

JOHN TUCKER ONLINE - FEBRUARY 2010



Back in October 2007 I asked Orphaned Land's frontman Kobi Farhi how they were getting on with the follow-up to [2004's] 'Mabool'. "Well," he started to explain, "If you listen to 'Mabool' you'll know that it's very complex; every song begins with a riff that continues into another riff and then in every song you will have maybe twelve riffs and by continually arranging and re-arranging we finally came up with an album. So it's very difficult to write an album for Orphaned Land. It's very complicated. It's like doing a puzzle, you know, but one where you have plenty of pieces," he laughed. "And we always have a concept, to make things more difficult still. So we never really write a song; we are not songwriters in that way. We write guitar riffs and we listen to each riff and try to figure out what it reflects in comparison to the concept, OK? And then we like fit them all together like a puzzle, and we don't really see the picture until it's finished. It's a shitty way of working, really," he concluded, "But that's Orphaned Land!" 30 or so months after that conversation the oddly titled 'The Never Ending Way Of ORwarriOR' (Century Media) is finally with us; to be fair it's not a vastly different from its predecessor and if you're a fan you'll already know what to expect – singing, chanting, growling and narrations in a variety of languages rubbing shoulders with a variety of electric and acoustic instruments against a

backdrop of choirs and orchestration – and one riff continuing into another! Steve Wilson's steady hand keeps everything tight in the mix, Shlomit Levi's female vocals add another dimension to the material and, as ever, Yossi Sassi Sa'aron's guitar work ranges from the breathtaking sublime to the out and out aggressive. If you're going to go for it, there's a limited edition version in a hardcover booklet with a DVD which makes for a nice package. Orphaned Land are in London in May, their first UK date since appearing at ProgPower UK in 2006, so miss them at your peril!

Every so often you come across a band which genuinely lives up to the hype. In this case the band is ASPERA whose debut album 'Ripples' has just been released by InsideOut. The superlatives have been flying off websites across Europe, and although it's easy for a band to be selective about the quotes it



publishes, the sheer number of star ratings in the 80%-100% region means that there must be something going on here. And there is! Musically, the young band from Skien, Norway, sit fair and square in the melodic progressive metal field, not a million miles from fellow Norwegians Circus Maximus; must be something in the water. What the guys in Aspera – Atle Pettersen (vocals), Robin Ognedal (guitars), Nickolas Pettersen (keyboards), Rein T. Blomquist (bass) and Joachim Strøm Ekelund (drums) – have is talent by

the bucketload, and not one of 'em's 21 years old yet! 'Ripples' is a very strong offering indeed, very exciting, beautifully written, extremely well played, and in Atle Pettersen Aspera have a frontman of exceptional talent. Ten tracks including the intro and not a filler in sight; as such it's hard to pick a favourite as they all pack a punch; maybe 'Do I Dare', 'The Purpose' and the title track all possibly have the edge on the others, but that's just personal choice and may have changed by the time you read this anyway – a reflection of the fact that there's so much good stuff going on here. 'Ripples' is well worth checking out, and Aspera worth keeping an eye on – this is a band that's going places. Incidentally, Pagan's Mind's Nils K Rue puts in an appearance (on backing vocals) which is no bad thing in itself.

Opening with gunshots, a typical hacking riff and a massive drum attack... It must be FEAR FACTORY. With founder members Burton C Bell and Dino Cazares



finally re-united, 'Mechanize' (AFM Records) is the first album under the Fear Factory banner since the band called it a day after 'Transgression' in 2005, and the first to feature them both since 2001's 'Digimortal' which ended up in burn-out and fallings-out. This is the band that created 'Demanufacture', the must-have album of 1995, but the music world's moved on since then and the difference now is that

whereas those early Fear Factory albums were groundbreaking, in the twenty-first century there are loads of bands doing a similar thing with extreme/melodic vocals over an über-heavy backing, and whereas for us old timers it's great to have 'em back, for younger fans it might just be a matter of 'so what?' To be fair, despite the passage of 15 years, 'Mechanize' sounds pretty much like 'Demufacture's little brother and certainly pretty much what you'd expect from Fear Factory: Burton C Bell has certainly still got it in the vocal department, Cazares has never lost his touch (as his releases with Divine Heresy prove), and Byron Stroud and Gene Hoglan are more than able replacements in the bass and drums department. How Fear Factory will fair almost ten years after their glory days is anyone's guess, but the likes of 'Christploitation', 'Powershifter' and 'Mechanize' itself do indicate that they've a lot more to say and do yet.

