heavier and often much faster, though there's still a strong focus on groove metal. The nu metal elements are gone, it seems, which I'm not upset about, and there are riffs that shift clearly from groove to thrash to death, which I'm also not upset about. It's an interesting mix and it's backed up by vocals that are definitely somewhere on that same road; they may be rooted in hardcore shouts but they don't feel remotely out of place on thrashy material and have a tinge of death growl to them too. I hear some Tom G. Warrior in that voice, especially on songs like *Ecstasy of Gold*. And all of this is a lot further up my alley than what I remember on earlier albums.

Of course, the tribal aspect is not neglected either and Cavalera's son Zyon is credited not only on drums but also Brazilian percussion. This is more overt on the later, more experimental tracks, but it's discernable on the storming opener, *Superstition*, and on others like *Rot in Pain* and *Ancestors*. I like this approach and, frankly I'd like to hear a lot more of it, but I'm hardly going to complain, as Soulfly are one of the few bands doing this at all. What's odd to me is how this doesn't particularly feel like folk metal at all, even though it kind of is because of that ethnic Brazilian sound.

Superstition is a blistering opener, more thrash than groove but the groove elements present add a bounce to it, so it feels upbeat as well as up tempo. It's over in three minutes

and that's average here, if we factor out the five minute title track and the epic nine minute closer. That makes these songs all the more urgent, because they show up, do their thing and then vanish into oblivion (or a dead tone on *The Damage Done*), so another short, punchy song can do the same thing. I dig that a lot, even though it's clearly a punk influence and this is a lot more of a metal album.

Talking of *The Damage Done*, not everything here unfolds at a serious pace. The songs are always urgent and ready for the pit to respond, but this one focuses on that effect, its fundamental riff a perfect example of what a thrash band would call the mosh part of a song. Add the chanting vocal and the bouncy groove and the pit ought to love this one, but I dug the guitar solo just as much. It definitely counts as a song to feel as much as hear.

With a brief note to point out that the title track is longer and so has more opportunity for wilder, more interesting things to happen, that's a growing approach on the album's second half that the title track kicks off. *Ancestors* plays a lot with the Brazilian side of things and morphs into a sort of conversation with the spirits. *Ecstasy of Gold* is my favourite short song here, not least because of the repetition at the end of lines, something that's there from *Superstition* onwards but finds its greatest effect here. *Soulfly XII* is an interesting instrumental built around what could have been a thrash metal intro, but deepened with world and electronic sounds.

And that leaves the closer, *Spirit Animal*, which is particularly fascinating. It kicks off riddled with spooky effects, like a Hallowe'en ride, then finds a groove metal riff to ground it, adds a chant to colour it and only gets more inventive from there. By the seven minute mark, it's unmistakably a prog rock song, atmospheric and imaginative and we start to wonder about the instruments that we hear. Was that a saxophone? Certainly horns of some description. What's being done over the clean vocals? Are those layered effects in post or some sort of filter? Something, I'm sure.

I've listened to this a lot today, partly because it connected with me and I'm not used to that from Soulfly but partly because it's really interesting material. The first five tracks are worthy of a 7/10 but the second five are even better and I don't think an 8/10 would be unfair. As the latter amount to a lot more minutes than the former, I think that balances a 7.5/10 upwards. This may become as low on my highly recommended list as anything gets this year, just squeezing on as a rounding up but I do think it deserves to be on there. That surprises me but it is what it is.

Now, what else have I been missing out on by Soulfly? I'm seeing suggestions that they ditched nu metal a while back.

Highlights: *Spirit Animal*; *Totem*; *Ecstasy of Gold*; *Superstition*; *Ancestors*.



MUNICIPAL WASTE

ELECTRIFIED BRAIN

COUNTRY:
USA

STYLE:
THRASH METAL/CROSSOVER

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
1 JUL 2022

Municipal Waste have never been the most prolific thrash band in the scene, but their every other year album release schedule slipped to every three years and it's now every five, with this coming five years after *Slime and Punishment* and that five after *The Fatal Feast*. What's increasing is the average ratings at Metal Archives, because each album released after *Massive Aggressive* in 2009 has garnered a higher rating. I'm not sure I can agree with that because Municipal Waste's brand of crossover thrash is ultra-reliable but also relatively predicatable. This is done well, because all of their music is done well, but it's hard to compare its merits.

For anyone not aware of what they do, the openers quickly establish their modus operandi and it's not one that they vary much at all as the album continues. *Electrified Brain* highlights how frantic their approach to thrash is, a speed metal assault with hardcore punk vocals that's over and done in fewer than three minutes, even with an intro, an outro and a set of swapped guitar solos in the middle. *Demoralizer* is a bit more metal, with even more Iron Maiden-esque guitarwork, but it's a song with a similar impact otherwise. *Last Crawl* is back to pure crossover, the vocals taking a lead over the guitars, and on we go.

I should comment on the lengths of these tracks, because they make those on yesterday's Soulfly album look positively epic. Only *Thermonuclear Protection* makes it to the three minute mark and *Putting On Errors* only reaches half that, with *The Bite* only a blip longer. There are fourteen songs on offer here and yet the album still only clocks in at thirty-four minutes even. It can't ever be said that Municipal Waste hang around.

The comparisons to draw are to the original crossover bands, so I won't even bother to list them, as they wouldn't surprise anyone. I got a lot of Suicidal Tendencies on *The Bite* though, with a dash of Overkill, a band that kept cropping in my mind from the thrash side of things. The most overt punk side is Tony Foresta's lead vocal and his voice defines the band's sound even more than the guitars of

Ryan Waste and Nick Polous. Talking of Waste, he and Land Phil both contribute vocals here too, combining most effectively on *Ten Cent Beer Night*, thus deepening an already catchy chorus.

That song has a neat nod to the Scorpions at the end and I couldn't fail to catch a German bite in a prowling Accept vein on songs like *High Speed Steel* and especially *Thermonuclear Protection*. The latter may well be my favourite song, even if *Restless and Wicked* comes as close to textbook as anything here, a two and a half minute blitz with rough vocals over tight riffs, the combination of punk voice and metal guitars being apparently effortless but utterly effective.

And there's not much more for me to say, because Municipal Waste aren't one of those bands who might grow on you with further listens. They're utterly transparent about what they do and that's on offer on the first song, the last song and everything in between. If you like one of them, you're pretty much guaranteed to like all of them. Conversely, if you don't like the first one you hear, the rest of the album isn't going to change your mind. This is another short blitzkrieg of an album that will clean your clock in the best possible ways. If you're into that, check it and them out.

Highlights: *Thermonuclear Protection*, *Restless and Wicked*.

AZFANDOM
.ORG



WHITE SPIRIT

RIGHT OR WRONG

COUNTRY:
UK

STYLE:
HARD AND HEAVY

RATING:
8/10

RELEASE DATE:
29 JUL 2022

Here's something special for NWOBHM fans that you probably never thought you'd get to hear. If you remember those days, you probably remember White Spirit, a band from Hartlepool in the northeast of England, who impressed enough with a single on Neat to land a deal with MCA but vanished after their one and only album.

That album is well worth your time, by the way, with plenty of biting NWOBHM guitarwork from Janick Gers, now of Iron Maiden, but also an incessant chug and heavy organ reminiscent of seventies Deep Purple. They even added some prog in there for good measure; just check out the epic closer, *Fool for the Gods*.

Everything was very promising indeed. But then Janick left to replace Bernie Tormé in Gillan, Toby Sadler replaced Phil Brady on bass and singer Bruce Ruff left, to be replaced by an unknown called Brian Howe. The new White Spirit recorded most of a new album under producer Colin Towns, also of Gillan fame, but they split up before it was done and everyone went their separate ways. While some joined bands as varied as Tank, Airrace and the Sweet, that unknown new singer made good on the other side of the pond, fronting Ted Nugent's band and replacing Paul Rodgers in Bad Company, hardly the easiest challenge a singer's ever been given!

Fast forward almost forty years to 2020 and the death of Brian Howe of a heart attack. A day later, Mick Tucker, who had replaced Gers on guitar, and Malcolm Pearson, keyboard player all along, did the expected reminiscing about old times and remembered that second never finished album. The expectation was that the master tapes were long gone, but then Pearson started organising for a move to France and found them in storage. And so began the process of restoration, because four decades in a bedside cabinet is hardly the ideal place to keep master tapes.

Restoration went well, but not everything was salvagable. Tucker and Pearson therefore decided to re-record all the music and to replace the vocals where Howe's original work

from 1982 couldn't be saved . They performed their own parts, of course, but brought in drummer Russell Gilbrook, of Uriah Heep—as original White Spirit drummer Crash Crallan had died in 2008—and bass player Neil Murray, who's played with everyone. Howe's voice remains intact on five tracks, making this a cool posthumous gem in his discography, with Jeff Scott Soto stepping in on two, Lee Small on two and FM's Steve Overland on the fifth. Towns finished up his production four decades on, while the mix was done by Pontus Norgen of Hammerfall.

So, these songs are old songs, written and originally recorded in 1981, but largely re-recorded by two of the original members, two new ones and a mix of original vocals with new ones by diverse hands. As a result, it sounds both old and new at the same time, as if White Spirit had done most of their job, but then magically hopped through a portal in time to finish up with 21st century technology. The Deep Purple sound of the first album carries through to this one, but the songs do change just a little depending on who's singing them.

