

JOHN TUCKER ONLINE - REVIEWS SEPTEMBER 2008



ICED EARTH
'THE CRUCIBLE OF MAN
(SOMETHING WICKED PART 2')
(SPV)

Part Two hits target, thankfully...

Despite Iced Earth's main man Jon Schaffer's laudable attempt to create a sci-fi concept album of some depth and magnitude, 2007's 'Framing Armageddon (Something Wicked Part 1)' was, frankly, disappointing; the songs were generally weak and the dominance of the storyline over the compositions gave the album a wholly disjointed feel. Twelve months later though, 'The Crucible Of Man (Something Wicked Part 2)' is a whole different bunch of bananas. The concluding part of Schaffer's saga stands head and shoulders above its predecessor: this time around, every song is a sure-fire winner and rather than suffocating under a 24 tog duvet of a story, they propel the narrative with a dazzling display of riffing, soloing and fast-as-a-shark drumming.

The album also sees the return of Matt Barlow following the relatively brief stint front 'n' centre of Tim 'Ripper' Owens. Much as Owens is a great singer, the material seems more 'natural' with Barlow back behind the mikestand. Whether his return is akin to finding the missing piece to the jigsaw is anyone's guess, but this is a great album – no question – and one which showcases Iced Earth as you expect

them to sound. With so much to choose from it's hard to zero in on individual highlights, but the mid-CD trio of the hard-edged 'The Dimension Gauntlet', the melancholic 'I Walk Alone' and the Queensryche-tinged 'Harbinger Of Fate' pretty much has it all: this unholy trinity say more in twelve minutes or so than some bands CDs can manage in seventy.

'The Crucible Of Man (Something Wicked Part 2)' – file under 'E' for essential.



DIGNITY
'PROJECT DESTINY'
(Napalm Records)

Exciting classic melodic rock debut from Austrian five-piece...

Sitting pretty much fair 'n' square in the middle of the melodic rock field, Dignity's debut 'Project Destiny' clocks in at the lighter end of Napalm's roster alongside the likes of Fairyland and light years away from, say, the doom-dirges of Ahab! Formed by ex-Edenbridge drummer Roland Navratil and keyboard player Frank Pitters in 2006, the basis of Dignity was completed by the addition of guitarist Martin Mayr (who you may recall added acoustic guitar to Edenbridge's epic 'The Grand Design') and bassist John Boy Bastard (who probably wasn't given that name by his parents). It took about a year to land the right singer, but worth the wait it was, with Jake E coming on

board in October 2007 and finalising the vocal tracks in February 2008.

'Project Destiny' has roots deeply embedded in the Eighties' rock scene – it's quite telling that their cover of Chris de Burgh's 'Don't Pay The Ferryman' blends in with the other eight self-penned compositions – and even the solos sound like they could have been performed twenty years ago: listen to Mayr's classic work-out in 'Arrogance And Rapture' for evidence. But it's not a nostalgia trip; it's more of an homage to a time when writing catchy and, dare I say commercial, songs was not considered abhorrent, and Jonas Kjellgren's mix ensures that everything sounds bright and punchy and twenty-first century.

Consummate players, great songs: check out 'Inner Circle Sympathy' and the following cut 'The Edge Of The Blade' and see if they don't rock your world. On the strength of 'Project Destiny', Dignity's future should be assured.



EPHRAT
'NO ONE'S WORDS'
(InsideOut)

InsideOut celebrates its 300th CD release with some style...

Another Steve Wilson approved band, Ephrat are as progressive as the day is long. The Israeli quartet refuse to be

hurried, delivering just six slow-burning songs over the course of an hour with more changes of direction than the average taxi driver. The man behind the band is guitarist, keyboard player, flautist and programmer Omer Ephrat, aided and abetted by Lior Seker (vocals), Gili Rosenberg (bass) and Tomer Z (drums), and between them they have crafted a pretty-much perfect album.

