

JOHN TUCKER ONLINE - OCTOBER 2009



Short of stature but big on vowels, **Udo Dirkschneider** has been doing his thing for a long time now; it's been, what, 32 years since Accept came together, and so he and his cohorts know a thing or two about writing chest-beating, muscle-pumping heavy metal anthems. UDO's latest offering 'Dominator' (AFM Records) – preceded by an EP 'Infected' earlier in the year – is further evidence that both the man and the band have got a lot more to offer yet. As ever (the thing about UDO is that you get what it says on the box) 'Dominator' features slice after slice of metal so raw you can almost see the blood oozing out. As such there are no real surprises (the swingtime 'Devil's Rendez-Vous' excepted) as Dirkschneider wears his metal heart well and truly on his sleeve; so whereas, for example, not many bands in 2009 could get away with opening an album with a song called 'The Bogeyman', in the hands of Messrs Dirkschneider, Kaufmann, Gianola, Wienhold and Jovino it's as scary as a night at the Bates' Motel. Elsewhere, the title cut is reminiscent of 'Restless And Wild' and if 'Black And White' and 'Stillness Of Time' are each a bit of a plodder the subsequent follow-ons, the high-octane 'Infected' and aforementioned quirky 'Devil's Rendez-Vous', get things back on track once more. The album rounds off with another heads-down work-out in the 'Fast As A Shark' mould 'Speed Demon' and the lighters-in-the-

air 'Whispers In The Dark'.

'The MCA Years' (Universal) is a nicely packaged retrospective of **Diamond Head's**, uh, MCA years. For not a lot of money you get a box with three slip-cased CDs – the two albums 'Living On...Borrowed Time' and 'Canterbury', and the Friday Rock Show live at Reading CD, thankfully repackaged with a better cover. More important than the actual albums themselves – if you don't already know 'em, shame on you – are the bonus tracks. '...Borrowed Time' carries the four-track BBC session (one of the best ever recorded for The Friday Rock Show) in full as well as the other three tracks from the 'Four Cuts' EP. The Reading set is augmented by the unreleased October 1982 BBC In Concert broadcast, where the Stourbridge Four shared an hour's slot on the radio with Bernie Tormé; and 'Canterbury' boasts the 12" extended remix of 'Makin' Music' ("An enjoyable experience," Sean Harris once told me, "but not exactly a marketing success so a futile exercise...") and three unreleased demos. There's so



much good stuff here it's almost as if Christmas has come early. There's a minor gripe in that the 'In The Heat Of The Night' 7" single and its two B-side live cuts ('Sweet And Innocent' and 'Play It Loud') could and should have been included to make it complete, and there are some real howlers in the sleeve notes, but the unreleased material makes the package an essential

purchase.

Is **Guilt Machine** Ayreon lite? Well, Arjen Lucassen's new project doesn't sound too dissimilar to his work under the Ayreon banner, although it's certainly light of a few singers, replacing the sixteen pairs of tonsils on his last offering '01011001' with just one vocalist this time around. Jasper Steverlinck isn't a known singer in the metal field, coming from a Belgian alternative rock band called Arid, but that's the point. "He's not what people expect as he's not a typical metal singer," notes Lucassen. "He's a singer from a completely



different style which makes it interesting," and he handles the angst-ridden progressive metal on display with a degree of virtuosity. Guilt Machine features just two other musicians – ex-Porcupine Tree man Chris Maitland on drums, and the lead guitar work was undertaken by Lori Linstruth who impressed the metal world with her work on the first Stream Of Passion album – with, as ever, Lucassen handling everything else with his usual apparent ease. 'On This Perfect Day' (Mascot) is gloomy yet grandiose, perceptive yet powerful, and features a number of Ayreon trademarks as well as the ghost of Pink Floyd. With more hooks than anglers' shop and just six songs in sixty minutes there's a lot of offer here to tempt even the least curious, although it's the middle order of 'Green And Cream' and 'Season Of Denial' which tick all the boxes

for me. A great album, and a strong contender for the top slot when the albums of the year are counted down over the Christmas pud. It really is that good.

