

CIRCUS MAXIMUS

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Roman Amphitheatres? Who needs 'em? Circus Maximus guitarist Mats Haugen explains all to John Tucker

It was at ProgPower Europe in October 2007 that I first got to see Circus Maximus play. The Norwegians were the first band of the

lowing month at ProgPower Scandinavia.) Even the über-cool Arjen Lucassen was seen in the audience, checking them out.

Although the band's two albums 'The 1st Chapter' and last year's 'Isolate' may be polished, live the band are a serious kick-ass force to be reckoned with, and the inter-

Circus Maximus and all things related. Now, one of the things that really interests me is how or why bands choose their names. Some names are really obscure; some, like Circus Maximus, are more obvious. So, my first question was to ask why they chose to take their name from the biggest amphitheatre in ancient Rome. He laughs. "Well, it's not; it's not at all! To be truthful, I'm a computer geek and I play a lot of video games and stuff - that's why I've been to London in the past because I've played in tournaments for arcade games there. But me and my brother [Circus Maximus drummer Truls Haugen], we found the name on a PC game about fifteen years ago. We thought, 'Oh, cool name' and just



weekend to perform to a really substantial audience as, all of a sudden, people seemed to appear from nowhere, and the crowd massed around the stage went absolutely nuts for them. (And in case you think this was a one-off, they repeated the trick the fol-

play on stage between the musicians, in particular vocalist Michael Eriksen and guitarist Mats Haugen, is exceptional.

After the band had had a little time off stage to wind down, Mats and I settled down to talk about

remembered it. We didn't know it was a place in Rome - we didn't find that out till much later! You know, it was just, 'Oh cool name, we should use it sometime, maybe for a song or something'. And then we decided to use it for the band name! So I'm afraid it's **1**

nothing more than that. It's nothing to do with Rome at all! It's just me being a computer geek!"

So much for research! Oh well, on safer ground I ask Mats is for a quick history of Circus Maximus. "Well," he laughs again, "I can't be quick about it! But me and my brother Truls and Michael our vocalist, we played together for eleven years or so, doing a lot of covers, although we didn't write any songs at all. We had a lot of

write and record more, and that took a year or so to complete. So it wasn't until 2004 that things really started happening. We hooked up with Intromental Management, and seriously started to write and record more music. We recorded two more songs, one I think was 'Glory Of The Empire' which went on the first album and the other was 'Imperial Distraction' which ended up as the bonus track on the US version of 'The 1st Chapter'.

more to come. "Thank you, yes, that's right," replies the guitarist. "It was actually my idea. It was like, 'what are we going to call this album?' and he came up with a lot of stupid," he emphasises the fact, "stupid ideas for the name, so I'm glad we didn't use any of those! 'Why not just call it 'The 1st Chapter' because that's what it is. It's our first album, and the first chapter of Circus Maximus. And it's an album I'm really proud of. I think it's really good. Of course,



looking back now, there are things on it that we wouldn't do today if we had the same material. But I'm very proud of what we did back then and it feels really good even now. We got some great reviews when it was released so I am very happy with it."

After that first album, Espen Storø left to be replaced by Lasse Finbråten. "Well, the thing with our former keyboard player was that it was on the cards for a long time that he would leave," recalls Mats. "We knew it was going to happen and it was no problem really. He said that he wanted to move on, and he wasn't

riffs and stuff, but we didn't focus on creating songs until about 2000 or 2001, I think it was, when we finally started. Then it was like, 'Maybe we should try to get a little serious, you know, start a real group!' We got a bass player, not Glen [Cato Møllen] but another guy; he was with us for a year or so but we didn't record anything with him, and then he quit and we got Glen in. Glen is an old friend, I went to school with him, so I've known him since I was a little boy, and then we hired Espen Storø, our former keyboard player. We recorded a demo in 2002, I think it was, three new songs or something. We sent it to a lot of labels and got some interest in doing an album. Several labels wanted to hear more stuff but we didn't have any more stuff at that time. So what the hell do we do now?" he laughs again. "So we had to

On the strength of those two songs we signed a deal with the US label Sensory and then everything just went from there. We kept writing and were offered a deal with Frontiers because the management wanted us to have a good deal for Europe and when Frontiers heard us they were like, 'Wow, this is really cool; it's not like typical prog metal, it's more like melodic AOR, cool'. I think that's because Michael's voice is more melodic, he sounds more like a pop, AOR kind of vocalist, and I think they really liked that about us. So they signed us in early 2004. We recorded the album in the summer of 2004, I think it was, and released it in June 2005."

I mention that I thought 'The 1st Chapter' was a great title for their debut - a statement of intent that says we're here to stay and there's

feeling the same way about playing in the band as we were and that he wanted to do other stuff, and so it was cool; no problem. It was really relaxed, and we're still friend of course. Lasse, I've known about for a lot of years. He's played with several bands in Norway and I knew he was a good keyboard player and he called me in January 2006, I think it was, and said, 'Hey, you haven't got a new keyboard player yet?' 'Well no, we tried one guy but it didn't work out.' 'Well, I want to try out for you,' he said. He came to rehearsal and we played about four songs and he played them straight through, perfectly, and we thought, 'this is our guy!' Simple as that...

All of which leads to 'Isolate'... "Yes it does!" he laughs. He is obviously still very excited by the band's 2007 album.



“Of course, a lot of the ideas for ‘Isolate’ were brand new. We did use some riffs and stuff that were left over from the first album but Lasse also had a lot of cool ideas which he had written before he joined the band and they fitted in really well with our own stuff.”

It sounds like the second album came together fairly easily, which Mats confirms. “Yes. I mean, we were worried that we wouldn’t get the same good reviews as we did for the first album, but in the end we stopped thinking about that; it wasn’t helpful, and what we didn’t want to do was make the first album all over again. I think the only thing that might sound similar is perhaps the mix of the album; in that respect there are some similarities, but I think ‘Isolate’ is better produced than ‘The 1st Chapter’. And again, it’s had very good reviews, I personally think that overall it’s better than the first one - which you’d expect really! - so we are very satisfied with it.”

I pick up on Mats’ point, because to me, if you listen to the two albums, the second demonstrates

an obvious growth in the band. “Yes, I agree. That’s what we feel too. And I think the songs are much stronger in themselves, and we definitely have much better lyrics. The atmosphere was really good when we did it too, and I think that shines through the album. ‘The 1st Chapter’ was good, but we were searching for something, an identity or something, you know? ‘What are we going to do here?’ Whereas on ‘Isolate’ it was more us, us as a band, and we knew what we wanted.

There is actually a theme running through ‘Isolate’. “Yes, there is,” Mats confirms; “it is a conceptual story, but it is a very complicated story so we haven’t really sat down and written about it. We will put it out on our website so that people can get it but I’ll warn you that it’s very, very, very deep!” he laughs, which is great, because I for one certainly don’t get it!

At which point a fan standing nearby asked me if she could borrow a pen to so that Michael, standing nearby, could autograph on her copy of ‘Isolate’. As Michael

scribbled his signature, the guy he was talking to asked if she wanted his autograph too. She looked rather dubious until he added, “I am in the band,” a fact Mats and I confirmed. “I know I’m just the drummer,” moaned Truls Haugen after she’d gone, “but it’s not as if I didn’t come out from behind the kit. She should have recognised me!”

Rock ‘n’ roll, eh?