Soto sang for Journey for a year, so it's hardly shocking to find that his two tracks, *Right or Wrong*, which is a stormer of an opener, and *Better Watch Out*, with a more prominent keyboard line, have a notable Journey feel to the vocals, but the band is more like Heep and Purple behind him.

Lee Small currently sings for Lionheart, Shy and the Sweet, so he has plenty of flexibility; he's a higher, more emotional version of Soto here, especially on *The Dice Rolls On*.

Steve Overland helps *Holy Water* to sound exactly like Bad Company, a fitting tribute to Howe, who sang for them for eight years.

And that leaves Howe's half of the album. He does sound a little thinner than the others, but that has to come from the fact that his recordings are forty years old. *Runaway* sounds like it could have been on Van Halen's *1984* album, if Sammy Hagar had joined by that point. *Lady of the Night* and *Gotta Get Out* are keyboard heavy too, but in a different way, as if White Spirit was moving a little away from the NWOBHM sound and more into mainstream hard rock but in an interesting way, as Diamond Head did with *Canterbury*.

That said, the riff in *Gotta Get Out* feels like it could have been on White Spirit's debut album, and I actually went back to see if *Wait a Little Longer* actually was. It wasn't, but it's my favourite song here, happy to just barrel along. There are hard rock songs here that rock hard, but none of them harder than that one. Finally, there's *Rock and Roll (Is Good for You)* to close out, which is the most obvious single material here, completely unlike the closer of the debut except for the keyboard bit in the middle and a carnival version of *Greensleeves* to fade out at the end.

These are all fantastic songs to hear but the obvious response is that it's a real shame that such a promising band ceased to be so quickly. After all, they didn't record a third album before they split up that someone's going to find next week. However, Tucker and Pearson have apparently hired an all new rhythm section and a second guitarist to record and tour with. So White Spirit are back and I couldn't be happier.

Highlights: *Wait a Little Longer*; *Rock and Roll (Is Good for You)*; *Gotta Get Out*; *Right or Wrong*; *Better Watch Out*.



TYSONDOG

MIDNIGHT

COUNTRY:
UK

STYLE:
HEAVY/SPEED METAL

RATING:
6/10

RELEASE DATE:
29 APR 2022

From one NWOBHM band to another, but White Spirit and Tysondog are very different in sound, even though they were based only thirty miles apart in the north east of England. It isn't at all difficult to notice the unmistakable influence of seventies Deep Purple on the hard rock of the former, but the latter were always faster and heavier, often even approaching speed metal as befits their later arrival on the scene, though this album mostly slows down from that to be good old fashioned heavy metal. The opener here, a belter called *Battalion*, reminds very much of Toranaga, slower and tighter but fully aware of how emphatic it is. I liked the album immediately because of that.

I have to say that I enjoyed the vocals here, delivered by the new fish in the band, Alan Ross, who is especially good given that he's mostly known as a guitarist, his role nowadays in Blitzkrieg; he has vocal experience too, but I haven't heard his work for Cardinal Synne. I'd suggest that his voice is a pretty solid match for the current Tysondog sound, loud and heavy, clear and resonant, deliberate and emphatic. He may not have much in the way of nuance, but then he doesn't need to have. He's the absolute vocal equivalent to the Steve Morrison/Paul Burdis guitar assault that underpins the entire album.

There's a genre of music called lowercase sound, because it's so quiet and ambient. This is close to the exact opposite, something like uppercase sound, bolded and underlined, because it's slow and in your face and relentless, even when songs happen to start in a deceptive way. For instance, I dig the way *Hellbound* begins, in a sort of acoustic but manipulated alt country vibe, only for it to kick into a firm groove in almost Rammstein style. I'm sure Ross will be hoping that the crowds at gigs will sing that title at him the way that crowds sing *Du Hast* back at Till Lindemann.

The fastest song here is *Defiant*, another highly appropriate title for a Tysondog track. It wouldn't be unfair to suggest that their sound right now could be defined by words

like *Hellbound*, *Defiant* and *Battalion*, not to forget *Midnight* and *It Lives*, which are perhaps not uncoincidentally all the titles on the first half of this album. *Defiant* still isn't speed metal, but it's a gear higher than the songs around it, some of which almost take pleasure in not going faster than they do. *Paper Cuts* especially could easily have been more up tempo, but the band just won't oblige.

Now, it does make sense for some of these to remain slow, the inevitability in the rhythm of *Dead Man Walking* being highly appropriate. It's another song that reminds me of Toranaga, though it finds a groove metal approach for the bridge. In fact, there's enough Toranaga here that I double checked the line-up to see if anyone from that band is also in this one, but there are no surprises to be found there.

The core of Tysondog nowadays is the pairing of Paul Burdis on guitar and Kevin Wynn on bass, like it's always been when the band has been active. If I'm reading things correctly, neither has played for anyone else, even during the thirty years Tysondog spent on hiatus. Like Ross, Phil Brewis was in Blitzkrieg and also played live for Satan, whose new album I reviewed earlier in the week. Hes a solid and reliable drummer, again underlining how well suited these musicians are to each other.

The results are decent, but not spectacular. Tysondog released a pair of albums in the eighties but then vanished. This is their second since reforming in 2008, arriving seven years after *Cry Havoc*. I'd be lying if I didn't say I liked it, but I didn't like it as much as their old stuff and I think it's fair to say that the faster this got, the more I liked it. *Defiant* is a peach of a track and *Battalion* isn't a long way behind it. I'm a sucker for the Toranaga sound and it's good to see someone else taking it on, even if it's a band who predate them and I liked before they ever formed.

By the way, just as an aside, I recognise part of the cover art. That young lady crawling towards us here is the same young lady crawling towards us on the British cover of Mike Flanagan's fantastic movie *Absentia*, which I know very well because it boasts an Apocalypse Later quote at the top, which is still a bucket list achievement for me.

Highlights: *Defiant*; *Battalion*.



DEREK SHERINIAN

VORTEX

COUNTRY:
USA

STYLE:
PROGRESSIVE ROCK

RATING:
8/10

RELEASE DATE:
1 JUL 2022

Here's something interesting from a name you may not know but a talent that you probably do. It might appear to be another instrumental guitar album, and it certainly includes large amounts of guitar solos, but Derek Sherinian isn't a guitarist. He merely plays his keyboards as if he is, with an array of very recognisable talent jamming along on guitar. This approach comes from very diverse background, his first three professional jobs being with jazz drummer Buddy Miles, rock icon Alice Cooper and prog metal legends Dream Theater.

I didn't hear a lot of Alice here, but I was often reminded of an inventive jazz fusion take on Dream Theater. It's primarily hard rock rather than metal, but it does heavy up at points, unsurprisingly a lot more on *Die Kobra*, with guests Michael Schenker and Zakk Wylde, than on songs featuring the likes of Nuno Bettencourt, Joe Bonamassa and "Bumblefoot" Ron Thal. The only guitarist to show up more than once is Steve Stevens, of Billy Idol fame, and he helps set the album in motion with a lively and spirited title track, which isn't wildly different from his other contribution, *Seven Seas*.

It's a good starter because it's warm and welcoming, but I think *Fire Horse*, featuring Bettencourt, still best known for his work with Extreme, is an even better way to continue. It starts out firmly as hard rock but quickly finds a bouncy jazz fusion riff that feels like it could have been lifted from an iconic seventies jazz fusion album. It focuses initially on guitar but becomes a very palatable duel between Bettencourt's guitar and Sherinian's keyboards. It's my favourite piece here and it gets a little more favourite every time it comes around.

I should mention that not everything is guitar and keyboards. There's a very noticeable bass from Ernest Tibbs on *Fire Horse* and he's one of five bassists here, the name I recognise most being that of Tony Franklin. The most obvious here may be Ric Fierabracci, even though he's only on one track, *Scorpion*, perhaps because it's the only one without a

guitarist. I didn't know the name, but he's a massively experienced talent who's played with everyone from Tom Jones to Shakira, but perhaps more typically for jazz names like Chick Corea and Billy Cobham. In many ways, he plays lead guitar on *Scorpion*; he merely happens to be using a bass while he does it.

Bonamassa's track also features Steve Lukather of Toto, an intriguing pairing. What they conjure up in *Key Lime Blues* is something in the vein of *Fire Horse*, but with weaving guitars set to a much funkier backdrop. While this often jazz over rock and often rock over jazz, there are plenty of other genres in play, a dabble in metal here and there and a few dabbles in funk being the most obvious. *Nomad's Land* is funky too, though as much because of Ernest Tibbs's work on bass as for Mike Stern's guitar. That's as jazzy as you might expect, with a central riff that feels like a jagged, deconstructed and rebuilt version of Herbie Hancock's *Rockit*.

I knew all the guitarists here, except for him, so it wasn't too much of a surprise to find that he has stayed primarily in the jazz world, albeit from jazz rock band Blood, Sweat & Tears to work with the likes of Billy Cobham, Jaco Pastorius and Miles Davis. The sheer diversity on this album is perhaps best highlighted by *Nomad's Land* being right next to the much heavier *Die Kobra*. Both are rooted in jazz, but they feel like they come from different genres and different eras, but not sounding out of place in each other's company. The dots connect in a lot of ways.