There's a handful of things you might not expect – few bands choose to open their debut with a ten minute epic, for example, but 'The Show' just sweeps you along, slowly building and then passing away with a solo to die for – and guest vocalists make things a little more interesting. At Steve Wilson's suggestion, Petronella Nettermalm from Paatos was asked to sing on 'Haze' (the story goes that after he heard her voice, Omer Ephrat rattled off the song on the strength of what-might-be in less than five minutes), the result being a quirky, haunting ballad, albeit one with a sting in the tale. Later on Daniel Gildenlöw of legends Pain Of Salvation (and someone whom Omer Ephrat says, "Symbolizes the endless possibilities of the progressive genre to evolve") adds his vocals to 'The Sum Of Damage Done', a song which comes over all swagger and rock 'n' roll to start with before changing lanes and proudly displaying its progressive metal credentials like a peacock's tail. The shortest song on offer – 'Blocked' – is a light-and-dark instrumental piece with a powerful refrain and perhaps a slight nod to David Bowie's 'Hallo Spaceboy'; and the pièce de resistance is closer 'Real', a Beatles' style opening passage giving way to a frenetic riff and then a further fifteen minutes of progressive melodrama.

Topped off with a luscious mix by Steve Wilson, 'No One's Words' could be one of the prog metal talking points of 2008



**EVERGREY
'TORN'
(SPV)**

Crucial album for one of metal's most exciting bands...

"The album is about human relations in many ways, how we deal with certain issues, and how tiring, devastating and hopeless life sometimes feels, especially for people in a less fortunate position than most of us... I am merely realistic. I have been through some hard times in my life, and I think the stories people can relate to are always going to be stronger than writing about dungeons and dragons and stuff like that." So says vocalist/guitarist Tom Englund of Evergrey's latest studio offering. As dark and as brooding as the best of the band's back catalogue, 'Torn' is long overdue. The band's seventh studio album comes well over a year after its tentative release date of May 2007 and over two years after its vaguely experimental and less well received predecessor 'Monday Morning Apocalypse'. "When we record an album we want it to be the best album ever released," says Englund in relation to the delay between releases; "That's why we took our time to really write, record, and do all the parts necessary to make this thing kick your ass into the middle of next decade when you hear it. Without hesitation even for a second, I would say that this is by far the most epic, dark and heavy album we've ever recorded, and I will tell you that there is something for everyone on it – almost an hour of music

straight from the hearts and souls of the five of us." Flush with expectation, 'Torn' does indeed carry with it all the trademarks of a classic Evergrey album, and if you want proof, start things off with the middle order of 'In Confidence', 'Fail' and 'Numb', three of the most exciting songs the band have ever recorded; indeed, the album is worth buying for those three songs alone. Production duties have been moved back in-house once more with Englund and drummer Jonas Ekdahl sharing the task, re-positioning the dynamics after the less impressive sound of '...Apocalypse' and recalling the ambience of 'Recreation Day'. In addition, the album also introduces ex-Stratovarius bassist Jari Kainulainen to Evergrey's ranks (although I'm pretty sure that on the album itself the bass parts are played by Englund and guitarist Henrik Danhage). Elsewhere on the disc, 'Still Walk Alone' is bleak and unforgiving, and opener 'Broken Wings' kicks things off with a solid neck-wrenching riff and some of Englund's most plaintive vocals to date. This is Evergrey at their best, and it's good to hear them back on top form once more. Incidentally, as part of the deal with SPV, Evergrey's new label has the band's entire output at its disposal and as a result 'top quality re-issues' are being promised...



**KATRA
'BEAST WITHIN'
(Napalm Records)**

Sex! Sex! Sex! The number of the Beast...

Fronted by poster-perfect front-woman Katra Solopuro, Finnish act Katra came together in the summer of 2006 and released their self-titled debut the following February (at the same time, the singer was in the running to represent Finland at the 2007 Eurovision Song Contest, apparently). With a band featuring longtime friends and ex-Nocturn members Kristian Kangasniemi (guitars) and Johannes Tolonen (bass) together with keyboard player Jani Wilund and drummer Jaakko Järvensivu, some solid touring in their homeland brought Katra to the attention of Napalm, the upshot being a contract and 'Beast Within'.

