

JOHN TUCKER ONLINE - REVIEWS AUGUST 2008



SABATON
 'THE ART OF WAR'
 (Black Lodge)

Although there is some dispute as to who Sun Tzu was and exactly when he lived (there's a possible time frame of something like 722 - 421 BC depending on whom you read), his name has lived on through his book 'The Art Of War'. Generally attributed to some time in the 6th Century BC, 'The Art Of War' has been an influential reference work for both generals and politicians throughout the ages, including the likes of Napoleon and Mao Zedong, and is still studied at military academies today.

With a narrative thread from Sun Tzu's work and thirteen tracks - the book has thirteen chapters - drawing on major conflicts, Sabaton's latest offering 'The Art Of War' could easily be a turkey but is, in fact, pretty much a masterpiece. The Swedish six-piece have pulled out all the stops on their fifth album (if you include the 'Metalizer' comp/re-issue): the songs themselves are cleverly constructed and passionately performed, and although they no doubt belong to the power metal camp, vocalist Joakin Brodén, guitarists Rikard Sundén and Oskar Montelius, keyboard player Daniel Myhr, bassist Pär Sundström and drummer Daniel Mullback have their roots in classic metal of the Eighties - which is, believe me, no bad thing.

A brief spoken word intro 'Sun Tzu Says' - the opening lines of the book - gives way to 'Ghost Division', and, being the first song on offer it is, as you might expect, as fast and furious as the blitzkrieg it describes. The title track 'The Art Of War' slows things down and grinds along like a tank, crushing everything in its path, with a clever use of guitars and keyboards soloing away against a backdrop of fury. From its opening '40:1' comes over a bit more perfunctory at first. Have the Swedes lost their way? No way, José! The middle-eight with its choral backing pulls the song back from the chasm of mediocrity and sets the album fairly and squarely on the rails once more.

It's in the middle section that things really heat up. 'Unbreakable' owes more than a nod to Black Sabbath's 'A National Acrobat', but then hits the accelerator mid-way through and sprints for the finish line. 'The Nature Of Warfare' is another spoken word piece, and a preface to 'Cliffs Of Gallipoli'; admittedly, as a song it does veer into Savatage territory ('hands up who's got 'Gutter Ballet' in their collection, lads') but with its epic vocal delivery and beautifully executed guitar solo 'Cliffs of Gallipoli' is probably the album's centrepiece. 'Talvisota' (the Finish winter war of 1939 -1940) ups the speed quotient once more and is probably the album's only throwaway moment, but softens you up for the grandiose 'Panzerkampf'. Opening with a heroic and optimistic soldiers' anthem as the Nazi army invades the Soviet Union and switching midway through to a Russian motive and a lyrical defeat as the Germans are forced back, 'Panzerkampf' is an extremely clever composition and the album's second great set piece. Taken together, this and 'Cliffs Of Gallipoli' are worth the price of the album alone.

After that, anything else is going to struggle to compare. 'Union (Slopes Of St Benedict)' is a chest-beating affair with some great guitar work; 'The Price Of A Mile' is a slower paced song with an anthemic chorus and a riff as thick as the trench mud of Paschendale, and makes for an interesting counterpoint to 'Firestorm', a heads-down frenetic work-out and a great way to round things off (the thirteenth and final track 'A Secret' just being a spoken word filler).

OK, so the purists will sniff that 'The Art Of War' is a tad derivative at times, but it's an immediate and easily accessible album and certainly the pinnacle of Sabaton's career thus far. Since coming together in 1999 they have bettered themselves with each release, and it'll be interesting to see if - or how - they can top this one when the time comes. But in the meantime, 'The Art Of War' is already picking up accolades across Europe, and I can see it featuring in a number of Top Tens at the end of the year. It'll certainly be up there in mine.



ICE AGES
 'BURIED SILENCE'
 (Napalm Records)

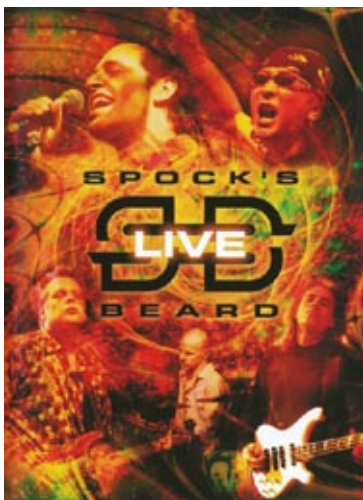
Another release from Richard Lederer, a man unlikely to publish a joke book...