The most unusual song here, excepting *Scorpion* with its deliberate omission of guitar, is the closer because of its length and its approach. It's *Aurora Australis*, the guest guitarist is Bumblefoot and the ensuing organised chaos is over eleven minutes long, which is close to any two of the others. It starts out as a solo piano piece, with a little percussion—all the drums here are provided by Simon Phillips, last encountered guesting for Lalu and MSG—but it grows and keeps growing. There are a few surprising instruments here, including an obvious sitar to kick off *Die Kobra*, but the theremin of Armen Ra that's on five of these eight tracks, is most noticeable on this one.

And so there's a lot of variety here, wrapped up in prog rock/jazz fusion clothing. It sounds like an agreeable album from the outset but everything is done so effortlessly, not just the playing of the instruments but the way that they weave together and the way that the musicians were chosen so well, that it's almost inevitably a better album than we think it is. After one listen, it's obviously a very good album but it's only as we start to climb inside it after a few more times through that we come to terms with just how good it is.

Highlights: *Fire Horse*; *Die Kobra*; *Key Lime Blues*.



MIDNIGHT

LET THERE BE WITCHERY

COUNTRY:
USA

STYLE:
BLACK/SPEED METAL

RATING:
6/10

RELEASE DATE:
4 MAR 2022

Athenar, the jack of all trades who is the entirety of Midnight in a studio environment, is ahead of himself with this album, because it's only two years since the previous one, *Rebirth by Blasphemy*, and everyone knows that Midnight albums arrive like clockwork every three years. Maybe that's a positive impact of the COVID pandemic, a pleasant side effect to the unpleasant lack of touring of the last couple of years. Whatever the reason, I'm happy, because I like Midnight.

I should clarify that I like the other Midnight better, the live Midnight that expands the line-up by hiring a couple more musicians and blitzes through their set like a punk-infused speed metal band getting paid by the song, so they'd better finish this one quickly and start up another. I like what I hear from studio Midnight too, but they're a lot slower. These songs may end up as still more punk-infused speed metal on stage but, on virtual vinyl, they're more akin to proto-extreme metal, the sort of thing I was so enthralled by in the early to mid eighties as bands developed the sounds that would grow into black metal and death metal and what have you.

The most obvious examples of that this time out is *Nocturnal Molestation*, which is a catchy combo of Venom and Hellhammer, and *Let There Be Sodomy*, which features Athenar's most recognisable Cronos impression against a Teutonic power/speed metal backdrop. I dug both of these, of course, because this sort of thing is my happy place, taking me back to my introduction to everything rock and metal all at once, courtesy of Tommy Vance's *Friday Rock Show*, in 1984 and 1985.

The catch is that, nostalgia aside, the genre has moved on rather a long way since then and I can't honestly say that Athenar does this better than anyone else. This isn't *Black Metal*, let alone what spawned from it, and it frequently makes me think of Cronos way back in 1979, when Venom were a completely unheard of nightmare of a band, figuring out just how raw and deviant he could make the Motörhead sound. Songs like *Devil Virgin* could

have been on a Venom demo a year later. And I came in with *At War with Satan*, so I knew how far that sound could go. Midnight don't go that far.

Half of me appreciates what Athenar does with Midnight, because he's utterly reliable. He churns out another ten songs every three, ahem two, years that are pretty akin to the ten on his previous album and the one before that. They sound good, especially if the revolutionary years in the early eighties in the UK and parts of the continent are special times for you. However, even if they were, you're going to be well aware that what was revolutionary then isn't revolutionary today and that realisation is the biggest downside to what Midnight do.

There are other bands out there trawling that same source material but they're doing it in a more contemporary fashion, bringing the sound up to date, even if it remains fundamentally old school. Athenor apparently has no interest in doing that at all, so Midnight sound less vibrant—on record—than bands like Reaper and Inculter and Bütcher, even an old school band like Sodom, given their most recent album. Now, I highlighted "on record" there because I've seen Midnight live and I know how much they blister on stage, but that's a different Midnight to what Athenor gets up to in the studio.

What that boils down to is that, if you know Midnight already, this is more of the same, but, if you don't, this is as good as any album to start out on. It'll do the same job as the others. If you want a sample first, check out *Nocturnal Molestation* or *Snake Obsession* or *Let There Be Sodomy* first on YouTube. If you like them, you'll like everything else. Maybe, for something just a little different, I'd suggest *More Torment*, because it's Midnight as a slow and lumbering heavy metal monster in search of food. But variety isn't what you'll get here. You'll get Venom in 1980. And, if that's not a birthday present for you, knock a point of my rating.

Highlights: *Nocturnal Molestation*; *Let There Be Sodomy*; *Snake Obsession*.



PLACEBO

NEVER LET ME GO

COUNTRY:
UK

STYLE:
ALTERNATIVE

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
25 MAR 2022

I had no idea what to expect going into this one, because I haven't heard the earlier eight Placebo albums—the downside of exploring the niches is missing out on the mainstream—but it wasn't this. Maybe I was imagining them to be a British alternative rock band like a Coldplay or a Radiohead, which isn't the case, though there are commonalities. Apparently, their primary influences in the early days were Sonic Youth and Depeche Mode, which does make sense. The sound they conjure up is punky but rarely anarchic and it's grounded in electronica with idiosyncratic pop vocals that are nasal but very clear.

And so I shouldn't be surprised that it all kicks off with jagged electronica and punky riffs. It's also a little progressive, though it's clearly alternative rock over prog rock. It's very commercial, even in the heavier sections, but then Pink Floyd got very commercial at points; there's definitely some of that approach here. There's David Bowie too, because the vocals are always high in the mix and they drive everything, so there's always a pop side in play even if the guitars are raging.

I enjoyed this and more than I expected to, but wonder how much is substantial enough to keep me coming back. I appreciated how unique Brian Molko's vocals are. After just one album, I know that I'd recognise his delivery on any song he sings that shows up behind a dramatic scene on a TV show. It's also surprisingly versatile, because it changes whenever he gets sarcastic or happy, developing an interesting Johnny Rotten snarl on *Hugz*; a sardonic John McCrea edge on *Try Better Next Time* or *Went Missing*; and an Iggy Pop tinge whenever he goes for repetition for effect, as on *Surrounded by Spies*.

Talking of *Try Better Next Time*, it's the most overt standout here, because there's a general tone of pessimism riddled through the album, as if everything's going wrong and there's no longer any way for us to reverse that—I took the cover art to be an environmental message, with its decaying pixels and clash between foreground and background—and that mindset is found everywhere except in *Try Better*

Next Time, which is perky, like Cake covering an uncharacteristically upbeat REM song. *Sad White Reggae* is a darker, heavier take on the same approach, but it ditches the perkiness.

Even though the early songs aren't perky, they're still pop songs and that means that they have to reach out to grab us. Whether it's the snarly punk of *Hugz* or the sad sarcasm of *Happy Birthday in the Sky*, even the orchestral swells of *The Prodigal*, these are songs meant to be heard. However, I found that, as the album runs on, the songs get more and more introspective, especially once the first ten are done and we're into the last three. These feel more like songs meant to be written, to be played, regardless of an audience, like there's power simply in them being.

I wonder if that's a fundamental dichotomy that drives Placebo. Sure, they play a poppy flavour of rock music that's not a million miles from what I expected, even if their starting point isn't close to what I thought it was, but they clearly have things to say, not just lyrically but musically. The more I listened to this album, the more emerged from it. Sure, *Try Better Next Time* stood out on the first time through, because it's a standout sort of song in pretty much any company, but *Went Missing*, which is entirely different in every way except for its Cake-like vocal approach, is the one that will absolutely not leave me alone. It's far more subtle but it does a huge amount in five minutes. This one would be notable on a prog rock album.

Clearly, I should take a listen to how Placebo got to this point, while acknowledging the six years in between this and its predecessor, *Life's What You Make It*. I have a healthy level of distrust of any band that plays arenas but still gets tagged as "alternative" because they're clearly no longer an alternative any more; they're a new form of mainstream. I can see why a band who can write songs like *Try Better Next Time* can draw that sort of audience, but I particularly appreciate how they're going to hear something subtly subversive like *Went Missing* too.

Highlights: *Went Missing*; *Try Better Next Time*; *Hugz*.



VULCANO

STONE ORANGE

COUNTRY:
BRAZIL

STYLE:
BLACK/DEATH/THRASH METAL

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
29 APR 2022

It's good to see Vulcano knocking out releases nowadays. They're one of a handful of bands who we can thank for introducing Brazil to extreme metal and, while they've never been as interesting or as diverse as fellow pioneers Sepultura, they've stuck to the sound that they found in 1984 and continue to be entertaining. That means that pretty much everything I said about their previous album, 2020's *Eye in Hell*, is just as applicable here, whether it was positive or negative.

The positive is that this is another large set of short songs that unfold in the proto-extreme thrash style that pointed the way towards where black and death metal would go. In fact, this particular set is a larger one, with sixteen songs on offer this time out instead of the thirteen from last time, though one is a very short entirely instrumental piece. However, those sixteen songs still come in under fifty minutes. Not one reaches four minutes, five don't make three and that instrumental, *418*, doesn't even manage two. As you might imagine, they all get down to business quickly and are just as quick to wrap things up and hand over to the next track, like a relay race.