'Catharsis' (Napalm Records) is the first full-length album by **Elis** to feature 'new' frontwoman



Sandra Schleret who joined the band after Sabine Dünster died of a brain haemorrhage just after the 'Griefshire' album was completed in 2006. I've always thought that Elis haven't (yet) attained the profile they richly deserve, although maybe that'll change with album #4. Freed from the conceptual constraints of 'Griefshire' the band let themselves go a bit more on this new release and songs like 'Twinkling Shadow' and their take on Jennifer Rush's 'I Come Undone' are the sound of a band having fun (in the latter case, in a very Eighties' way!), 'Das Kleine Ungeheuer' oozes passion with a deadly slow groove, and 'Warrior's Tale' with its duet with Michelle Darkness is a powerful, heavy-hitter driven by the powerhouse instrumentalists Peter Streit and Chris Gruber (guitars), Tom Saxer (bass and growls) and Max Näscher (drums); top of the tree for me though is 'Des Lebens Traum' with its soaring guitar work and quite exquisite vocals. The first-rate production which brings out the clarity of Elis's sound and vision comes as ever from the hands of Atrocity/Leaves' Eyes maestro Alexander Krull, and it's worth bearing in mind that there is a limited version of the album with two bonus cuts and a live DVD shot at the Metal Female Voices Festival in 2007. Napalm had the kit there to film Leaves'

Eyes' set for 'En Saga I Belgia', and have already released the Battlelore set from the same gig. The Elis live performance – and I was there, if that helps, and on the day it was great – should be a cracker.

Ms Schleret also puts in an appearance on **Siegfried's** third album 'Nibelung' (Napalm Records), handling the vocals of all the female characters on this rather complex conceptual piece alongside Bruder Cle who covers the "dark, aggressive and pagan vocals" (so it says on the bio) of Hagan and Werner Bialek "who is the perfect vocalist for the character of Siegfried, the young and cheerful warrior." Musically 'Nibelung' as you might expect is an epic, symphonic, operatic metalfest, and the fact that it's sung in German actually



adds to the drama and scope. What works here is that just as Wagner wrote the Ring Cycle as four pieces which could stand alone but should be performed as a series, 'Nibelung' should be heard as a whole but equally the nine tracks stand alone perfectly well. The orchestrated and choral soundscapes build atmosphere and conjure up images of battlefields and despair, although at times it does seem that there's perhaps too much going on, too much to take in, and a few more breaks from the dark brutality would have been welcome. Nicely done, though, extremely well crafted and executed, and Schleret's vocals in particular are worthy of credit and praise. Once again the production chair is occupied by Alexander Krull, aided and abetted by his two Leaves' Eyes/Atrocity colleagues Thor-

sten Bauer and Mathias Röderer, and although it's a very different album to 'Catharsis' in sound and scope he keeps a tight rein on the proceedings.

Brainstorm were by far the best at the Metalfest gig at JB's, Dudley, in September. Maybe it's their mindset ("It is always a great honour for us to be invited to come and play the UK and we only have great memories of our shows there and the people we've met," said Torsten Ihlenfeld recently) or just their sheer



professionalism, but if you could bottle the essence of Brainstorm and sell it to other bands, you could make a fortune. As befits such a band, they'll have not one but two new albums in the racks by the end of the year. 'Memorial Roots' is their first album for new label AFM. It's a slightly more controlled beast than its predecessor 'Downburst' and, face facts, they'll probably never write a song as good as 'Fire Walk With Me' again – such gems come but once in a lifetime – but the power and the passion is still there in bucketloads and when it comes to vocal melodies there's few bands that come even close. No doubt about it, the guys in Brainstorm have got it nailed, and 'Memorial Roots' is eleven cuts of melodic heavy metal: all meat and no stuffing. 'The Conjunction Of The 7 Planets' is a great heads-down workout, 'Ahimsa' and 'Cross The Line' up the pace somewhat and CD opener and closer 'Forsake What I Believe' and 'Would You' respectively are probably two of the classiest things 2009 has thrown up.

Meanwhile, previous label

Metal Blade have pulled together a two CD retrospective entitled 'Just Highs No Lows (12 Years Of Persistence)' which includes amongst its 32 tracks a handful of odds and ends including three Japanese bonus tracks, two live cuts and their take on both Judas Priest's 'Before The Dawn' and Tony Christie's 'Amarillo'. With a tracklisting to die for ('Shiva's Tears'; 'Painside'; 'Tear Down The Walls; the aforementioned 'Fire Walk...' – the list is endless) it's probably the must-have collection of the year.