The album is tagged as gothic metal (as opposed to the misery and bleakness of goth metal) but it's actually pretty poppy in places and sits at the more commercial end of the symphonic metal spectrum, catchy and easily accessible, and all the better for it. Katra herself possesses a great voice and wide range which is used to its full effect across the album's twelve tracks, and when the band get to cut loose – as in the heavy semi-industrial riff to 'Fade To Gray', the frenetic riffing of 'Swear' with its cracking guitar solo, or the foot-stomping opening of 'Storm Rider' – they really go for it; Kangasniemi in particular is a stunning player and a great asset to the band. Elsewhere, the material, although varied in approach, does tend to be more, well, pleasant, in a radio/chart friendly sort of way. Don't get me wrong, 'Beast Within' is a very credible release, but I would certainly be interested in hearing the material live, with some of the production gloss stripped away and the heavier elements brought to the fore



**MOTÖRHEAD
'MOTÖRIZER' (SPV)**

Back 'n' bad once more...

Look, this is Motörhead. They've been doing this for thirty-plus years and you know exactly what to expect when you press play. 'Motörizer' is an exciting addition to the Motörhead catalogue, opening with a heads-down slice of Motörhead rock 'n' roll with 'Runaround Man' and wrapping things up 39 minutes later with the driving, relentless riffing of 'The Thousand Names Of God'. Aside perhaps from the rather disposable 'Rock Out', there's nothing to fault here – every track sparkles in its own Motör-way, although in the middle order a special nod goes to the bluesy 'One Short Life' which takes the pace down between the aforementioned 'Rock Out' and the powerhouse 'Buried Alive'; and later on the storming middle-eight of 'Back On The Chain' and the break in 'Heroes' single them both out for repeated plays. Despite the fact that Cameron Webb is once again in the producer's chair, the album puts me more in mind of the 'Sacrifice'/'Snake Bite Love' era, which is no bad thing in itself, although sonically it packs a twenty-first century punch. Tearing through eleven songs in 39 minutes means there's no time for Messrs Kilminster, Campbell and Dee to mess around, and the result is all meat and no stuffing. "We are Motörhead and we will kick your ass"? Dead right.

Released on 1st September

2008, the album is available as a limited edition digipack and on good old fashioned vinyl as well.



**SINNER
'CRASH & BURN'
(AFM Records)**

Sin after sin, indeed...

Opening with a siren and the relentless title track and ending with the anthemic 'Like A Rock', 'Sin After Sin' is a masterclass in good ol' fashioned heavy metal. And so it should be – after twenty-five years in the fray, Mat Sinner has been doing this a long time now and knows a thing or two about how to craft an album as clever as Einstein and as attractive as a supermodel. Whether the return of long-time guitarist Henry Wolter has upped the stakes a bit I don't know, but the songs are tight and exciting and the Sinner/Wolter production is loud 'n' proud, and strong enough to punch holes in walls.

Fairly obviously, the album's roots as ever lie in the Eighties' German metal scene, but aside from the obvious (and very welcomed) heads down Teutonic workouts that Accept and Scorpions trademarked so well, 'Crash & Burn' throws up a diverse range of material. 'Unbreakable' wears its AC/DC homage on its sleeve, 'Revolution' comes on with the Astbury attitude of The Cult, and 'Heart Of Darkness' flings up some Celtic Thin Lizzy influences from the word go. (Ironically, the runts of the litter – 'Little Head' and 'Connection' – are also from the Phil Lynott song-book, the first standing a

little too close to 'Emerald' for comfort, and the latter sounding more like one of Lizzy's throwaway moments). But why dwell on the minor blips? Check out 'Break The Silence' – I'm a sucker for that solo! – and the kick-ass whiskey-dripping swagger of 'The Dog'.

With the current line-up completed by guitarist Christof Leim and drummer Klaus Sperling, the biog notes that this is the "strongest possible line-up" and I'm not going to argue with that. There's so much good in this album it should be canonised. St Sinner... Now there's a thought!



**SISTER SIN
'SWITCHBLADE SERENADES'
(Metal Heaven)**

The more things change, the more they stay the same...

"A new musical genre is about to hit the masses," runs the biog. "Introducing 'Street Metal', and its new irrepressible ambassadors Sister Sin." Er, well, no; this is not quite 'new'... This is metal as it was played in the Eighties, before the bubble burst. It's Skid Row, Black 'N' Blue, Trouble Tribe, Spread Eagle (who, of course, had a catchy MTV hit called 'Switchblade Serenade')... Actually, it's more Hellion, Smashed Gladys or Black Lace, because the twist in the tale here is that the Gothenburg quartet is fronted by the raven-haired, leather-clad Liv.