The core of the sound is thrash metal, with most tracks finding a decent speedy pace and infusing us with energy in the way that only thrash metal seems to do. The black and death angles to their sound mostly manifest in the guttural vocals of Luiz Carlos Louzada, who has clearly listened to an impressive amount of Destruction. They're clearly an influence on the band in general, but on the vocals most of all, right down to the inflections on *The Altar of Defiance*. Louzada takes that style from 1983 or 1984 and moves it forward in a slightly different fashion. Remember when we didn't talk about death growls and black shrieks, just demonic vocals? That's kind of where Louzada's at. Backing vocals don't show up too often, but when they do, they're more overtly death growls.

The negative is that most of the songs also unfold in pretty much the same way, meaning that it's tough to call out highlights because

there's little to delineate one from another. That's not to say that there's no originality or quirkiness here because the bluesy intro to *Rebels from 1980s* firmly states otherwise. That's what's going to stand out on a first listen but further listens highlight more that deserves praise, from the slower title track with its interesting cymbal sound to the two note bass intro on *Witches Don't Lie*, which is ambitious but works really well. However many listens you give this, though, a lot of songs just sound like other songs.

And that means that the value of the album isn't so much in the songs themselves as the album's overarching impact. I enjoy this style immensely and it's never a hardship to listen to fifty minutes of new proto-extreme thrash metal, especially when it comes with 21st century production values that may seem counter to the rough and ready style but work well nonetheless. I didn't quite get the opener, *Metal Seeds*, which is half album intro and half song proper, but everything kicks in as *Putrid Angels Ritual* gets frantically underway and stays there throughout.

Not everything is fast, not everything is heavy and not everything is intense, but nothing here fails to be at least two of those things. This general approach means that the album remains fresh but never really does much different. The title track slows things down and *Trigger of Violence* kicks in with a neatly slow riff too, albeit one that carries an inherent urgency that we know means that it will speed up soon enough, but these aren't huge variations and one bluesy intro to take us aback doesn't take them too much further. It's all about the way they energize us with combinations of a trio of things we like, in the way that cocktails can do different things with similar ingredients.

I should add that the final song is a cover, but an unusual and perhaps unexpected one, because it carries the name of *Vulcano Will Live Forever*. It's actually a song by Cadaverise, who wrote it for a demo that served as a sort of tribute to the bands they presumably loved most, the omnipresent Venom and a couple of fellow Brazilian acts, Armagedom and Vulcano. It's telling that this one is a natural fit for the Vulcano sound, suggesting that Cadaverise really know their stuff.

And so, if you're into this proto-extreme sound, I'm happy with another 7/10 here. It's not original but it's done very well. If you need progression in your music, you won't find it here. Like a host of bands I've reviewed lately, including Municipal Waste and Midnight, you know exactly what you're going to get from a Vulcano album and they're happy to oblige you.

Highlights: *Trigger of Violence*; *Witches Don't Lie*.



THUNDER

DOPAMINE

COUNTRY:
UK

STYLE:
HARD ROCK

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
29 APR 2022

Thunder aren't the most prolific band on the face of the planet, but they've continued putting out product for over three decades. Their debut, *Backstreet Symphony*, first saw the light in 1990 and it made quite the impression on me, even at a point when I was drifting away from new music due to changes both in my life and the new music that I was hearing. Last year, they released lucky number thirteen, *All the Right Noises*, and I gave it a highly recommended 8/10. Only a year later, here's another and this one's a double album. Clearly the creative juices are flowing.

I found this one easily split between the two discs. The first one is the traditional Thunder throughout but the second one sees them taking all sorts of chances to be able to play with other genres, both through departures into new places or through merging hard rock with other flavours of music. I'd be hard pressed to say which is my favourite, because both discs are strong. I might actually lean a little towards the second disc, because it feels like the band are overtly exploring their influences.

The first one shows us why Thunder have been such a reliable band for so long, especially over the first four songs. *The Western Sky* is an emphatic opener, as if it wants to play in heavy metal but is still a little hesitant to dip its toes too far. Black has a cool glam rock vibe going on. *One Day We'll Be Free Again* is a quintessential song, with effortlessly powerful vocals from Danny Bowes in the Paul Rodgers tradition. It has a huge build, aided by gospel-infused backing vocals and a seventies heavy organ. And, even though that one's a peach, *Even If It Takes a Lifetime* is the standout. It's odd that I blanked past this one on a first listen, because it grabbed me on a second and won't let go at all.

They're good songs, one and all, though the first side tails off a little for me after that. As each of these discs contains eight songs, for a seventy minute runtime, that means half of it spoke to me and half not so much, though I don't want to discount the second half. Every song on it is done well

and they may be favourites for you; they just aren't for me. *Unraveling* feels too patient; *The Dead City* too straightforward; *Last Orders* too simple, even though it shifts nicely from an acoustic vibe to become an overt foot tapper.

That leaves *All the Way*, which feels like it should have been a Queen song, an approach that would have shifted it to the second disc. Instead, the second opener is *Dancing in the Sunshine*, which is a Queen song in a very different way, and that's well placed. It's less overt in its influence, so maybe should have swapped that place in the playlist, but it's also a perfect opener, so is maybe fine right where it is. It's deservedly one of the singles.

From there, we leap into influences. *Big Pink Supermoon* deliberately channels, of all people, Van Morrison, right down to specific chords, words and transitions that bring classics like *Moondance* quickly to mind. It features a strong saxophone solo too. *Across the Nation* channels AC/DC in its relentless simple but very effective riffing, with a little Cult groove in there too. *Is Anybody Out There* is a ballad, sure, but it's an Elton John sort of piano song rather than a power ballad, right down to the orchestration.

Just a Grifter is the one that looks back further, because it's not a seventies song at all, instead a vocal piece that we might expect to be sung by members of the Rat Pack, complete with accordion in the French café style and a little fiddle too. I dug this one a lot, even though it plays more as an opportunity for Bowes than a true band piece, unless those less traditional hard rock instruments are played by regular band members. And don't worry, everyone in the band shines at some point or other, even if they don't get specific spotlight moments like Bowes gets here. They wait for the closer for that, because *No Smoke without Fire* gives everyone opportunity.

Other tracks are less in the style of one band and more just a different genre. I *Don't Believe the World* is sassy, a hard rock song for sure but one that's deeply infused with pop and soul and a few other flavours. *Disconnected* keeps the sassy but adds a grungy riff, along with a psychedelic part early in the second half that reminds of the Beatles. I guess that makes this disc a tribute in mind if not specifically in form. I don't believe any of these are covers, but they're still homages and not particularly opaque ones.

I'm tempted to give this another 8/10 because much of it deserves that but I don't think it's quite able to sustain that level throughout. As a double album, that it comes this damn close is a strong recommendation all on its own.

Highlights: *Even If It Takes a Lifetime*; *One Day We'll Be Free Again*; *Just a Grifter*; *Dancing in the Sunshine*.



ANVIL

IMPACT IS IMMINENT

COUNTRY:
CANADA

STYLE:
HEAVY METAL

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
20 MAY 2022

Nobody is going to pick up an Anvil album expecting something unusual and innovative. They play pure and simple heavy metal and they play it loud in the traditional fashion. The guitars are front and centre, building songs out of buzzsaw riffs and barrelling beats. The usual question is whether they're on form this time out. Some of their albums are blistering, but some are just meh. I took a listen to their previous album, *Legal at Last*, and found myself a little closer to the latter than the former. I wasn't convinced by the opener here either, *Take a Lesson*, but it perks up from there to stand higher than its predecessor.

I think much of it is that, once we get past the plodding opener, this album is bouncier than usual. *Ghost Shadow* and *Another Gun Fight* are both bouncy and catchy, without losing any of the heavy sound we expect or the more urgent tempo that's welcome after *Take a Lesson*, especially on the former. After them, *Fire Rain*, with its gorgeous guitar sound, ratchets the energy up yet another notch before a short but excellent instrumental called *Teabag*, which is immensely playful.

Now, this is an instrumental in the same way that *Tequila* is an instrumental, namely that the only word delivered is the title, but it does the job and highlights in no uncertain fashion that Anvil are still eager to rock and, for that matter, rock hard. If this energy translates onto the stage, and I'm in no doubt that it will, the next tour ought to be a lot of fun. I should add here that there's also a second instrumental here, called *Gomez*, that's even more fun and does exactly the same job, all the way down to the same riffs because it's basically the same piece of music, merely with a highly prominent brass section. That makes it even more fun.

In between the two instrumentals are the usual mix of strong rockers and more filler material but the ratio is pretty much in favour of the former this time out. Once it all got moving, I was always going to give this a point more than the last one. And I firmly believe that this album is at its best when it's really

moving, on songs like *Fire Rain*, *Someone to Hate* and *Bad Side of Town*. Lyrically, it doesn't do anything you don't expect, but it's easy to get caught up by the sheer motion of it all. I found myself singing along with *Bad Side of Town* and *Wizard's Wand* on a first time through.

Talking of *Wizard's Wand*, it remains perky and bouncy even with a slower riff that's straight out of the old Black Sabbath playbook, chugging along with ominous intent. *Shockwave* is even more a nod to Sabbath, with Steve Kudlow taking on that simple but utterly memorable Tony Iommi style with panache. Then he'll shift to a lighter, more elegant sound on songs like *Lockdown* or a lively and urgent one on *Fire Rain* and the appropriately titled *Explosive Energy*, on which he reminds of a UFO-era Michael Schenker.

