

## JOHN TUCKER ONLINE - REVIEWS JANUARY 2009



Although it looks like the barometer of fashion might be swinging away from **SAXON** once more ('they're shit' noted Kerrang! in a review of the November 2008 tour with Motörhead), the band's material goes from strength to strength. Back in 1980, they released 'Wheels Of Steel' and 'Strong Arm Of The Law' back to back and both were deemed worthy of top honours in Sounds music paper. With 'Into The Labyrinth' (SPV) they've topped that, following 'Lionheart' and 'The Inner Sanctum' with a third out-and-out cracker. It's just a shame really that they chose to showcase the two weakest cuts, the single 'Live To Rock' and 'Hellcat', on the tour as they're not that representative of what 'Into The Labyrinth' is all about. Opener 'Battalions Of Steel', 'Crime Of Passion' or 'Come Rock Of Ages' would have been much better examples of both the album and where Saxon are heading these days. The tour with Motörhead did Saxon many more favours than a cheap-shot TV programme, and a full UK tour in May on the back of these recent dates should hopefully give their profile over here a major – and much deserved – hike.

The head may be all about crafting pop songs but for Jem Godfrey the heart lies in **FROST**, a progressive rock/metal band not dissimilar in some respects to Jon Crosby's VAST of the late Nineties. Having been responsible for writing for and/or

producing a who's who of pop glitterati including Atomic Kitten, Blue and Shayne Warne



(for which he received an Ivor Novello Award, trivia fans), Godfrey formed Frost in 2004 to get back to his first love and opened the band's account with 'Milliontown'. 'Experiments In Mass Appeal' (Inside/Out) is the band's second album, and again sees him joined by guitarist John Mitchell, bassist John Jowitt and drummer Andy Edwards, with this time around the addition of vocalist and guitarist Declan Burke to counter the criticism of his own vocals on the first album. 'Experiments In Mass Appeal' veers from more traditional progressive rock fare to more heavier progressive metal workouts (which is why I'm hedging my bets on how to describe it!), best exemplified by 'Dear Dead Days' whose quirky opening gives way to a monster of a song. Elsewhere, 'Toys' is a nod to Godfrey's more poppy side.



'The Seer' (Spinefarm/Universal) is **TARJA**'s follow up to her rather disappointing debut album 'My Winter Storm'. It's marketed

as an EP, presumably because it's a collection of alternative takes, remixes and live cuts as it still clocks in at a respectable 49 minutes long. The title cut, the UK bonus track on 'My Winter Storm', features a duet with the seemingly ubiquitous Doro Pesch and is a likeable soft rock workout, very pleasant, very hummable, but it's elsewhere that this EP clocks up the brownie points. The two versions of 'Lost Northern Star' – a pseudo-industrial remix by Peter Tägtgren and the 'ambience sub low mix' by Mel Wesson – and the alternative version of 'Die Alive' are worth the price of the EP alone, and the four live cuts ('Damned And Divine', 'You Would Have Loved This', 'Our Great Divide' and 'Ciaran's Well') show what Ms Turunen can do when she puts her mind to it



'When Time Fades...' (Sensory Records) is the third release from New Jersey's **SUSPYRE**. Like its predecessors, the album features a clever blend of music from across the progressive metal spectrum, and given the calibre of the musicianship it's little surprise that a head-down workout like 'Evolutions' can easily rub shoulders with the neo-Seventies prog rock of 'Sirens' (with sax solo from guitarist Gregg Rossetti). Singling out individuals is in one way unfair to the rest of this talented young band, although Clay Barton's vocals are a treat throughout, and his performance at ProgPower Europe in October shows that he can pull it

off live as well with little effort and great panache. Opener 'Possession/The Negative' tries too hard to be Dream Theater, but get past that one and the band strut their own stuff with passion. The album has a really tight, hard-hitting production as befits the power of the material and is a marvel to listen to. The only reservation is that at over 75 minutes – which I appreciate is good value for money – 'When Time Fades...' is a very heavy dose of metal to take in one go, and as someone who only ever used to listen to one side of vinyl before changing the record, I found it easier to digest in bite-sized chunks.