Not being content with his day job as Protec-

tor in the Lord Of The Rings-inspired Summoning, creating dense, epic soundscapes, and his other day job heading up the goth-tastic but downbeat Die Verbannten Kinder Evas, Richard Lederer also likes to dabble with what Napalm refers to as melodic industrial darkwave in his one-man-band Ice Ages. 'Buried Silence' is his second album under this banner, and follows hot on the heels of 2000's 'This Killing Emptiness'.

With the aid of the latest in synthesizers, Lederer delivers a bleak, dark soundtrack to a dystopian future, melodic but melancholic and over-ridden by his menacingly-enhanced voice. A crystal-clear production helps bring the material to life and inject a degree of humanity into what is almost a robotic musical monolith, a seemingly relentless slide into a cold world of technology.

There's a lot going on here (check out, for example, 'Icarus' which has definite Sisters Of Mercy tendencies buried under the layers of electronica), and it's an interesting and varied collection of compositions, all expertly executed. My only gripe is that, at 55 minutes, the album is a bit long for what it is and it's hard to keep focussed right to the end. But don't let that put you off – just play it in two shifts!



SPOCK'S BEARD
'LIVE'
(*InsideOut Music DVD*)

"It's live, Jim, but not as we know it..."

Captured live in May last year at De Borderij, Zoetermeer, Holland - which also hosted, amongst others, Threshold's 'Critical Energy' DVD shoot in 2003 - this lovingly-shot although unimaginatively-titled DVD and double CD captures Messrs D'Virgilio, Morse, Meros, Okumoto and Keegan grooving away in support of the then current studio album (the also unimaginatively-titled 'Spock's Beard'). From the understated slow-burning opener 'On A Perfect Day' to the double-whammy set closers of the 'As Far As The Mind Can See' suite and 'Rearranged' alongside a clutch of other newbies, the two-hour set draws heavily on their ninth studio album with a sprinkling of older classics to keep everyone happy.

As you might expect, there's not a lot of visuals or theatrics to watch, and not a great deal of crowd interaction either (although both Nick D'Virgilio and tour drummer Jimmy Keegan do get to crowd surf). It's more about a band of consummate musicians putting a wealth of intricate material through its paces; besides, the rear cover shot shows how cluttered the stage is, accommodating as it does vocalist Nick D'Virgilio's additional drum kit, keyboards and guitar. That said, Spock's Beard do let themselves go - a bit! - during the more rocky 'Surfing Down The Avalanche' and also as 'Rearranged' brings the main set to a climax. For the most part though, the performance is a masterclass in technique, and judging from the crowd's reaction, on the night it hit the nail firmly on the head - and at the end of the day, that's what counts



AMASEFFER
'SLAVES FOR LIFE'
(*InsideOut Music*)

Part one of a Biblical trilogy from a relatively new ambitious young band

Epic in its scope and narrative, 'Slaves For Life', the debut album from Israel's Amaseffer, is the first part of a trilogy telling of the story of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt. Metal, choirs, Middle Eastern influences, chants and actors all collide to bring the narrative to life, and, given the richness and diversity of the material on offer, the immediate point of reference has to be fellow Israelis Orphaned Land with a sprinkling of Queensryche for good measure. The result is a comprehensive, exciting, cohesive body of work which tells its tale without the storyline getting in the way and detracting from the flow of the music.

Amaseffer - the name is a Hebrew reference to the 'people of the Holy Book' - was formed by drummer/producer Erez Yohanan in 2004 as a vehicle to work on the Biblical story. Guitarist Yuival Kranmer was the next on board, and within a year and the addition of guitarist Hanan Avramovich, the basic structure of the band and the album was in place. The original plan was to have Andy Kuntz singing on the album, but when it became apparent that this wasn't working out because of the bands' different schedules, the Vanden Plas frontman was finally replaced by Mats Leven, one of the true greats of the contemporary metal scene: alongside him line up, amongst oth-

ers, Arch Enemy's Angela Gossow and Orphaned Land's own Kobi Fahri.

The songs on 'Slaves For Life' are atmospheric, elaborate and laden with emotion, with the guitar work of the 'Wooden Staff' and the grandiose 'Midian' hogging centre stage for me. Amaseffer have served up an electrifying debut – it's just impossible not to like something this well crafted – and it'll be interesting to see how parts two and three shape up when the time comes.