I have trouble not liking Anvil. They're like an enthusiastic puppy that always shows up and makes us all fuss it because it's so effortlessly endearing. Translating that into heavy metal, they're the sort of reliable band who sit in the middle of a show, after the local wannabe talent but before an established headliner. They're the perfect band for midway through a long festival day, because a happy attendee will have a blast and a jaded listener will still engage. They're utterly reliable and this is a solid nineteenth album for them.

Highlights: *Fire Rain*; *Gomez*; *Someone to Hate*; *Explosive Energy*.





MOTORPSYCHO

ANCIENT ASTRONAUTS

COUNTRY:
NORWAY

STYLE:
PROGRESSIVE ROCK

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
19 AUG 2022

Motorpsycho haven't been into the studio in the last five minutes, so it's about time they knocked out another album. While that might sound flippant, and I guess it is, the bizarre truth is that the quality of their albums absolutely does not suffer because of their prolificity. I found them in 2019 and this is the fourth album of theirs that I've reviewed since then, a release rate higher than any band I'm aware of except the inevitable King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard. Yet I gave 2020's *The All is One* a highly recommended 8/10 and I gave *Kingdom of Oblivion* a 9/10 and an Album of the Month.

This one didn't hold up to those standards initially, with a pair of shorter tracks, especially by their standards, *The Ladder* and *The Flower of Awareness*. The latter is only two minutes long, hardly an expected length for Motorpsycho anyway, but those aren't particularly memorable two minutes to my thinking, just a sort of dark ambient interlude between *The Ladder* and *Mona Lisa/Azrael*. *The Ladder* itself runs a more typical near seven minutes, but it grows slowly from almost nothing and doesn't really kick in until the two minute mark. It's decent stuff and it gets better with each time through, but it's hardly the most inspired Motorpsycho track that I've heard.

Mona Lisa/Azrael is where my jaw started to drop in a way that I'm getting used to with this band. I should add that, while it begins at the halfway point as far as the track count goes, it's also merely nine minutes into forty-three, so the album's really just getting going. This one is gorgeous from moment one, the opening patient and pastoral with progressions highly reminiscent of early King Crimson and Bent Sæther's vocals soft but magnetic.

It perks up around the four minute point and then travels through a rollercoaster of emotions, its heavier sections marked by urgent and busy rhythms by Tomas Järmyr but its quieter ones with an almost tantalising peace, one that always feels as if it might explode into life in a heartbeat. For a majority

of the time it does, though the piece does fade out rather oddly. If there's a flaw to it, it's that it doesn't reach a definitive conclusion.

It's rather telling that *The Flower of Awareness* felt long at two minutes and yet *Mona Lisa/Azrael* felt short at over twelve. The jagged guitar solo from Hans Magnus Ryan to open the second half is as unlike the opening vocal section as can comfortably be imagined, or indeed from the subtle fade at the end, but that's how far one track can take us. I was utterly absorbed by this piece of music, just as much on my fifth listen as my first.

And, if you think twelve minutes is long, the album wraps up with *Chariot of the Sun - To Phaeton on the Occasion of Sunrise (Theme from an Imagined Movie)*, a stunningly verbose title that does suggest that the entire piece should be told through seventies Tangerine Dream synthwork. That doesn't happen, of course, even if it hints at it early on, but what we do get does something very similar because it's almost entirely instrumental (and what vocals we get do not deliver words).

I can't say that I did much visualisation of the movie that the band imagined but it does feel a lot like a sunrise in the way that it builds slowly and patiently into something transformational. It's a good piece, a very pleasant way to spend twenty-two minutes, but it's not as vibrant and essential a piece as its predecessor. And so this has to be a 7/10, my lowest rating for a Motorpsycho album since my first, *The Crucible*, in 2019. It's what I'd give *Chariot of the Sun* and *The Ladder*, while *The Flower of Awareness* is much lower but *Mona Liza/Azrael* easily an 8/10 highlight.

Highlight: *Mona Liza/Azrael*.





KING BUFFALO

REGENERATOR

COUNTRY:
USA

STYLE:
PSYCHEDELIC ROCK

RATING:
8/10

RELEASE DATE:
2 SEP 2022

I haven't heard King Buffalo before, but I've seen the name increasingly often and, on the basis of this, their fifth studio album, that rise in prominence is well justified. They play psychedelic rock in an interesting fashion, because it's not remotely the instrumental stoner rock I expected. For one, Sean McVay sings as well as plays guitar, though he does do much more of the latter. For two, that guitar isn't downtuned and it's a liquid space rock vessel here rather than a fuzzy riff machine. For three, while Dan Reynolds's bass is clearly audible throughout, it's not extra-high in the mix.

What that sums up to is almost an old school sound. The opening title track starts out like Vangelis but then shifts into a cross between laid back desert rock and Hawkwind space ritual. It's a peach of an opener, the first of a pair of nine minute bookends, and, like all the best psychedelic rock, it takes us on quite the journey. McVay's voice is soft and reserved, almost an alternative rock voice, but it floats in a wild swirl of instrumentation dense enough to shock us to acknowledge that this band is a trio. Sure, if we pay close attention, we can only hear three instruments but that guitar is like an orchestra all on its own. I'm assuming at this point that the keyboards I keep hearing are really guitar with serious reverb or other effects in play.

The rest of the album follows in much the same vein, albeit at shorter lengths, with McVay's guitar always the lead instrument, far ahead of his voice, and Reynolds and drummer Scott Donaldson an immensely reliable backing for him to shine over. Whenever he gives his fingers a rest, Donaldson shows just how much Joy Division he's listened to in his time. I wasn't expecting to reference them in this review, just as I wasn't expecting to reference U2 in the early sections of *Mercury*, though it does heavy up somewhat in its second half.

It's usually McVay who signals any shift in comparison. He taps the fuzz pedal late into both *Hours* and *Mammoth* to highlight a stoner rock mindset that I had expected all along, though it's combined in both cases with mel-

odies out of alt rock. He softens up on *Interlude* to remind of *Ummagumma*-era Pink Floyd. I wasn't expecting to raise a comparison to *Grantchester Meadows* here either, but it helps highlight how much depth there is to King Buffalo's sound. Moving from a jagged guitar in *Hours* to the pastoral hippie-esque chill of *Interlude* is quite the shift but it works.

Interlude excepted, because it is what it says it is and does its job well, I found that the longer the song the more I appreciated it. Perhaps that's because, while McVay does a fair job as a vocalist, that's just one more texture in the layers of the band's sound and I appreciate them more when a song leaves the vocals behind and they jam. *Mammoth* is probably the best example of this, with a perfectly capable opening vocal section that's left in the dust when McVay unleashes his guitar to blister his way through the rest of the piece. If I remember this one for vocals, it's not the singing early on, it's the vocalisations that wrap it up.

So *Mammoth* and *Avalon* sit a little higher in my estimation than *Mercury* and *Hours*, but it's that title track and its opposite bookend, *Firmament*, that I'll praise the most. *Firmament* kicks off with more hints to that soft Floydian approach, but it's perkier with chiming guitar. Later in its opening half, it heavies up in an unusual call and response fashion, between riff and what feels like a cloud. Then the second half returns us to the magic of *Regenerator*, because I simply get lost in this music. It lifts me up and carries me somewhere and the world ceases to exist for a few minutes, almost the perfect attribute to an album in these troubled times.

This is a majestic album, which makes me very aware that there are more King Buffalo albums out there, including two last year the band is combining with this one as their "pandemic trilogy", and an upcoming gig at the Rebel Lounge here in Phoenix. Let's see if I can make it out to that one.

Highlights: *Regenerator*; *Firmament*.



RAMMSTEIN

ZEIT

COUNTRY:
GERMANY

STYLE:
INDUSTRIAL METAL

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
29 APR 2022

I've been a fan of Rammstein ever since I first saw the video for *Sonne* a couple of decades ago, but I wasn't particularly enth- used by their most recent album in 2019. They took a ten year break after its predecessor and it felt like an unsure return to action for me, with songs that tried new things and a surprising structure that left me wondering where they were planning to go in the future. In reality, of course, they went where we all went, which was lockdown during COVID, and that might explain why they've knocked out another one only three years later.

It's a better album to my thinking, on every front. There are still departures from the typical NDH sound but they're both more successful and more appropriate in the order they're presented. It's perhaps notable that they mostly constitute the beginning of the album, with *Armee des Tristen* a new wave song done NDH and *Zeit* and *Schwarz* mirror images of each other. *Zeit* is subdued, even when the heavy chords show up halfway or when it seriously swells late on, while *Schwarz* is just as slow but is immediately emphatic and remains so even when it slows down for a softer section.

It's *Giftig* where we get the Rammstein we know and love most. Nobody does crunch like this band and it's right there on *Giftig* and *OK* and onwards. Nobody does the prowl the way they do on *Zick Zack* either, that's at once ominous and playful. And they do these things almost instinctively, as if it's as natural to them as breathing. Whenever it comes time for them to turn up the power, it's an as one response, as if being this tight doesn't even take any effort. Then again, they still have the same line-up they had when they formed in 1994 and that's a rarity indeed nowadays. They have to know each other backwards.