Almost exactly two years ago after 'Nine Destinies And A Downfall' and the ensuing disastrous attempts to promote it, **SIRENIA** are back with another attempt at repositioning themselves into the mainstream of the Metal Female Voices genre. 'The 13th Floor' (Nuclear Blast) sees the introduction of new blood with singer and Spanish 'X Factor' contestant Ailyn and guitarist Michael S Kruminis (who has worked with drummer Jonathon A Perez in an early incarnation of Trail Of Tears) joining guitarist/mainman Morten Veland and Perez. The material on the band's fourth full length album doesn't differ that greatly from 'Nine Destinies...' and it did cross my mind that the band might be trying to erase the past couple of years and almost start afresh. Alongside kick-ass opener 'The Path To Decay', the songs that do it for me are 'The Lucid Door' and 'Winterborn 77', the former being riff-driven yet still as catchy as they come,

and the latter being a great showcase for Ailyn's vocals. A mention also goes to the haunting closer 'Sirens Of The Seven Seas', sung pretty much wholly by Jan Kenneth Barkved and augmented by a haunting violin solo courtesy of Stephanie Valentin, and 'The Mind Maelstrom' which veers quite heavily into Within Temptation territory (although is a heavy little beast when it gets going). Hopefully, this time around the band will get their just rewards and not screw it up again...

'Wolves & Witches' (AFM Records) is the fourth album from **MAGICA**, the Romanian band fronted by Ana Mladinovici and their second for their current label following on from last year's critically-acclaimed 'Hereafter'. For those of you with an aversion to the Metal Female Voices scene, it's worth pointing out that this is pretty much a power metal album with an operatic singer; having only recently seen Power Quest (and with their songs still in the mental i-pod), Steve Wil-



liams' band would be a pretty good point of reference. For evidence, check out the pacy opener 'Don't Wanna Kill' or later cut 'Chitaroptera' where Mladinovici pops off to, I don't know, go shopping for shoes or something, and the boys deliver a tasty heads-down work-out. There's nothing wrong with 'Wolves & Witches' – well, one gripe aside – but to my mind it doesn't have the impact of its predecessor and that is a great shame. Magica have made great strides since their 'The Scroll Of Stone' debut album in 2003, and

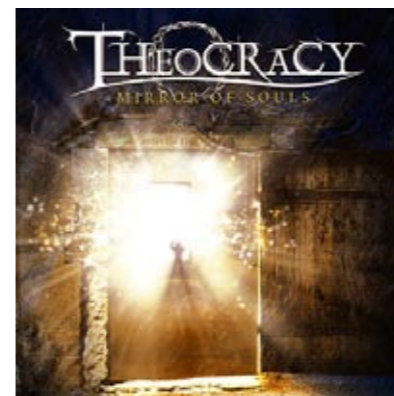
although their future still looks pretty rosy this album adds little significant to their arsenal. The gripe, by the way, is that the drum tracks appears to have been produced and/or mixed by someone with their head in a bucket which has bequeathed to the drums and cymbals a dull resonance at times, leaving a couple of songs with the ringing tones of Cristi Barla seemingly building a shed in the recording studio's garden.



Taking their name from the Parisian cemetery Père Lachaise where you can wander around the graves of, amongst others, Oscar Wilde, Edith Piaf and Jim Morrison, **LACHAISE** are a young Italian five-piece fronted by Annalisa 'Anya' Monticelli, a singer with a fantastic voice and a great deal of potential. As you might expect with such a name, the band sit fairly 'n' squarely in the goth metal genre, and although what they do isn't breaking any new ground – something they admit themselves in their biog – what they do, they do extremely well. There's a lot of good stuff on offer on 'Silent Cries For Help' (MP & Records), their debut album. 'Maybe' is a real cracker: its gentle opening gives way to a catchy chorus with a plaintive vocal and swirling keyboards, and a middle eight Paradise Lost would be proud of, making it a welcome addition to any list of top Metal Female Vocals songs. A little further into the album, 'Deep Silent Melancholy' does what it says on the tin, kicking off as a gloomfest before gearing up into Within Temptation territory and allowing Valentina 'The Gun' Degan to solo to his

heart's content; and the album plays out (bonus track notwithstanding) with the epic 'It's Just A Dream'.

