

OPEN YOUR EYES (AND EARS!)

Midnattsol's Carmen Elise Espanæs and Birgit Öllbruner tell tales of 'Nordlys'



It's almost exactly three years since Midnattsol released their debut album 'Where Twilight Dwells'. A well received album and some great live shows should stand them in good stead, but things have been extremely quiet since

2005 and whereas the band has managed to keep the same line-up over that time - Carmen Elise Espanæs (vocals), Daniel Droste and Christian Hector (guitars), Daniel Fischer (keyboards), Birgit Öllbruner (bass) and Chris Merzinsky (drums) - three years is a long time to be out of the limelight.

"Well," starts Carmen, "on the surface it perhaps seems that it was a quiet time for us in Midnattsol, but in fact so much has happened and we have experienced so many important things in our lives that I would go so far as to say that it's been the most hectic years ever in my life - up to now I still haven't had one day off just for myself. In this period five of the six people in the band have been finishing their studies, resulting in exams and masters degrees. At the same time, we were all working as well, of course, and these things are the main reason why it took a

while to make 'Nordlys'.

"And of course," the singer continues, "after 'Where Twilight Dwells' we wanted to play live gigs, so the first months we concentrated on live activities. After that, besides writing new songs there was so much to do - studio planning, a new homepage and MySpace site, more gigs, interviews, merchandise, and, and... When we began writing again, we knew that it would take a lot of effort and time, but we didn't want to throw away years of studies and hard work, and at the same time we didn't just want to make a good album: we wanted to make an album which would be fantastic and which we all would have fun listening to time and time again. So it was a case of 'better late than never' and high quality too. And I think the really good thing that came out of it was that we noticed after having written some new songs that we have all grown a lot musically, and that we were playing more complex and difficult parts; we had more to give, so to speak.

"But we were all quite sure that we would have to re-introduce ourselves to some people after this time out of public eye. But at the same time it

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surprised us - and still surprises us enormously - how many fans still believed in us and supported us. We never thought we'd get such a response, such a true fan base showing that kind of patience. We are so grateful for that, we always try to show our gratefulness by keeping contact and telling them how much they mean to us. So, because of our fantastic fans,



we never had to really worry too much. It will be exciting to see how the next months go. We hope of course that a wide range of people will like the new album; but time will tell," she laughs. According to the biog, the new album is "more metal, more diverse and also way more folk-orientated" than its predecessor. Achieving all three would be a bit of a tall order, but it's obvious from the off that it's a heavier offering than 'Where Twilight Dwells'. One of the criticisms of the first album was that it was a bit 'twee' in places; it was 'nice', it was 'sweet', if it was your girlfriend it certainly wouldn't make out on the first date! 'Nordlys' - The Northern Light to us non-Norwegians - comes at things from a different angle, with harder-edged songs and a heavier mix. Opener 'Open Your Eyes' marks out where this

album is coming from: five-and-a-half minutes of heavy riffing, crashing drums and soaring vocals. 'Skogens Lengsel' keeps up the pace and it's 'Northern Light' that ostensibly cools things off a little and takes the tempo down a notch or two before a time-change midway through turns the heat up once more and twists the song into a good old-fashioned mutha of a headbanger. We like? You betcha!

"Yes, you're right," agrees Birgit. "'Nordlys' is heavier than 'Where Twilight Dwells', both the songs and the production. That we are more metal now is in my opinion a natural evolution. Metal is what most of us grew up with, this is the music we listen to and love, so this is of course the music we want to play. I think our roots can be heard much clearer now. That's also the reason why we wanted to have a more metal based production this time, with a warm, natural and heavier sound. If we look back, the last album sounds a little bit too sterile for us. The production of 'Nordlys' sounds much more heavy and earthy, but we still have many calm and atmospheric parts or songs, so the album is not 'only' heavy. We also still have many folkish elements in our songs. All in all, the songs on 'Nordlys' are much more complex, playful and diverse.

There are wonderful melodies and much more detail that cannot all be picked up on the first listening. On the last album each song on the CD was a song for itself, one song more heavy, the other one more melancholic and another one more folk. But on the new album all these different elements, feelings and grooves can be found within each song."