In fact, the guitars are so effortless that they're almost not worthy of mention. We have to take it for granted that Richard Kruspe and Paul Landers are going to do their thing on guitar seamlessly and the rhythm section of Oliver Riedel and Christoph Schneider, on bass and drums respectively, is right there

with them. As usual, we tend to focus on Till Lindemann's ever-confident vocals and a variety of musical decoration from Christian Lorenz. Take *Giftig* for example. Kruspe may be lead on paper and Landers rhythm, but they're really twin rhythm with Lorenz providing the melodies on his keyboards.

And Lorenz does a lot here. The more often the guitars take a back step, the more he comes to the forefront. He provides the majority of the intros and most of the melodies on top of the ambience that might be needed too. I find this fascinating because Lindemann is the iconic face of the band, especially given their penchant for memorable videos, and the guitar crunch is what springs most speedily to mind when people talk about Rammstein. Yet Lorenz is kept so busy on this album that it's arguably his above everyone else's.

Talking of videos, I've seen a couple of them this time out, for *Zick Zack*, with its almost fetishistic look at plastic surgery, and *Dicke Titten*, which isn't entirely as rude as it might seem from its title but only just. Yes, it's about Lindemann wanting women with big breasts, whatever other qualities they may or may not have. Only Rammstein can get away with that nowadays, beyond parodies like Steel Panther, where it's almost compulsory. I'm finding nowadays that the videos distract me too much from the music. I like *Zick Zack* on this album far more than in the video, for instance, even if it's the same song.

As always, it's the crunchier songs that work best for me here. I do like the title track, surprisingly so given where it goes, but it's *Giftig* and *OK* and, to a lesser degree, *Angst* that I'd call out as the standouts. I'd add *Lugen* to that, because it's another driving song that nails its groove, but it has a weird descent into the world of autotune during its second half that turns me away. Of the more unusual songs, I'd call out *Dicke Titten*, with its prominent use of a Bavarian oompah band while it kicks off. With these strong songs and the fact that the lesser material isn't at all filler, I'd have to give this a 7/10. It's far from Rammstein's best but it's still a solid step up from its predecessor.

Oh, and the cover photo was taken by Bryan Adams. Yes, that one.

Highlights: *Giftig*; *OK*; *Dicke Titten*.



THE HU

RUMBLE OF THUNDER

COUNTRY:
MONGOLIA

STYLE:
FOLK ROCK/METAL

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
2 SEP 2022

This album is aptly named because Mongolia's best known musical export are rather like a rumble of thunder, initially heard somewhere over the horizon but who keep coming ominously closer till they're right in your face. What they do tends to be called folk metal, but it's mostly world music, heavier than the norm but not massively so. It's just that the aggression in their sound fits so well with the metal genre, because everything feels like a challenge, even if it isn't.

I loved their first album, *The Gereg*, and I loved them on YouTube before that, through the videos that went so effectively viral, songs like *Wolf Totem* and *Yuve Yuve Yu*. I hoped to catch them live in Phoenix last year and then this year, because they keep coming through town, but I had to enjoy a little vicariously through my son, who saw them while I was in England. He reported back that they were excellent and bought me a Hu shirt, which was much appreciated.

This is at once a better and a worse album than *The Gereg*, mostly because it's more consistent in approach. If you want an hour of the Hu bellowing at you, then you're not going to complain at all, because they start out doing that with *This is Mongol*, continue doing that in *Yut Hovende* and, for all intents and purposes, rarely stop doing that throughout the album, even when they cool their jets on more peaceful songs like *Mother Nature*. They're just naturally aggressive, even when the thinking is welcoming and open, and they play that up.

In fact, when they calm down a little and write pieces of music that could be considered songs, not just chants and challenges, they feel more mature than ever. *Triangle* is the first of these, because it has a serious bounce to it. It's almost alternative rock, but with jaw harp and throat singing. I'm very fond of it, once I got used to its friendly approach after the opening pair of musical threats. I like *Teach Me* too, which has a similar bounce but also adds a Celtic flavour behind its aggression. There's more of that Celtic feel on *Bii Biyelgee*, especially when it speeds up at the end into what could be considered a jig.

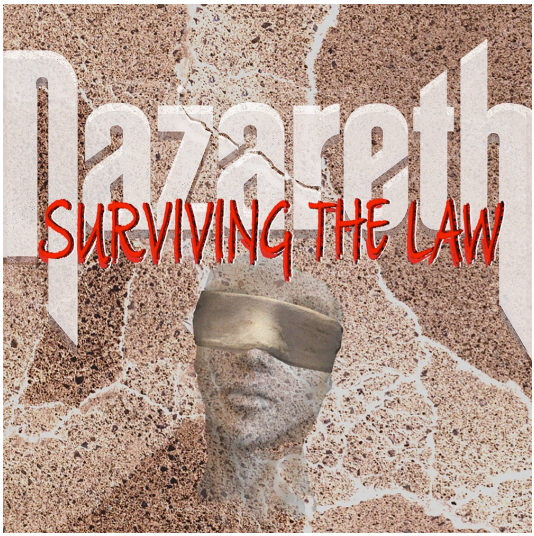
My favourite songs come late on, because the album is beat heavy. Everything drives forward and much of that is due to the drums, which are high in the mix, but every instrument plays along in an overtly rhythmic fashion, including the vocals. I wanted a lot more of the fiddles, especially given that two of the primary four musicians, Gala and Enkush, play them. However, with notable exceptions, like *Black Thunder*, they almost hide in the background. They're there and they sound great, but they're a background texture rather than a lead instrument.

Black Thunder does allow these horsehead fiddles to run loose and dominate for a little while like soloing electric guitars. I enjoyed everything here, especially the throat singing on *Sell the World*, but the album came alive for me in the second half, with the nine minute *Black Thunder* kicking off in style with patient morin khuur against a vocal drone and continuing to build, its sound getting progressively heavier as the song evolves. It feels like a complete song, as if the band deliberately chose to develop it further than the more simple, albeit highly effective, chant songs.

And that goes double for the closing couple of gems, *Shihi Hutu* and *Tatar Warrior*, which are the most complete songs here, to my thinking. There's plenty of that aggressive chant in the former, but the song develops with riffs, power chords and interesting transitions, as if it's a wild cover of a Led Zeppelin song we've never heard before. *Black Thunder* is more immediate but I think this is my favourite song here. It even has plenty of that wailing morin khuur that I crave so much. *Tatar Warrior* is more like a Metallica song and they've covered a couple of them in their time. This is a tribute in different form, but just as enjoyable.

The catch to ending so well is that it's easy to see that not everything stands up to the closing pair, so I think I have to go with a 7/10 this time. It's still a really good album and I wonder which angles they show here are going to be the ones that they follow most diligently in the future. *Triangle* is toe-tapping commercial fun but I hope they get more progressive the way that *Black Thunder* and *Shihi Hutu* do. Only time will tell. And when are they coming to town again? I can't miss them every time through.

Highlights: *Shihi Hutu*; *Tatar Warrior*; *Black Thunder*.



NAZARETH

SURVIVING THE LAW

COUNTRY:
UK

STYLE:
HARD ROCK

RATING:
8/10

RELEASE DATE:
15 APR 2022

I've heard a lot of albums lately by bands who were important in the seventies. I've also heard a lot of albums by bands who weren't even born then but have been drawn back to that era of music, some putting out material that sounds like it could have been released back then. I don't have to let you know that Nazareth were important in the seventies, ten ten albums in nine years including *Razamanaz* and *Hair of the Dog*, and many of the songs on this, their twenty-fifth studio album, feel like seventies songs, but it's also contemporary in feel, as if they've heard what AC/DC have done lately and channelled their own sound in that direction.

Pete Agnew is the sole survivor from that fundamental core line-up that ran unchanged, only added to, from 1968 to 1990. He's the bassist and he's been with the band all the way through. Original drummer Darrell Sweet died in 1999 and original guitarist Manny Charlton this year. The highly recognisable original vocalist, Dan McCafferty, retired from the band in 2013 because of ill health, though he did release a solo album in 2019 called *Last Testament* that I happily reviewed.

Nowadays, the drummer is Lee Agnew, son of Pete, who took over when Sweet died, and he dishes out a solid beat, utterly reliable and agreeably high in the mix to bolster that contemporary edge. He works closely with his dad, with the beginning of *Better Leave It Out* a perfect example of how they're the bedrock of this band. The guitarist is Jimmy Murrison, as he's been since 1994, and his guitar is often simple but effective, *Better Leave It Out* a good example of him being a little more dynamic. Much of the time, he's bolstering the beat with a straightforward riff that refuses to be ignored, just like Angus's riffs for AC/DC.

Carl Sentance didn't replace McCafferty directly, as Linton Osborne held that spot for a little while in 2014 and 2015, but he quickly established himself as the new voice of the band. As a massively experienced singer in both hard rock and heavy metal, singing for bands like Krokus and Persian Risk, he has all the chops needed to do the job. What he

brings beyond that is character, an important aspect for Nazareth who don't only write good rock songs, they write characterful ones with surprising hooks from glam rock, even pop.

As such, a song like *You Gotta Pass It Around* can have a driving hard rock back end and a powerful hard rock vocal but also a catchy as hell and rather dominant backing vocal that makes us picture the band in bellbottom jeans on *Top of the Pops*. Even more obviously, a song like *Runaway* brings them all the way back to the Sweet and the Ram Jam Band. This may not end up quite as iconic as *Ballroom Blitz* or *Black Betty*, but it does the same sort of job and deserves to be heard by a more mainstream audience who might baulk at hard rock but happily see chart glam rock as pop music.