Although they revel in producing what comes across as pure European power metal, the



three-piece **THEOCRACY** surprisingly come from Atlanta, Georgia. 'Mirror Of Souls' (Uterium Records) is their second album; the band's 2003 self-titled debut was recorded by vocalist/guitarist Matt Smith as a one-man band, although shortly afterwards he recruited guitarist Jonathon Hinds and drummer Shawn Benson, and it's these three individuals who are responsible for this belated follow-up. As a band Theocracy almost literally burn; power metal done badly can be painful to listen to, but in the hands of guys like this it can scorch the paint off a door at sixty paces. Check out opener 'A Tower Of Ashes' and if you don't crack a smile and start tapping your foot as things quicken, check you've got a pulse! 'Mirror Of Souls' is dominated by the 22½ minute title track, album closer and veritable feast of riffs and time changes which twists and turns without ever giving your attention time to wander (no mean feat in itself). If pressed to chose a personal favourite though I'd go for 'Laying The Demon To Rest', where the guys reign things back a bit, take the foot off the gas and trade speed for out-and-out power, or 'Martyr' with its increasingly intricate vocal lines, unexpected Spanish guitar break, and twin guitar ploy. And incidentally, don't be put off by the white metal tag around Theocracy: although the

band's song titles and even their name ("form of government by God") clearly indicate a Christian persuasion, and the power ballad 'Bethlehem' in particular is a pretty overt statement of intent, this is first and foremost a true power metal album, and possibly the best one released this year. Every home should have one, as the old slogan used to read.



A belated mention must go to **FLOWING TEARS'** eighth release 'Thy Kingdom Gone' (Ascendance Records). Another striking cover gives rise to another fantastic body of work, and if the release of 'Invanity – Live In Berlin' was to give the band time to take stock, it's paid off big time. 'Thy Kingdom Gone' is a cleverly constructed album with a great depth and beauty – check out 'Miss Fortune' or the opener 'Orchidfire' for further evidence. Possibly the strongest cut on offer is the title track, where Helen Vogt shares the vocals with Vorph of Samael, the band who inspired Helen to adopt a death metal approach to some of FT's own material in the first place. "The grunts 'developed' on our tour with Samael," she told me after the band's performance at Metal Female Voices Festival in 2007. "When we were in Poland, there was a concert with only 'die-hard death metal fans' in the audience who didn't want to see any band with female vocals. So I started grunting the choruses, just to get a reaction, and it worked perfectly. In the course of this tour, we discovered that this suited certain parts of our songs, and that's why I always use these grunts for live shows. And the reactions I get are great!" The other song that floats my boat

is 'Souls Of The Neon Reign' – as evocative a song as you are likely to hear.

There's an old story about Yehudi Menuhin: one day someone admired his playing and said, "I'd give my life to be able to play as well as you," to which the violinist replied, "I did." I wouldn't have thought that many people who saw **DORO** Pesch, the diminutive singer pictured on the first Warlock



album, would have expected her to be belting 'em out over a quarter of a century later but Doro, like Biff Byford and a handful of others, has pretty much given her life to metal. Saw her in half and the words 'heavy metal' must run through her like a stick of Brighton rock. So it's no surprise that 'Fear No Evil' (AFM Records) is an honest, gutsy, full-blown metal offering, with a delicate balance of over-the-top workouts, chest-beating anthems and beautifully crafted ballads. Pick of the bunch for me are 'Running From The Devil' for the superb guitar work, and the two tear-jerkers 'Herzblut' and 'Walking With The Angels' which features a return favour from Tarja Turunen. ('Herzblut', by the way, was the follow-up single to 'Celebrate' and features a number of versions of the title cut, sung in a bewildering array of different languages.) This is metal as it's meant to be played – forceful from the head and emotional from the heart – and there is nothing, nothing, to dislike about this album at all. This year is only two weeks old and already we're talking about a potential contender for album of the year. Due out on 2nd February, alongside the

standard CD 'Fear No Evil' will be issued as a digipack, a special edition fan box and a vinyl picture disc, so it looks like it could be an expensive month for some of us!