CHROME DIVISION
'BOOZE, BROADS AND
BEELZEBUB'
(Nuclear Blast)

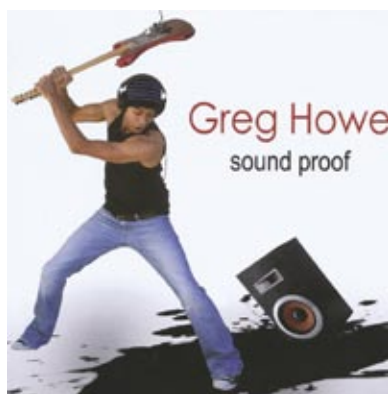
'What are you rebelling against, Johnny?'
'What'cha got?'

Chrome Division's second album kicks off pretty much where its predecessor – 2006's 'Doomsday Rock 'N' Roll' – left off; it's a scuzzy, lowdown, booze-fuelled soundtrack to the Eighties, a time when men were real men, girls were all lipstick and leather and two shots of liquor was the solution to everything (or so countless videos on MTV would have you believe).

What Dimmu Borgir's Shagrath and his cohorts have rattled up in 'Booze, Broads And Beelzebub' is a cocktail of two parts Motörhead, one part Motlëy Crüe (when they were good), a slice of AC/DC and two fingers of Jack Daniels shaken, not stirred. As the title indicates, it's not an album that's going to change

your life, but nor is it something you need a degree or a knowledge of musical scales to listen to. It's uncomplicated, it's fun, it's head-down, good-time rock 'n' roll, a little on-the-edge and all the better for it. It's Marlon Brando in 'The Wild One'; a rattlesnake rocker-roller, unashamedly un-PC, with a snarl to die for an attitude to match.

Aiding and abetting the axe-wielding Shagrath in this Norwegian rock 'n' roll felony are bassist Luna from Ashes To Ashes, vocalist Eddie Guz (The Carburetors), guitarist Ricky Black (Hot Muffins) and Tony White (Minas Tirith). And whereas Chrome Division's cover of 'Sharp Dressed Man' isn't for purists, this isn't an album to over-analyse. Just hit play and enjoy.



GREG HOWE
'SOUND PROOF'
(Mascot Records)

This is Howe to do it...

Kicking off his career in 1988 when Mike Varney of Shrapnel Records – one of the US indies in the Eighties – asked him to record what would be simply titled 'Greg Howe', the American guitarist has made a name for himself both as a solo artist, a collaborator (most notably with Ritchie Kotzen, and as a hired hand – although his choice of artists – including Michael Jackson, Justin Timberlake and Enrique Iglesias – all come from the A-list of dodginess!). 'Sound Proof' is his ninth solo work-out and, with a band consisting of bassist Jon Reshard, keyboard

player David Cook and drummer Gianluca Palmieri, Howe takes us through a ten-track stroll in the jazz/rock fusion park.

It's not quite that simple, of course, as Howe lobs other influences into the pot and gives it all a healthy stirring, the net result being a large dose of feel-good summer's-day music. Highlights are the beautifully laid-back Satriani-esque soloing of 'Morning View', and right next door's funky-dory 'Walkie Talkie'. Nice...



A NEW DAWN
'FALLING FROM GRACE'
(Independent)

Debut album from rising Dutch stars...

Originally starting life in 1997, A New Dawn brings a twist to the Metal Female Voices genre by having not one but two female singers in Sanne Kluiters and Jamila Ifzaren, as well as Monica Janssen who not only supplies the bass lines but also throws in some of the best extreme vocals around.

The band is pretty much the brainchild of Elbert de Hoog, who wanted an opportunity to get some of his previous band's material on tape after they'd split up. Having recorded a demo featuring three originals and covers by Queensryche and Paradise Lost, he threw in his lot with Mental Captivity and A New Dawn was sidelined for a while until, with Kluiters on board, a new demo 'The Wisdom Of Hindsight' was recorded in 2003, featuring amongst other things a cover of

Savatage's 'Last Dawn'. A 'real' band came into being the following year, and after one further demo in 2006 leads us nicely to their debut album.