And so it goes. As the fourteen songs ran past me, I found myself constantly reminded of how this band work in two completely different eras. Most of these songs are mid-pace, *Runaway* flurrying along at an atypically fast tempo, but they're agreeably heavy in that old Deep Purple way, with a mere four piece sounding much denser than they have any right to do. The bass is high in the mix, as an easily located instrument in the band's sound rather than a general thing with everything at the lower end amped up on the desk. This is a hard rock band of the old school who don't just want to be relevant, they want to be heavy in an era when there are a lot heavier sounds out there than hard rock. Most of them don't feel this loud.

Yet their melodies are paramount and ones that would have flown into the charts back in the glam rock era. And everything is melody, not just the choruses. Sentence finds a way to channel both his predecessor in the band, who could croon and belt in the same song, and Bruce Dickinson, perhaps most overtly on *Let the Whiskey Flow*. He takes the band firmly into heavy metal at points, but to old school glam rock and even pop music at points too. *Ciggies and Booze* feels like it ought to have been a mainstay on mid seventies pub jukeboxes.

And we can't forget the impact of Jimmy Murrison, who generates strong riffs, repetitive ones for sure but catchy ones that drill their way into our heads. He doesn't generate Diamond Head style riffs that keep on evolving majestically as songs progress; these are more like AC/DC riffs that do nothing fancy but establish themselves immediately and continue to bludgeon us until we hum them on our way to the bathroom. After one listen.

Most importantly for a metalhead in 2022 wondering if he should pick up an album by a hard rock band who were formed in 1968 before his parents were born, every track is in your face until *You Made Me* at the very tail end of the album and that's hardly a ballad. Sure, it's laid back, with the guitar taking a break so that the seventies organ can take over, but it's no ballad. Even when they get soft, Nazareth still kick ass and it's been four years now since their 50th Anniversary Tour.

This band is older than I am and I have an adult grandchild. They have no business being this strong and heavy but, damn, I'm so happy that they're still turning out quality material like this to show up a lot of the kids who think they have it all. Quite frankly, I wonder who has the balls to tour with them because it feels like they're going to blow anyone off stage right now. Now, let me turn this up again and blast the neighbourhood.

Highlights: *You Gotta Pass It Around*; *Runaway*; *Ciggies and Booze*.



DIR EN GREY

PHALARIS

COUNTRY:
JAPAN

STYLE:
PROGRESSIVE METAL

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
15 JUL 2022

Dir en Grey are one of those infuriating or joyous bands, depending on your perspective who are impossible to categorise, which should make it no surprise if I tell you that they come from Japan, Osaka in particular.

Just wrap your ears around *Schadenfreude*, the opener on this, their eleventh studio album and first since 2018's *The Insulated World*. It starts out quirky and alternative; turns gothic, even operatic with a male lead vocal that suddenly sounds female; crunches from rock into metal; and then goes full on extreme with death growls over a downtuned backdrop that's happy to match. After that, it only gets more complex, with technical progressive metal.

So yeah, they're a symphonic gothic metal band. They're a progressive death metal band. They're an experimental alternative rock band. And they're not uncommonly all of those things at once. It shouldn't shock if I highlight that the band's favourite albums include records by Radiohead, Nine Inch Nails, David Sylvian, Pantera and, well, the Beatles. All of those bands can be found here and a whole lot more, across a multitude of genres, but they're all subsumed into a unique Dir en Grey sound. The most obvious is probably Pantera.

Schadenfreude, the pleasure generated by seeing someone else's troubles, is an ambitious track to open up here, which I'm sure is the point. It's a breathe shy of ten minutes long and it rides the intensity levels like a roller-coaster. There are points where it's almost music box quiet, but points where it's metal-core intense. The band leader is Kaoru, who plays lead guitar, but the wildcard of the band, who matches every instrumental shift, is vocalist Kyo, who reminds of a Japanese Mike Patton. He doesn't just sing in multiple styles, he vocalises in even more. To my mind, it's the best thing on this album, whether as a song or as any particular part of one.

In a way, if you like the sheer variety in this one song, you may like this album too because

it does a similar job across fifty-plus minutes. However, it's not really that simple, because *Schadenfreude*'s long enough to do those things but also short enough for our brain to acknowledge it as an entity of its own. The album is the former but not the latter, so we inevitably break it down into a bunch of eleven individual songs and most of those are not long enough to do what Schadenfreude does, so have to succeed or not with smaller sonic palettes.

The other song that is long enough to sit alongside *Schadenfreude* is its bookend at the other end of the album, *Kamuy*, a divine being in Ainu mythology that exists in a state of spiritual energy. It's a strange track, not as fast or urgent as *Schadenfreude* but with a lot of fascinating texture. There's a tango in there and a whole lot of subtle operatics from Kyo that I found delightful. It's not quite as varied as the opener but it's just as grand and it highlights that the current Dir en Grey really need room for their songs to breathe.

By the way, that's not unusual subject matter for this band, who have generated controversy with their videos. The album title this time out references a torture device, the Brazen Bull, an ancient Greek statue built from bronze in which victims were burned alive, their screams manipulated into sounding like the bellowing of a bull. It was commissioned by Phalaris, a Sicilian tyrant, hence the album's title.

The video this time out is for *The Perfume of Sins*, which is a mostly up tempo death metal number that gets more complex with its orchestration overlays. It's not my favourite piece here by a long shot, but the video does feature the Brazen Bull and a whole slew of other torture devices amidst other dark imagery. It feels deviant for the sake of being deviant though, carefully tailored to its iconography, and that lessens the impact. It's not raw enough or visceral enough. It's deviant chic and that feels odd for Dir en Grey, given how wild Kyo can get.

I'm fonder of songs like *Utsutsu, Bouga o Kurau*, because it's far happier to be its own thing. There are all sorts of elements to this one that I recognise, but I haven't heard them in this combination before and the jagged beat ensures that it remains a fascinating collection of fragments that has a groove all of its own. *Ochita Koto no Aru Sora* also walks the line wonderfully between frantically out of control metalcore and tight death metal riffing.

And, excluding the epic bookends which are easily my favourite tracks here, this is what I like best about Dir en Grey, a feeling that everything's going totally off the rails but somehow never quite does, because it's all planned and very carefully and skilfully executed. It's a pretty decent album for their twenty-fifth anniversary. I didn't like everything, but I appreciated what I didn't.

Highlights: *Schadenfreude*, *Kamuy*.



RED HOT CHILI PEPPERS

UNLIMITED LOVE

COUNTRY:
USA

STYLE:
FUNK ROCK

RATING:
7/10

RELEASE DATE:
1 APR 2022

This being a more fractured year for me than 2020, I'm still playing catch-up with the major bands who put out new material this year and that's why I'm reviewing the Chili Peppers's twelfth album right before they release their thirteenth. This is *Unlimited Love*, released in April, and *Return of the Dream Canteen*, due in mid-October, was recorded during the same sessions. Given that this is already seventy plus minutes in length, that means that they must have seriously felt the urge to create during that pesky COVID period of potential downtime.

They seemed like the logical contrast to follow Dir en Grey, because they're complete opposites in so many ways. In particular, I'd call them almost comfort food. Dir en Grey are complex and ambitious, a band to listen to actively to figure out what they're doing on any particular song and whether that works for us or not. The Chili Peppers are chill music, easy listening for the alternative era, and it's fair to say that a new album by them feels comfortable and familiar even on a first listen. It's hard to find a second mood but they're so good at their one mood that it doesn't matter.

The songs here, and there are no fewer than seventeen of them, merely play with the sliding scale from laid back chill to bouncy chill, and the levels they're happiest with are mostly defined by the first four songs. Calmest is *Not the One*, which is ocean smooth. Then comes opener *Black Summer*, the first single, which is *Californication*-levels of commercial. *Here Ever After* is funkier, with Flea's bass ratcheting up in prominence and it's natural to move to it. Wildest is *Aquatic Mouth Dance*, a terminally funky number that continues to build throughout, from Flea's hyperactive lead bass to the layers of experimental brass that show up when he introduces his trumpet.

The big change this time out, because it's been six years since the band's last studio album, is the swapping of guitarist Josh Klinghoffer, who had been with them for a decade, for an old favourite. No, not Dave Navarro, who surprisingly only had five years to his name, in but John Frusciante for his third

stint. He originally joined in 1988, so he was on their big early albums, *Mother's Milk* and *Blood Sugar Sex Magik*, where he strongly influenced a soothing of their sound. He left in 1992 but returned in 1998, for their most successful album, *Californication*, the logical end to that soothing.

When he left again, in 2009, it was to make electronic music, taking a wild left turn into acid house and other genres. There's an irony in that, even though he spent years as an heroin addict, almost dying because of it, he's far more prolific as a musician than the Chili Peppers themselves, having as many solo albums to his name, plus four more under the name of Trickfinger and a further trio of collaborative releases, including one with Josh Klinghoffer, who both replaced him in this band and who he then replaced in turn.

I wondered how his presence would change the band's sound, given that he absolutely did that on his previous two stints with them. I especially wondered how he'd introduce electronica into their music and I'm surprised to find that it isn't a huge amount, at least at this point. There's some on *Poster Child*, which is as notable for its sonic backdrop as for Anthony Kiedis's skilful cadence, and *Bastards of Light* builds out of his keyboards, but he makes his presence far more known on guitar and, quite frankly, he's the best thing about the album.