Going back further to the days before 'Demufacture', a band like CYCLE SLUTS FROM HELL were never likely to change the world. And they didn't, vanishing in the blink of an eye with only one album and some saliva-slobbered magazine pages typed up one-handed by aging male hacks to mark their very



existence. If they'd been male they'd have been of no interest at all, and the band's credibility took a severe knocking when those self-same journos realised that this wasn't actually a band at all, more four female singers banging out the likes of 'By

The Balls' and 'I Wish You Were A Beer' karaoke-style in front of a male backing band. Ridiculous names like Venus Penis Crusher, She-Fire Of Ice, Queen Vixen and Honey 1%er and the fact that they looked like the girls from the No.7 counter at Boots on a hen weekend didn't help. But the punchline is that their self-titled album, originally recorded in 1991 and now given a new lease of life by IronBird, is actually very good. Opener 'Conqueress' has a fab riff and eminently hummable verse, and 'Dark Ships' is no-nonsense MTV metal. The aforementioned '...Balls' and '...Beer' kind of let the side down a bit, and 'Bloodlust' borrows unashamedly from 'Cherry Bomb', but all in all a very satisfying album.

For those who like things with a twist, MARTY FRIEDMAN's newie 'Tokyo Jukebox' (Mascot Records) is a bit of an oddity. The ex-Cacophony, ex-Megadeth guitarist turned solo artist is revered as a real guitar hero in Japan where he has lived for some time now, and as a bit of a thank you Friedman has turned his hand to re-interpreting some of the Japanese pop songs that have given him so much pleasure over the years. As such, it's a bit of a mixed bag, but detailed (as well as passionate



and amusing) booklet notes give you the whys and the wherefores about each song. OK, one cut ('Sekai Ni Hitotsu Dake No Hana') appeared on the 'Loudspeaker' album back in 2006 (the argument for its inclusion is that here you get to hear it "in context"), but overall this is footstompin' fun album. 'Ama-

gigoe' is worth the price alone, opener 'Tsume, Tsume Tsume' is as unsubtle as they come, despite some deceptive quiet breaks in the maelstrom, and at the other end of things the album wraps up with a delightful and beautifully played ballad.

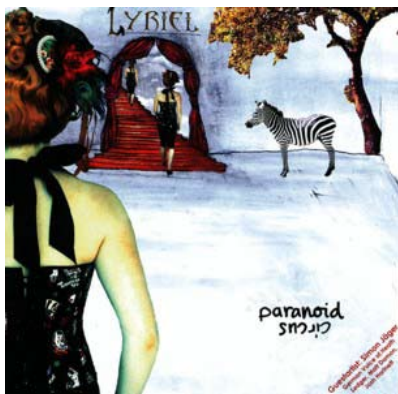
It must be the time of the year for off-beat releases. YOTANGOR's debut 'King Of The Universe' (Brennus Music) came out last year but has only had a



fairly limited release in its homeland France so far. Unusually for a debut album it's a double CD, 100 minutes of music, and although it aims to come at things from the Metal Female Voices point of view it's been painted with such a broad brush that it seems to have swept up the best of Eighties metal and blended it with twenty-first century MFV. 'King Of The Universe' is obviously been a massive undertaking and a real labour of love for the band's driving force, composer and creator Jean-Guy Pichoustre. Five years in the making, the 26 tracks make up a symphonic metal opera and in doing so create another world, although if you don't want to get hooked into the fantasy just press play and let the music do the talking. The real find here is drop-dead gorgeous vocalist Yngrid who has worked with Pichoustre off-and on for a number of years and who is a massive talent; a singer since the age of nine she has had such a wide and varied career that nothing is beyond her. Not that there are any slouches in this band though, and as the music leaps from sweeping orchestrations to good old fashioned power ballads with

a twist of power pop thrown in for the good measure, you can see that Yotangor is a band of exceptional gift and flair. This is a great album, and is well worth trying to track down if the MFV genre, symphonic metal or just damn good metal music is your thing.