'Falling From Grace' certainly isn't a one-trick pony. Although a cohesive body of work when taken together, the eleven tracks on offer display a variety of styles, ranging from almost Blackmore's Night 'twee-ness' to out-and-out riff-monsters. The dual vocalists and backing grunts are used to great effect, the guitar work of de Hoog and partner Willem Cremer is exceptionally good and Janssen and drummer Peter van Toren provide a rock solid backbone: for evidence, check out 'Victimless Tragedy' which to my mind is the perfect showcase for the band's talents.

Early in the set 'Darkness Falls' is a catchy little beast, but A New Dawn save the best till last: 'Winter' is a clever composition with twists 'n' turns and acoustic breaks in an otherwise heavy workout; 'Descending (Ascension Part II)' rocks out with a lengthy guitar solo and an almost NWOBHM feel, and 'Ascension (Part III)' – the first part is on the 2006 demo, trivia fans – sees the band paying homage to Savatage once more, with a nod towards 'Chance' and its use of counterpoint.

If there's a downside, it's that the production is a little lacking in sparkle, but overall 'Falling From Grace' shows a band with both a lot to offer and, hopefully, a very bright future.

To check them out or obtain a copy of the album, go to www.anewdawnband.nl



HAMMERFALL 'MASTERPIECES' (Nuclear Blast)

Swedish covers tribute...

Hammerfall follow last year's greatest hits collection with a round-up of their bonus tracks and 'B'-sides – all covers – with three newies tacked on the end for good measure. Consequently, much of the album will be familiar to die-hard fans and although I was just going to write it off as a contractual obligation, 'Masterpieces' is actually quite a good compilation. Amongst all the obvious old favourites – Priest, Kiss, Rainbow etc – it's the less well-known songs that really hit the spot: stuff like Heavy Load's 'Run With The Devil', Chastain's 'Angel Of Mercy', Stormwitch's 'Ravenlord' and opener 'Child Of the Damned' (originally by Warlord) all sound a tad better for their spruce-ups; even Hammerfall's spin on 'Detroit Rock City' should put on smile on die-hard Kiss fans' faces.

Udo Dirkschneider duets on Accept's masterful 'Head Over Heels' to add some authenticity to the mix, and squeezed between Loudness's 'Crazy Nights' and Riot's 'Flight Of The Warrior' is 'När Vindarna Viskar Mitt Namn', Roger Pontare's 2000 Eurovision Song Contest entry (which came 7th, by the way). The freshly recorded additions are the Riot cover, Skid Row's 'Youth Gone Wild' and 'Aphasia' by Europe.

Although the lads from Sweden haven't really added anything to the material (aside from a decent guitar solo to Twisted

Sister's 'We're Gonna Make It') they have come up with faithful tributes to the originals. It's well played, fun to listen to, and, as such, 'Masterpieces' should sit nicely in any CD collection.

BRITISH STEEL FESTIVAL

CAMDEN UNDERWORLD
LONDON, 26TH APRIL 2008

Metal for muthas... In fact, metal for the whole family!

For its third annual outing, the British Steel festival moved from its traditional home in Milton Keynes to Camden's Underworld, but that aside the format of the indoor metal-fest remained the same – five NWOBHM-related bands all perhaps a little longer in the tooth and shorter in the hairline these days but all cranked up and ready to roll.

Relative youngsters **REDLINE** kicked things off with some style. Although not a NWOBHM band as such, Redline feature bassist Martin Orum and drummer Mark Biddiscombe, members of Bitches Sin back when the band recorded their 'Predator' album. Redline's set was a pretty frenetic affair which drew heavily on the quartet's 2007's 'Ignition' album; as an opening band they were the perfect choice to get things rocking big time. Liam Doherty has one hell of a voice, and guitarist A.D. made it all look so easy. Unfortunately they were really on a roll when their time was up (every band gets a strict forty minutes) meaning that their set was cut a little short. A pity – I would love to have seen their finale, as I reckon it would have been pretty spectacular. Incidentally, many fans soon worked out that Bitches Sin's Ian Toomey and Tony Tomkinson – both of whom also appeared on 'Predator' – were in the house as the band were using the gig to launch their new (and exceptionally good) album 'UDUVUDU', and took the opportunity to get some historic photos of the four-fifths of the



'Predator' line-up twenty-five-plus years after the event.