But don't get me wrong. Yes, 'Switchblade Serenades' is a

bit of a time machine – the scratchy vinyl intro, a nod to the past, gives the game away – but it's a glorious re-awakening of a legacy; yes, it's retro, but it revels in the fact. Make no mistake; this is a great album. The songs are catchy, the band is really together, and the whole thing oozes attitude with a capital A. Despite the fact that Liv, along with guitarist Jimmy, bassist Chris and drummer Dave probably weren't even walking when the American metal scene was in full swing (and that they wouldn't know Anne Boleyn, Sally Cato or Marianne Scandifio if any of the singers poked them in the eye), on 'Switchblade Serenades' what Sister Sin have done is catch the soul and sound of the Eighties and throw in a Twenty-First Century twist. As a result, the eleven songs hit the spot beautifully with chest-beating choruses, razor sharp riffs and red hot licks. It's metal the way it's meant to be played, it's fun through and through and it rocks! It is impossible to listen to 'Make My Day', 'All Systems Go!' or opener 'Beat the Streets' without wishing you were twenty-two years old and standing in front of a backline of screaming Marshalls.

This is an album you can play over and over again without tiring of it, and I can't wait to hear how they follow it up. In the meantime, crank it up and enjoy!



**TAROT
'LIVE – UNDEAD INDEED'
(Nuclear Blast)
(CD/DVD package)**

Live after death, undoubtedly...

Recorded live in August 2007, 'Live – Undead Indeed' is a double-packed audio/video package featuring the first live offering of the band originally put together under the name Purgatory by brothers Marco (bass/vocals) and Zachary (guitars) Hietala in the early Eighties. Since then Tarot have had an on-off career, with Marco playing in a number of other acts and of course joining Nightwish in 2002, which no doubt gave them a welcomed kick up the popularity stakes although at the same time reduced their own time for writing and playing.

I can't comment on the visuals, but the CD side of the collection is an exhilarating live album brimming with energy and thrills a-plenty to keep things on the boil. In terms of style, Tarot come across as a genetic splice between a pretty traditional rock act (which is no bad thing in itself and not particularly unexpected, given the influences the musicians list on the band's website) and a cutting edge metal band. Because of this, 'Live – Undead Indeed' is an album which should appeal to a broad cross-section of music lovers – traditionalists, metal-heads and Nightwish fanatics alike. As a package it's also an excellent introduction to the band for the uninitiated, featuring as it does an exciting clutch of material played with pride and passion, from the opening of the title track of last year's 'Crows Fly Black' album to the dying notes of the riffastic stormer 'I Rule'. The dual vocals of Marco Hietala and Tommi 'Tupla' Salmela work extremely well together in a live setting, drummer Pecu Cinari is a powerhouse of a player and certainly the band's secret weapon, and keyboard player Janne Tolsa adds the fills 'n' spills with a degree of panache. Zachary Hietala is no slouch either, and he deserves more recognition as a guitarist than he currently receives.

If Marco Hietala ever gets tired of the day job in

Nightwish, there's plenty of evidence here that Tarot have the potential to make the leap from interesting side-project to full-time band in their own right.



**XANDRIA
'NOW AND FOREVER'
(Drakkar)**

The end of an era, as the guys in Nightwish once said...

A timely offering marking the departure of singer Lisa Middelhauve, 'Now And Forever' wraps up the best of Xandria's first four albums and closes the band's first chapter.

The Metal Female Voices German five-piece opened their account in 2003 with 'Kill The Sun' and this compilation splits fairly evenly, with five cuts apiece from 2004's 'Ravenheart' and 2005's 'India', four from latest offering 'Salomé - The Seventh Veil' and three from that debut. And despite the years between the first and last recordings, the material hangs together extremely well and could easily be an album in its own right rather than a career retrospective.

If you're new to the band, this is a good place to start, displaying pretty much all the facets of the band on one disc, from the mystic rhythms of 'India' and the drama of 'Some Like It Cold' to the more stripped down musicianship Lisa's use of death metal barks during 'Firestorm'. There are also three bonus tracks, but nothing for fans to get too excited about. 'Drown In Me' appeared on the 'Eversleeping' EP, and 'Lullaby' on the limited edition version of the third album 'India', which

just leaves the unreleased 'Salomé...' out-take 'One Word'. The big bonus is the DVD, which features - prepare to be surprised! - interesting interviews with all band members, telling between them the history of the band, the promos for 'Ravenheart', 'Eversleeping' and 'Save My Life' and eight live cuts from the Summer Breeze Festival in Germany in August 2007. The downside is that it's all jumbled up so you can't just cut to the live material, which is where the bulk of the interest lies, but it does make a good souvenir of the band's first phase.