'Paranoid Circus' is LYRIEL's third album, although it's been three-and-a-half years since its predecessor 'Autumntales' so you'd be forgiven if they've fallen off



your radar a bit. Although the cover art is a bit weird 'n' wacky, the German seven-piece fronted by Jessica Thierjung occupy the folkier end of the Metal Female Voices genre, and, with a violin and cello amongst the guitar, keyboards, bass and drums they're less Nightwish and more Blackmore's Night – although thankfully not as twee as Ritchie and Candice. It's not a heavy offering, although 'Elderberry And Lavender' really comes good in the end and there's a certain charm about the likes of 'Foe-man's Bride' (which is probably a cracker live) and the passionate title cut. The songs are well crafted and the vocals are exquisite throughout, and if there is a quibble it's that the production does let it down a bit, being all bark and no bite.

Whatever definition of metal you turn to – favourable or derogatory – will have some mention of loud guitars, so what happens if you take the axes out of the equation? The answer is VAN CANTO, a German a cappella sextet featuring one drummer, two (male and female) lead singers and three backing vocalists. Nothing more, nothing less.

What you get is Sly and Inga sharing the lead vocals, Stefan ("lower rakkatakka and solo guitar vocals"), Ross ("higher rakkatakka vocals"), Ike ("deep dandan bass vocals") and Bastian battering hell out of the drum kit. Newly signed to Napalm Records, Van Canto have wasted no time in following up the re-issues of their previous two albums 'A Storm To Come' and 'Hero' with a brand new offering 'Tribe Of Force'. There's less covers this time around (although tackling the eight-and-a-bit minutes of 'Master Of Puppets' is a masterstroke in itself, as is having Chris Boltendahl join them on their take on his band Grave Digger's 'Rebellion'), leaving more space for self-penned compositions. 'To Sing A Metal Song' pretty much sums



up what the band are all about, and 'I Am Human' is a real toe/tonsil-tapper. As with 'Hero' Charlie Bauerfeind is responsible for a rock solid production, and as to the question 'But is it metal?' Stefan is quite clear. "Yes. It's metal. I think metal is not only about guitars. It's about sound, arrangement, attitude and songwriting. We love metal and so we play it. The only thing is that we have a slightly different approach of creating the sound." And I'll second that. A limited edition digipack of 'Tribe Of Force' comes with a DVD of the band's Wacken show in 2008, which to my mind makes it a must have.

Despite sounding like angst-filled thrash merchants, HELLFUELLED are actually purveyors of well played, straight down the line metal. 'Emission Of Sins' (Black Lodge) is the Swedes'

sixth release – they opened their account with 'Volume One' back in 2004 although have been



together in one form or another since the year dot, finally settling on their current name in 1999 – and although it clocks in at a relatively short 39 minutes Andy Alkman (v), Jocke Lundgren (g), Henke Lönn (b) and Kent G Svensson (d) have well and truly made their point by the time the CD runs off at the end of track 11. A conscious decision to collaborate with an outside songwriter and producer (Rikard Löfgren) has certainly paid dividends in re-invigorating their approach and by all accounts 'A Remission Of My Sins' was a hit single for them – wouldn't get that in the UK! Hellfuelled have a distinctly Ozzy groove, mainly due to Alkman's tones and phrasing and some extremely riffastic songs (check out 'Stone By Stone' or the closing instrumental 'Moving On', and while you're there have a good listen to the Lundgren's soloing in 'End Of The Road'), and face it, that's no bad thing in itself.

Saving the best till last, MORTEMIA is the solo vehicle for Morten Veland, the brains and the muscle behind Sirenia, and 'Misere Mortem' (Napalm Records) is his first release under this name. This time round Veland has done the lot – written everything, sung and played everything, produced everything – in his own studio in his home town of Stavanger, Norway; the only exception is the choir for which he fell back on Sound Suite Studios, home of many Sirenia recordings. Given that Sirenia

is Veland's baby anyway and he did pretty much everything on those albums too, you won't be surprised to know that the material on 'Misere Mortem' sounds pretty much like latter-day Sirenia with Veland's voice in place



of female vocals; and, as with latter-day Sirenia, the songs are generally pretty short and attention-span friendly. Here though, much better use is made of the interplay between the vocals and the choir, and the guitars feature more highly on the nine tracks on offer than is usual on goth metal offerings. I have to confess to being a big fan of Veland's work anyway, but I do like this album a lot. He knows how to construct songs that flow with passion – seemingly writing more from the heart than from the head – and he really doesn't have the profile his career (don't forget, this is the guy who co-founded Tristana way back when) and talent deserve. Good album; great album, in fact: an early contender for this year's Top Ten.