

# JOHN TUCKER ONLINE - REVIEWS NOVEMBER 2008

## PROGPOWER

JC Sjiwa, Baarlo, The Netherlands, 3rd October – 5th October 2008

As hard to believe as it is, 2008 saw the tenth annual ProgPower festival in Baarlo, the gig that has given rise to sister festivals in America and Denmark as well as the ill-fated UK shows. To celebrate its birthday, the traditional Friday night pre-show party was moved into the main hall and incorporated into the festival itself, which meant that



**DIVISION BY ZERO** had the honour of kicking things off. The perfect openers, the Polish five-piece drew from their album 'Tyranny Of Therapy' a balanced set of up-tempo progressive metal. Vocalist Slawek Wierny apologised for his lack of proficiency in English, and later in the set, having been blown away by the crowd's response, said, "Wow, what can I say? Well, not much in English!" The audience loved them, and they should have a great future.

Norway's **ATROX** I didn't really get, although their semi-industrial 'schizo metal' groove was a great hit with the crowd. A lot heavier than their Polish predecessors, they played a lot on the good-natured humour and charm of singer and one-armed Jack Black look-alike Rune Folgerø. I just couldn't get into them at all, but that's probably just me. "The Dark Side of Europe" was how Freedom Call's

Chris Bay referred to Norway when they played at ProgPower UK, which might account for it... That said, it was fellow Nor-



wegians **PAGAN'S MIND** who wrapped up the first night and as befits their headliner status pulled off the set of their lives. With two hours to play with, the band could weave in and out of their back catalogue and drop in a few never-before played songs while still highlighting their excellent most recent album 'God's Equation'. Pagan's Mind are always a joy to watch – they genuinely look as if they're having fun on stage, and Nils K Rue makes even the most intricate solo look oh-so-easy. Despite the strength of their material, the highlight for me was their storming cover of David Bowie's 'Hallo Spaceboy' – but then, if you can't get with the beat on that song, then I suggest you check you've still got a pulse. Saturday afternoon, and the first full day was opened with a Dutch double-whammy. **CILICE** were hard and angry, with frontman Daniël de Jongh barking and growling and leading the band through a ferocious onslaught on the senses. Interestingly, in a weekend where five- and six-string basses were the norm, Cilice are just two guitars, vocals and drums: not a bass player to be seen...

In contrast to the aggression of Cilice, the members of



**SUN CAGED** have progressive metal oozing through their veins, and offered a diverse set with odd ambient and jazz fusion moments in amongst their prog metal performance. As the plan was to recreate their 1999 set (and things were dif-



ferent back then), **WOLVERINE** only had a forty-five minute slot to start with. But with things over-running they were forced to drop one song. And then vocalist Stefan Zell pointed out that the second song they played in 1999, 'Miles Away', had never been recorded and although they'd videoed the show, there was no audio track: as a result, no-one could actually remember it, and it had been consigned to the mists of time. Notwithstanding all of that, Wolverine were magnificent, and although Stefan told me later that he felt it was under-rehearsed and rushed, from

where I stood they were simply majestic.

As usual, after the first three bands came an hour's refreshment break and then things recommenced with **ALARUM**. The Australians' not-overly-imaginative brand of metal did little for me, and it was up to **ZERO HOUR** to rescue things. To misquote Shakespeare, some bands are born great, some bands achieve greatness and some bands have greatness thrust upon them. Take your pick – Zero Hour are all three. Their current album 'Dark Deceiver' lies at the darkest, heaviest extreme of the progressive metal genre, and the American quartet powered through a set that was technical enough to make your jaw drop in amazement and at times brutal enough to make your ears bleed. With front and centre dominated by vocalist Chris Salinas, stage left and right hosting the Tipton twins (guitarist Jasun and bassist Troy respectively) and unassuming drummer Mike Guy pounding out the beats at the back, Zero Hour set Baarlo alight. Already veterans of the ProgPower scene, this is a band with the songs, the skills and the determination to be huge. Catch them whenever and wherever you can.

Fellow Americans **CYNIC** rounded the day off. Back in the early Nineties, their album 'Focus' was highly regarded as a technical metal masterpiece, and after a split they're back in business once more with a new album 'Traced In Air' ready to roll. Tiredness was kicking in by this point, so I didn't see their set through to the end, but their brand of proto-technical metal was well-received and their upcoming European tour with Opeth should win them a new following.

**21 EYES OF RUBY** kicked off the third and final day. Young, Dutch and full of enthusiasm, the three-piece failed to create much of a spark, and although they were unquestionably talented, their lack of experience

showed; obvious nervousness, too much downtime between songs, too much fiddling with equipment... Nice touch though, having the drummer's kit side-on to the crowd, reminiscent of Strypker all those years ago.



So it was up to **PATHOSRAY** to really kick-start Sunday's proceedings. Playing only their second gig outside of Italy – they'd just returned from ProgPower USA the previous weekend – the five Italians are the real deal, and they concentrated on showing what they're made of. Their self-titled debut album is an amazing melting pot of melody, technical precision and power, and they brought this and much more to the Baarlo stage. Great band: well worth checking out at every opportunity.

Unfortunately, Tunisian band Myrath pulled out at the last minute, and after a bit of shuffling of the running order

**THE AURORA PROJECT** were drafted in to fill the vacant slot. "Five days ago we had an email from Rene..." they announced as they took to the stage, thanking organiser Rene Janssen for bringing them back to the festival. They were terrible. Maybe it was a lack of rehearsal, but by delivering the worst excesses of prog metal seemingly held together solely by guitarist Remco van den Berg, the band completely destroyed the energy built up by Pathosray, sending a great number of people out in search of an early evening meal.

**SUSPYRE** opened the final part of the final day. The Americans were technically competent, and

although they had a pretty full venue to play to, their material didn't have enough light and shade to my mind. It was **WOLVERINE** who pulled things back on track; their second performance of the festival featured a more contemporary set, and drew from all four albums rather than just their earliest days. I'd loved them the day before, and second time around they were even better, being able to showcase the diversity of their material. They looked and sounded great, and we can all just be thankful that they didn't split up as had looked likely earlier in the year.

Band t-shirts are a great indicator of popularity, and so it was obvious that the majority of people had come to see



**THRESHOLD**, the UK's best-kept secret and the band that headlined the first ProgPower festival back in 1999. There is no such thing as a bad Threshold performance, just degrees of passion and power. Last year's line-up changes (bringing back vocalist Damian Wilson and introducing Soliloquy guitarist Pete Morten) and 'Dead Reckoning' album appear to have imbued the band with a greater sense of their own intensity and they really are a phenomenal band both to listen and to watch, working hard to cover every inch of stage. And drummer Johanne James played with a dislocated shoulder – now that's dedication!