**IN THE HEAT OF THE NIGHT
Diamond Head/Witchfynde/
Icon**

**Camden Dingwalls, London,
13th August 2008**

Maybe it's the credit crisis, maybe it's just Wednesday night in London, but Icon came on to about thirty people. They call themselves "a working man's metal band" and hammer out riffs not dissimilar to what their NWOBHM forebears were doing almost thirty years ago with an integrity and honesty that belies their relative youth. With four EPs already on the streets, Mark Sagar (vocals), Scott Knowles (guitar), Jason Shuttleworth (bass) and James Henderson (drums) are about to unleash their debut album 'Blindside' which should be worth investigating. Check out www.myspace.com/iconrock

I've never seen a bad Witchfynde gig, but I've never seen one without a technical hitch either ("the curse of Witchfynde", the band call it), although thankfully this time round the problem (one of Montalo's pedals cutting out the guitar) was swiftly rectified. With just fifty minutes of stage time, the band elected to drop in just one song from the year's 'Play It To Death' album, the mesmerising 'Holy Ground', and left the rest of the set list to pretty much write itself. 'Leavin' Nadir' might creak 'n' groan a bit these days, but

set amidst the choppy riff of 'Moon Magic', the crushing opening of 'Stagefright', the street-tough 'Stab In The Back' or majestic opener 'Ready To Roll', what's to complain about? The backbone of bassist Pete Surgey and drummer Gra Scoresby was rock solid, Montalo remains to this day one of the most underrated guitarists of all time, and, front 'n' centre, vocalist Harry Harrison both delivered the goods and engaged good-humouredly with the crowd, at one point remarking on the small Camden stage and adding that it was the first time the band had played on a pallet! Things of course inevitably drew to a close with 'Give 'Em Hell', almost thirty years old and still kicking ass.

Set: 'Ready To Roll', 'Holy Ground', 'Stagefright', 'Moon Magic', 'Getting Heavy'/'Telestai', 'Cloak And Dagger', 'Leavin' Nadir', 'Stab In The Back', 'Give 'Em Hell'

It's been three years since Diamond Head came back out fighting with 'All Will Be Revealed' and the band are now as tight as ever they were before. Nick Tart literally commands centre stage, despite battling a heavy cold on the night, Karl Wilcox thrashes his kit to within an inch of its life, stage left are bassist Eddie Moohan and guitarist Mills, and stage right is Brian Tatler, founder member and the guy behind some of the greatest metal licks in history.

By the time Diamond Head came on, the crowd had grown to around eighty-hundred. The band added a new sparkle to things by running the James Bond theme 'Diamonds Are Forever' as the intro tape and then setting the place alight with the right-left jab of 'Wild On The Streets' and 'The Prince'. With a healthy back catalogue to draw on, the set was an interesting mix of old and new, and songs like 'Victim' and 'Mine All Mine' easily hold their own alongside the older, more revered material. The only real

difference song-wise between Diamond Head then and Diamond Head now is that the more recent material is shorter and snappier; the older grandiose compositions like 'To The Devil is Due' and 'In The Heat Of The Night' have served the band well, and have certainly stood the test of time; it would be interesting to see Diamond Head 2008 creating another such epic.

Before the show Tatler had mentioned that songs like 'Call Me' and 'Play It Loud' were being re-introduced to the live show, and come encore time there they were, rubbing shoulders with a cover of Little Willie John's 'Fever' and 'Sweet An' Innocent' B-side 'Streets Of Gold'.

Great band, great show, terribly small audience. That's the trouble with the UK these days. The bands are here, but no-one can be bothered to actually go out and see them.

Set: 'Wild On The Streets', 'The Prince', 'This Planet & Me', 'Lightning To The Nations', 'Victim', 'To The Devil His Due', 'In the Heat Of The Night', 'Skin On Skin', 'Give It To Me', 'It's Electric', 'Mine All Mine', 'Helpless', 'Am I Evil' //
'Call Me', 'Play It Loud', 'Fever', 'Streets Of Gold'