Whoever penned the laughable recent Kerrang! piece on the greatest riffs ever written ('Sweet Child O' Mine'? – Do me a favour!) has obviously never come across **HolyHell**'s self-titled debut album (Magic Circle). Fronted by Maria Breon, whose 'Phantom Of The Opera' duet with Eric Adams was a YouTube darling for many months and who has one hell of a voice, HolyHell also features guitarists Joe Stump and Jay Rigney,



keyboard player and principal songwriter Francisco Palomo and drummer Rhino who, of course, used to thump the tubs for Manowar. To be fair, the first long-player from the American five-piece isn't as heavy as I'd expected it to be and comes at things fairly and squarely from a power metal angle rather than the full-on approach of the Kings Of Metal – in fact, my first impression was of a female-fronted Power Quest – but what an album! Highlights come thick and fast on a roller-coaster of power-chords, but check out the guitar/keyboard battle in opener 'Wings Of Light', the symphonic heart-

beat of 'Revelations', the emotion-laden 'Resurrection' and/or the brooding, majestic 'Angel Of Darkness' which wouldn't be out of place on a Dio album. At 70 minutes the album does go on a bit, and, as heretical as it might be, I'm not sure Joey DeMaio's production brings out the best from the material as it all sounds a bit dated – more when-men-were-men Eighties rather than cutting-edge Twenty-First Century. It's a classy release though, metal through and through, and yes, as you might have guessed from the titles the album is inspired by The Apocalypse. Happy days...

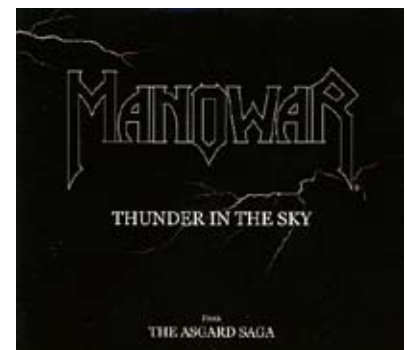
From the same stable come **Metalforce**, whose self-titled debut opens with a track entitled 'Faster, Louder, Metalforce'



(Magic Circle) and who for the next hour then take you on a ride of real metal, true metal, metal to live 'n' die for. Metalforce is what you'd get if you put the offspring of Manowar on the same stage – furious, exciting and metal through and through. I kid you not, these guys – Tarek Maghary (v), who sounds not unlike Eric Adams, Tristan Visser (g), Freddy Schartl (b) and Jan Raddatz (d) – are the real deal, and their clutch of shout-'em-out anthems and pedal-to-the-metal workouts are the perfect antidote to a bad day. With lines like 'Faster, Louder, Metalforce/ Fighting for an ancient course/ Hail the demolition lords/Faster, louder Metalforce' etc etc they're never going to win any prizes for their lyrics, torn exclusively from the Rob Halford book of rhyming couplets and the Joey DeMaio book of Valhalla 'n' Valkries, but who really cares when you can

lose yourself in maelstroms of furious riffing, pounding drums and wild guitar solos. There's no slouches here – Metalforce are definitely a band to keep an eye on as they could be going places very soon – but Raddatz should get paid double for the amount of effort he puts into beating hell out of his kit. DeMaio pops up as executive producer on this one, as does the mighty Ross The Boss who solos like a man possessed on 'When The Valkries Fly'. Oh, and have I mentioned that this is really, really metal?

So, after a couple of young pretenders, what about the real Kings of Metal? 'Thunder In The Sky' (again, Magic Circle) is an EP taster for the upcoming epic 'The Asgard Saga' and in true OTT Manowar fashion is a double disc; the days of an EP being just twenty minutes are long gone! The first CD features six songs including a "metal version" of 'The Crown And The Ring' and 'Father', and the second disc containing a further



fifteen versions of 'Father', each sung in a different language. (Track 3 'Isä' – Finnish – is my favourite!). 'The Asgard Saga' is a multimedia fantasy universe, and, although I have no idea what that actually means, it will eventually involve CDs, books, games, interactive websites and full-length feature films to convey adventures in Norse mythology to the world. I never saw that coming when I first bought 'Battle Hymns' 27 years ago! Aside from being THE true metal band, Manowar are also the true Marmite band – you either like them or hate them, and there's nothing hacks can say or do to persuade people to

switch sides. This is real metal, made by metal gods, for true worshippers at metal altars, and in my opinion it's glorious – real music played with power and passion. It's a shame the band's early love affair with the UK went off the boil years ago because it would be great to have them back on 'English ground' once more.

In related news, **Manowar's** 'Hell on Earth V' double DVD, the first of the 'Hell On Earth'



series filmed in high-def, is due out in November. Apparently five years in the making, 'HOE V' was shot from over 150 camera angles, using helicopters, camera cranes, mounted cameras and hand-held HD cameras. According to the press release, amongst a shedload of true metal favourites, the DVD covers the world premiere of 'The Asgard Saga' with the release of the 'Thunder In The Sky EP' at the Magic Circle Festival III in Loreley, Germany, as well as a full-length version of 'Hail and Kill', filmed during a lightning storm at Istanbul's fearsome Fortress of the Seven Towers...