Remember when I said that everything here shifts up and down a sliding scale from laid back chill to bouncy chill? Well, that's true for the rest of the band, but not for Frusciante. He lets his guitar rip on *The Great Apes*, wail on *Watchu Thinkin'* and soar on *It's Only Natural*. He gives serious edge to *She's a Lover*, which is otherwise routine seventies funk/soul and serious urgency to *Bastards of Light* and *These are the Ways*, which are heavier than I remember the Chilis being in forever. Each of these songs sounds good but they're all chill until Frusciante mixes it up.

And now I'm eager to see what they come up with next which is a feeling I haven't felt for decades. The Chilis are one of the easiest bands in the world to like, because everything they do musically is inherently accessible, but we move right along after we hear them and go about our day. Maybe the return of John Frusciante will also return some balls to what they do. The seeds are obvious. I think it's fair to say that the second half of most of these songs is better than the first, when they let him loose.

And he's exactly why I'm giving it a 7/10. I'd go with a pleasant but inconsequential 6 otherwise and add that it runs too long.

Highlights: *Aquatic Mouth Dance*; *These are the Ways*; *It's Only Natural*

SUBMISSIONS

I welcome submissions to Apocalypse Later Music, though I can't guarantee that everything submitted will be reviewed.

Please read the following important notes before submitting anything.

I primarily review the good stuff. There's just too much of it out there nowadays to waste any time reviewing the bad stuff. Almost everything that I review is, in my opinion, either good or interesting and, hopefully, both. I believe that it's worth listening to and I recommend it to some degree, if it happens to be your sort of thing. Now, if you're a die hard black/death metalhead, you might not dig any of the psychedelic rock and vice versa. However, maybe you will! Open ears, open minds and all that.

I have zero interest in being a hatchet man critic who slams everything he writes about. I'll only give a bad review if it's in the public interest, such as a major act releasing a disappointing album. Even then, I'll often keep away.

If I do review, I'll still be completely honest and point out the good and the bad in any release.

I'm primarily reviewing new material only. Each month at Apocalypse Later Music, I review releases from the previous two months. I might stretch a little beyond that for a submission, but not far. Each January, I also try to catch up with highly regarded albums and obvious omissions from the previous year that I didn't get round to at the time. I then bundle my reviews up at the end of a quarter and publish in zine form midway through the following month.

I'm especially interested in studio albums or EPs that do something new and different. I try to review an indie release and a major band each weekday, one rock and one metal, with each week deliberately varied in both genres and countries covered.

If you still want to submit, thank you! You can do so in a couple of ways:

1. Digital copy: please e-mail me at hal@hornsablaze.com a link to where I can download mp3s in 320k. Please include promotional material such as an EPK, high res cover art, etc.
2. Physical: e-mail me for a mailing address.

Either way but especially digitally, please include any promotional material such as a press kit, high res cover art, band photo, etc.

And, whether you submit or not and whether I liked it or not, all the best with your music! Don't quit! The world is a better place because you create.

Submissions of books for review at the Nameless Zine wouldn't come to me directly. If you have books that fit the scope of a predominantly science fiction/fantasy/horror e-zine, please see the contact details at the bottom of the main page at thenamelesszine.org.

I don't review film submissions much any more, as most of my film reviews are for books.

RATINGS

People do ask about my ratings, so I should explain them here.

For music, I work to a scale that runs from 1 to 10 but you're likely to see mostly 6s, 7s, 8s and 9s from me.

That's because 1-5 are inherently negative and I don't write a lot of negative reviews. I hear a lot of music that I'm negative about, but I mostly don't write about it because you don't need to know about the bad stuff. If you see a 4 or a 5 from me, then it's because the album is by a major artist or band and you might want to know why it disappointed me.

6-10 are inherently positive, but I don't believe in giving out 10s. A 10 to me means an undying classic and, while we might think that a fantastic new album might qualify as classic, we can't be sure that it's going to stand the test of time. I'd wait five years and, if it still stands up after that point, then I'll upgrade to a 10. So a 9 is as good as you're going to get from me on a new album.

6 means above average but only just. It's decent and worth your time, especially if you're into that band or that genre, but it's not going to blow you away.

7 means a solid release. It's not great, but it's reliable and entertaining and worth your time, maybe even if you're not into that band or that genre.

8 means an excellent album. It's not just good, it's great and, because it's highly recommended, it makes it onto my annual Highly Recommended Lists on my Albums of the Month pages.

9 means the best of the best right now. These are the amazing works that will define a year.

CREATIVE COMMONS

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ABOUT HAL C. F. ASTELL

While he still has a day job to pay the bills, Hal C. F. Astell is a teacher by blood and a writer by the grace of the Dread Lord, which gradually transformed him into a film critic. He primarily writes for his own site, Apocalypse Later, but also anyone else who asks nicely. He writes monthly book reviews for the Nameless Zine.



Born and raised in the cold and rain of England half a century ago, he's still learning about the word "heat" many years after moving to Phoenix, Arizona where he lives with his much better half Dee in a house full of critters and oddities, a library with a ghost guard ferret and more cultural artefacts than can comfortably be imagined. And he can imagine quite a lot.

Just in case you care, his favourite film is Peter Jackson's debut, *Bad Taste*; his favourite actor is Warren William; and he believes Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* is the greatest movie ever made.

He reads science fiction, horror and the pulps. He watches anything unusual and much that isn't. He listens to everything except mainstream western pop music. He annoys those around him by talking too much about Guy N. Smith, Doc Savage and the *Friday Rock Show*.

He tries not to go outdoors, but he's usually easy to find at film festivals, conventions and events because he's likely to be the only one there in kilt and forked beard, while his fading English accent is instantly recognisable on podcasts and panels. He hasn't been trepanned yet, but he's friendly and doesn't bite unless asked.

Photo Credit: Dee Astell

My personal site is Dawtrina. I run Smithland, a Guy N. Smith fan site. I founded and co-run the CoKoCon science fiction/fantasy convention. I co-founded the Arizona Penny Dreadfuls. I've run the Awesomelys since 2013. I write for the Nameless Zine.

The Arizona Penny Dreadfuls	azpennydreadfuls.org
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ABOUT APOCALYPSE LATER

Initially, Hal C. F. Astell wrote film reviews for his own reference as he could never remember who the one good actor was in forgettable episodes of long crime film series from the forties. After a year, they became long enough to warrant a dedicated blog.

The name came from an abandoned project in which he was reviewing his way through every movie in the IMDb Top 250 list. Its tentative title was a joke drawn from covering *Apocalypse Now* last and it stuck. It didn't have to be funny.

Gradually he focused on writing at length about the sort of films that most critics don't, such as old films, foreign films, indie films, local films, microbudget films, and so on, always avoiding adverts, syndication and monetised links, not to forget the eye-killing horror of white text on a black background. Let's just get to the content and make it readable.

Four million words later and Apocalypse Later Press was born, in order to publish his first book, cunningly titled *Huh?* It's been followed by many more with double digits worth of others always in process.

This growth eventually turned into the Apocalypse Later Empire, which continues to sprawl. In addition to film and book reviews, he posts a pair of album reviews each weekday from across the rock/metal spectrum and around the globe. He runs the only dedicated annual genre film festival in Phoenix, Arizona, the Apocalypse Later International Fantastic Film Festival, or ALIFFF for short. He publishes books and zines by himself and others. And he presents programs of quality international short films at conventions across the southwest.

Apocalypse Later is celebrating its fifteenth anniversary in 2022.

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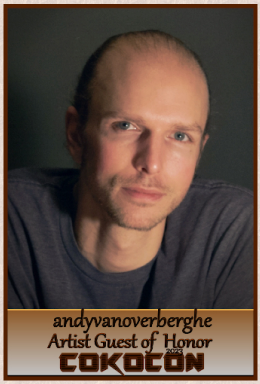

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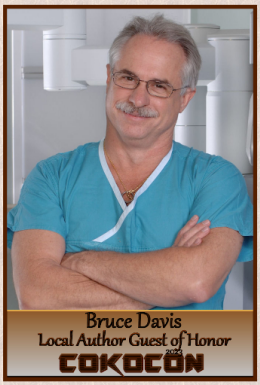
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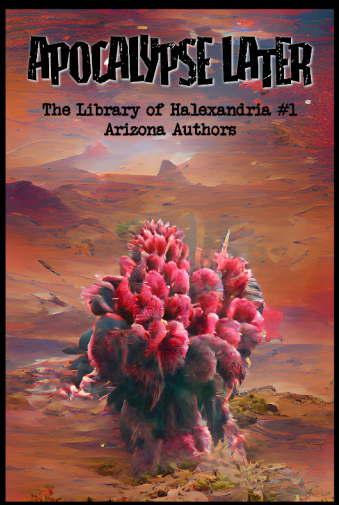

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Horns Ablaze collates Hal C. F. Astell's album reviews at Apocalypse Later Music from July-September 2022, adding interviews with bands from across the rock/metal spectrum and around the globe.

Interviews with Mathras (Argentina), Compassionizer (Russia), Purple AQP (Peru), Blue Merrow (Spain), Velesar (Poland).













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