

“GIMME SANCTUARY FROM THE LAW..”

Serenity's maiden album caused a bit of a stir but 'Fallen Sanctuary' is a real revelation. Georg Neuhauser and Mario Hirzinger explain all...



A band highly regarded by Threshold's Richard West after they toured together last year, Serenity have just released their second album 'Fallen Sanctuary'. Its predecessor, 2007's 'Words Untold And Dreams Unlived' received some great press which must have put the pressure on when it came to record the notoriously tricky second album, although according to keyboard player Mario Hirzinger the Austrian quintet was not fazed by the process.

"Of course we knew that we would have to work hard to fulfil the fans' expectations and to even exceed them with the second album," he points out. "But that fact did not put us under any pressure. We talked about the direction of the new album and, after short time, agreed on composing more compact, catchy songs that would also go down well live; that meant cutting down on the progressive elements but we added more bombastic symphonic parts and

some huge, Queen-esque choirs. Maybe you can see 'Fallen Sanctuary' as our 'don't bore us, get to the chorus' album! The massive orchestral parts didn't play that big a part on the debut album whereas on 'Fallen Sanctuary' they are essential in most of the songs. And I would also say that Georg's singing is way better, he sounds much more passionate and, yes, I'd say serious!" he laughs.

Serenity originally came together in January 2001. "At that time, the style of the music was a little bit more prog rock, like Arena or similar," explains Georg Neuhauser. "Several line-up changes left just Mario and Andrea [Schipflinger - drums] and

because Thomas and I are big fans of bands like Kamelot and Nightwish. Once the line-up had settled, we got our first big gig supporting Ronnie James Dio in our home town. That was the first really big thing for us, you know, a sold out gig in our home town; a dream come true. After that we started to record our first demo CD with this line-up, 'Engraved Within', in Munich with Jan Vacik, the ex-keyboard player from Dreamscape. We got a really good response to it, but the problem was that the big labels wouldn't offer us a big contract."

The solution was to do it themselves. "We decided to do it again on our own - produce



in 2004 three new bandmates came in, a new bass player Simon Holz knecht, a new guitarist Thomas Buchberger and me on lead vocals. The style changed a bit, and more power, more progressive, more symphonic elements came into our sound

a full-length CD and pay for it ourselves," he continues. "We went back to Jan in Munich and after that we went to Helsinki to Finnvox Studios because we wanted a similar sound to Nightwish. Jan is really a great guy, you know;

he helped us get the contacts at Finnvox as well, but he also helped us immensely in that he said to us, 'OK, I know you're money is over, but I'll do this and this and this for free because I love your music, and I like you guys, and also for me it's an opportunity to get better

After that, we went out with Threshold and Communic and Machine Men which was really a great experience, and then with Kamelot which was a big deal for me because I love Kamelot and Roy Khan is one of my influences."



known.' And I mean, for example, Visions Of Atlantis, they went to his studio because we told them, 'OK, this is a really great guy' so it worked both ways – he helped us, and we helped him.

"Once the album was done, we only sent it to three record labels," the singer recalls. "One day, Napalm called us and said, 'OK, we want you.' But we thought, 'OK, let's give ourselves some time and see what else happens.' And we did get other offers but Napalm really wanted us. Every second day, the telephone would ring and it's like, 'What's happening? What do you say? Will you sign with us?' We are very, very happy with Napalm because with our debut CD, we've played three tours which is really a big thing, I think. We went out with Morgana La Fey, mostly in Germany, and that was quite successful.

As well as the unusual title, 'Words Untold & Dreams Unlived' is also a little different in that it doesn't have a title track but instead features two short instrumentals called 'Words Untold' and (no prizes for guessing) 'Dreams Unlived'. "The title of the album was exactly our situation at that time," says Georg. "We wanted to have a contract so that we could say something – hence 'Words Untold' – and as for 'Dreams Unlived', well, we saw ourselves on a tour bus, we saw ourselves on tour with Kamelot, Threshold, and so at that time these were our dreams unlived. We hadn't got any songs that fitted in with this concept, and we all like it when bands like Kamelot or Circus Maximus – another great band – when they have these short interludes on their albums and so we decided to write two interludes and give them the name of the whole album. It's different; it's

something a little bit special." Some of the songs on the album were reworked from the 'Engraved Within' demo. "Songs like 'Forever' or 'Engraved Within' had a big response from the fans who told us, 'Wow, you hear it one time and you can't get it out of your ears,' so we decided that they had to be on the album. And also 'Dead Man Walking' and 'Thriven' got a big response from the press so we said, 'OK, let's re-arrange them a little bit and see how it works'. And I think it worked out quite well," Georg laughs.

Not only did the early incarnation of the band sound like Arena, they took their name from an Arena song. "There's one song called 'Serenity' and in 2001 when the band got their first gig they didn't have a name. So they had to come up with a name very quickly and Mario said, 'What about Serenity?' I think it fits because we are all very happy people and Serenity means happiness and feeling good, and it also fits to a prog/power band because we're not a TRUE METAL band like Hammerfall or someone like that," he laughs. "And I think that's one of our strengths, the fact that we're a mixture of things. I mean, we're not a true power metal band, we're not a true progressive metal band, and sometimes we also have influences from death metal because Simon and Mario are really fond of death metal stuff. So it's a mixture."