"I agree," adds Carmen. "I think that it is heavier than the debut as well. As I said, when we started to write the new songs we noticed that we had developed both as musicians and as a band which meant that we could play and sing more complex and diverse stuff. It was a fantastic feeling, just looking at how the band had grown, and we almost couldn't wait to try out new things and challenge ourselves. We wanted to create something new,

but at the same time still remain Midnattsol, and one of the results was the heaviness and variety, which I think the metal heads out there will appreciate," she laughs again.

Just from the three openers mentioned above it is apparent that 'Nordlys' is an extremely mature, cohesive body of work, and other highlights like 'Konkylie' (a slower, epic piece, telling its tale over eight minutes) and 'Race Of Time' whose time-changes (well, I guess the title's a bit of a giveaway) mark it out as something a little different, mixing folk elements into what is an extremely heavy piece of music. As an album, 'Nordlys' is a great body of work that the band should rightly be proud of. I wondered if Carmen and Birgit has any particular favourite songs amongst the nine (ten on the limited edition digipack) they serve up.

Carmen answers first. "Even though it is true, I will not leave it just by saying that I love all the songs on 'Nordlys'. We all agreed in the beginning of the song writing process that we only wanted to keep the songs that all of us liked 100% and identified with, so I can say honestly that I like the songs for what they are and each of them fits to different moods and situations. But I have to admit that 'Northern Light' and 'River of Virgin Soil' are my favorites, because of the feelings that I get when singing or listening to them. For me they are very melancholic and emotional songs which come from deep, deep within. It feels like my whole soul is opening, everything comes out. Personally I prefer to listen to music that is honest and real. Additionally, I love the beautiful melodies of the guitars and also the folk touch that they deliver."

Birgit is less clear-cut. "This is really difficult, because I don't have a real favourite on this album. I really love all of the songs and if I listen to 'Nordlys' I don't just pick out one song; I always want to listen to the whole album. It's like a story: you want to listen to the whole thing and not just a part of it. But the song 'Konkylie' is maybe a very special song. **2**



It starts with a wonderful guitar melody and creates a very special atmosphere; it's also our longest song, at about eight minutes. Also the song 'Northern Light' is a very emotional song with wonderful melodies. I love Carmen's vocals on this song and it has a cool break too. 'Skogens Lengsel', one of the faster songs, has some riffs that maybe remind you of Iron Maiden. It is one of the more progressive songs with lots of details. The song 'En Nat I Nord' invites headbanging and live it will break our necks - and hopefully your necks too! In my opinion 'Nordlys' is an album which you have to hear a number of times to explore all the tiny details. We took a great deal of time to harmonise all the instruments and the vocals and, as Carmen said, every one of us has improved over time. So there's a lot going on on the album. An album in my eyes is not good if you like it at the first hearing but after a few times you've soon had enough of it. It is a good album if you like it even more the more you play it and if you can still hear new things after a hundred listenings. This is what we wanted to achieve, and I really

hope people will take the time to 'explore' it properly." 'Octobre', the bonus track on 'Nordlys' was mentioned earlier.

"There's a funny story to this song," recalls Birgit. "The song was written in just two hours, in the last practice session before we went to the studio. Daniel came up with the idea for this song, but Carmen was already in Norway, so there was no time for her to write some vocals for it. So, we all said, 'OK, Daniel has to sing this song now as we liked it so much and we definitely wanted to have it on the CD'. At first he was a bit shy, but he also sings with his other band Ahab and he has a great voice. So we didn't let him make any excuses and encouraged him to sing it. Christian wrote the lyrics for the song and the first time we really heard it was at the studio because before we'd only played it without vocals. But we were so surprised; it was wonderful, the way Daniel sang it. It reminds me very much of old Borknagar, so anyone who likes Borknagar should definitely listen to this song."

My final question takes a bit of explanation. When I first interviewed Midnattsol I discovered Christian Hector was a big Monty Python and 'Hitchhikers' Guide... fan which gave rise to some extremely 'different' questions and answers which Carmen then warmed to. Without Christian, I wasn't sure if this would work, but lobbed it in anyway, asking if, on their travels, the band had come across a shop more annoying than Monty Python's cheese shop? Carmen laughs. "Cool question, and yes, I'd love to answer it! Yes, I have! I am a true animal and environmental protector, so the most annoying thing I see is shops selling fur and I cannot even tell you how I feel when I see shops or markets where dead animals are hanging up like objects with no value or right to live. For me it is not only annoying, it is disgusting!"