LYADRIVE only managed one single – 'Anytime' – back in 1984, but have been more prolific since getting back together later in the Nineties. Things get a bit confusing in terms of the line-up, so as drummer Lee Burrows explains, "There was me at the back, Paul 'Rhino' Ryan on guitars, Nick John front and centre, Steve Christiansen – bass one, Guy Wilson – bass two, Graham Stuart on guitar and Steve Jones on guest guitar! Basically, we had a dilemma: Steve was our original bassist (he left the band in '82), but over the last five or six years we have forgiven him and he was always a top bloke! But Guy is the man who recorded the 'Another Time Another Place' CD. Seeing as this was seen initially as a one-off gig, we didn't see any reason why they couldn't do half a set each. And along with Nick and I, Steve Jones was ever-present in the '81 to '85 line up. He moved to Alaska many moons ago and lost the mojo. Luckily, he recently found it again and came over in 2007 to record 'Black Waters Rising'. He fancied doing the gig but obviously couldn't make rehearsals, so a compromise was reached: come back to Blighty for a week, visit family and friends, do a four-minute number at the Underworld and return to the ice and snow! Simple!"

Lyadrive are a solid band with a diverse range of songs and an imposing frontman, although given the amount of material they've amassed, covers of Riot's 'Warrior' and Trespas's 'One Of These Days' occupied set time which I would rather have spent listening to more of the band's own compositions. Still,

they made great use of their forty minutes, and I for one am looking forwards to hearing more from them.

Bizarrely, **ELIXIR's** set list showed that they'd dropped their trademark song 'Treachery', although it made a sneak appearance towards the end. "Norms [Gordon] said that he was a bit fed up with playing 'Treachery' every gig and wanted to miss it out for once," Phil Denton told me afterwards. "Kev [Dobbs] and I weren't so sure. It isn't one of my favourite songs to play either, but the crowd always seem to want to hear it. It seems it's our 'Paranoid' or 'Smoke On The Water' – but without the sales, obviously! So we decided, with some feeling of uneasiness, to leave it out for this gig. However, Kev and Nigel [Dobbs] went over the road to Burger King before the doors opened and bumped into a few fans who said something like, 'Can't wait to hear 'Treachery' tonight!' So we put it back in the set pretty bloody quickly!" Elixir play prime-time NWOBHM – what would these days probably be called power metal, all swagger and strut, and, as the most experienced band on the bill so far, they had the songs and the moves and the crowd loved it. The twin guitars of Denton and Gordon packed a real punch, and Elixir are as exciting to watch now as they were twenty-odd years ago.

The best reception of the night went to **PRAYING MANTIS**. Fronted by the ever-reliable, ever-smiling Troy brothers (guitarist Tino and bassist Chris), Praying Mantis kicked off with 'Cry For The New World' and then romped through a set of highlights – 'Turn The Tables',

'Lovers To The Grave', 'Children Of The Earth', 'Rise Up' and 'Letting Go'. Notwithstanding the fact that there doesn't seem to be such a thing as a duff Praying Mantis gig, the band (featuring Mike Freeland on vocals, Andy Burgess on guitars and Benjamin Reid on drums) seemed to be having a blast as well as being genuinely surprised at their reception. Saving the best till last, they wrapped things up with a subtly-reworked version of 'Captured City', one of the most exciting songs of the NWOBHM.

The headliners had hoped to use the event to launch their sixth album 'Play It To Death' but as ever the curse of **WITCHFYNDE** struck, and the CDs remained accidentally shut in a warehouse somewhere. The real shame was that as their setlist had to be shortened, it was the new songs that were excised, leaving 'Holy Ground' as the sole representative of the new album; that said, however, any set that kicks off with 'Stagefright' and 'Ready To Roll' and wraps up with 'Wake Up Screaming' and 'Give 'Em Hell' is bound to be a winner. In another world Witchfynde would be huge – they have the songs and the passion – and Montalo feted as a guitar hero; despite the fact that none of us are getting any younger he still throws his instrument around and hits the poses like a teenager. Ah, what might have been... Problems with Pete Surgey's bass rig plagued the set but not enough to spoil the party, and by 10:30 it was all over for another year. All credit to Elixir's Phil Denton – the architect of British Steel as well as its driving force – for keeping the festival going. It's just a shame that the NWOBHM isn't celebrated more readily in the UK; on the night, English was almost a minority language in a crowd of Dutch, Spanish, Italian, German and Austrian metal fans. British Steel 4 is already in the pipeline for next year – same time, same place – with some interesting names being bandied around. Hope to see you there.