Having seen Serenity play live, it's obvious that Georg is happiest when he's on stage. "Yes, the stage is my home!" he replies. "I love to be on stage. I actually don't like the studio, because for me it's really hard work. But for Thomas our guitarist, it's the opposite. He likes to be in the studio, writing songs and so on, and I think that's good for the band, that we are so different."

"He sometimes was really bothered by Lanvall pushing him even further in the

studio," adds Mario. "But this is exactly what Georg needs from time to time because although he is ambitious, Lanvall always searched for the perfect take. I was not there when they did the recordings but I can imagine Georg's suffering. But it was worth the pain, dude!" he laughs. "Nobody ever died of a simple kick in the ass!"

Talking of Lanvall, a number of 'names' were involved in the making of 'Fallen Sanctuary': the Edenbridge guitarist, Oliver Phillipps from Everon and Jan Vacik for starters, and I wondered how and why these people participated. "Well," starts Mario, "With Jan the answer is easy: we've known him and his way of working in the studio for three years now and he also has become a friend to the band. He recorded drums and bass guitar and helped us a little bit with the song arrangements. Oliver Phillipps produced all the sometimes massive, sometimes fragile but always striking orchestral parts; he was recommended to us by our former manager who had worked with him on an album of his own band in 2004. I'm a big Everon fan anyway, so I was very happy to know that he would enrich our songs with his creativity. Lanvall is also a good friend, he was not among our 'team' at the beginning of the production process but when it turned out that Oliver would not be able to record vocals due to personal reasons we called Lanvall and were lucky that he had time back then! He created some really impressive choral passages with Georg."

And Elis's Sandra Schleret, who sings on 'Fairytale's'? "Well," continues the keyboard player, "Originally we wanted to have a female singer on 'Words Untold ...' but we were not satisfied with the sessions we did with some girls. So, at the beginning of the songwriting for the new album, we had that plan again and Georg later wrote 'Fairytale's' for a male and a female vocal part. Sandra resides in Tyrol, our Austrian home prov-

ince, we know her because she has been part of the metal scene since the Nineties (remember Dreams Of Sanity?) and Georg met her last year. They talked about our new album and our plans for female guest vocals and she said, 'Just call when you need me' – so we did! Her voice is not the 'typical girly timbre' and gives a nice contrast – as well as an addition – to Georg's vocals."

And what about the death metal barking? "As Georg said, most of us are melodic death metal fans as well, so that's a kind of natural thing to us. We thought that our music would need some extra spice in some parts and we used those death vocals when the feeling was right – although we never wanted to carry that too far! Performing live it is me doing that stuff, in the studio it was Marco Wenzel who is the singer in Austrian bands Inzest and Tristwood."

So what exactly is fallen sanctuary? Is it something you can describe in words? "In German it would be way easier," laughs Mario. "But let me try as I'm the one behind most of the lyrics! When it came to choose the album title we did some brainstorming and ended up with 'Fallen To Rust', 'Sanctuary Of Rust' and a few other ideas. Georg liked 'Fallen' solely, but there's already an album by Evanescence with that name. Someone said 'Why not 'Fallen Sanctuary'' and we all liked it. Later I sat down, read all the lyrics once again and noticed that the chosen title somehow seemed to fit perfectly. There are seven songs where some kind of 'fallen sanctuary' plays a role, sometimes on the surface, sometimes hidden in a metaphor. For example, 'Oceans Of Ruby' is a declaration against killings in the name of religion by the gods themselves: murdering someone to be rewarded with a place in paradise can be seen as a destroyed, fallen sanctuary. Then there's 'The Heartblood Symphony' which tells the story of Duncan Idaho in the third 'Dune' novel 'Children Of

Dune': his wife and high priest Alia turns the religion, once founded by her brother Paul Muad'dib, into an oppressive instrument to grant her power. Duncan decides to act against her plans which for him is some kind of fallen sanctuary, because all his life he was loyal to the Atreides family.

"I could go on for a very long time," he adds, "but let's leave some riddles for the fans!" A limited edition of 'Fallen Sanctuary' is rounded out by a bonus track, "A beautiful re-recording of our 2005 demo song 'Journey's End'," says Mario. "The lyrics are a little bit different and Oliver Phillipps of course added some slight symphonic sounds. I guess it would be a cool background song sitting around a bonfire!" Despite the differences between 'Words Untold And Dreams Unlived' and 'Fallen Sanctuary', playing the two albums back to back reveals that there's definitely a Serenity sound developing, a sound that's unique to you guys, I suggest to my interviewees. Is this intentional at this stage, or subliminal? Mario is genuinely pleased. "I can't thank you enough for acknowledging that we have a unique sound because as a band we do think that we have one – in contrary to others who only see us as a copy of, for example, Sonata Arctica. This is subliminal; every member of Serenity adds his own style of playing or singing and if one part resembles another band's sound, well, OK, we all have our influences. Of course our music is by no means a reinvention of metal but we always try to stay open minded and integrate some things which are rather unusual in melodic metal. And I think we do that well." I'll second that!