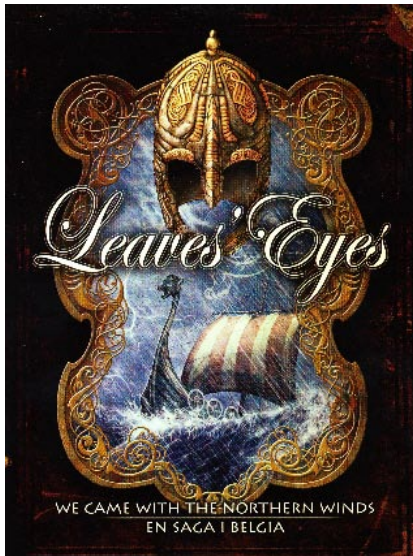


JOHN TUCKER ONLINE – MARCH 2009 (NAPALM SPECIAL)



The guys at Napalm Records have not been slacking since Old Father Time banished the Old Year and summoned the New. Starting off with **Leaves' Eyes**, 'We Came With The Northern Winds'/'En Saga I Belgia' is a sumptuous two DVD, two CD package, centred around the band's headline gig at the Metal Female Voices Festival in October 2007 (the CDs being a full audio version of the gig). The DVD side of the package is the proverbial game of two halves. Bizarrely – the Anvil effect, perhaps? – much of the



emphasis on the release has been placed on the documentary 'We Came With The Northern Winds'; so disc one is sixteen bite-sized chapters on the history of Leaves' Eyes, with some stilted new interview footage, a tangent about fjords, odd snippets of the band live here and there and loads of home movie

footage shot in various locations across the globe, as headings like 'Across European Borders', 'Mexican Tales' and 'Going Down Under' ably imply. Unfortunately, the UK doesn't get much of a look in; still, if you're going to wax lyrical about places you've been to on tour, Sydney is going to spring to mind much more readily than Dudley. And you get to see houses; loads of houses. Liv's mum and dad, grandparents and sister Carmen [Midnattsol] put in an appearance too. To be honest though, this is just the stuff that normally gets classed as bonus footage, and at 155 minutes it is a bit of a marathon slog – even for obsessives like me! – to wade through. Having interviewed the band a few times and worked with them at ProgPower UK I can save you two-and-a-half hours and summarise it like this:



Liv Kristine, Alexander Krull, Thorsten Bauer and Matthias Röderer (and previous members Chris Lukhaup and Moritz Neuner who don't feature in the interviews, having both left in the months after the Metal Female Voices Festival) are really nice people; in addition, they've worked hard, played everywhere and anywhere they can, and deserve all the success they've achieved thus far.

Extras on the disc include a photo gallery and seven videoclips – the one medium that really hasn't served the band well so far. There's the three which you must have seen unless you've spent the Twenty-First Century

so far living in a cave – 'Elegy' (nice idea until the leaves on the tree under which Liv is pinning reveal that they have eyes, a really poor idea that not only spoils the clip but furthers my belief that 90% of all music video directors are raving lunatics); 'Into Your Light' (great song but a completely inappropriate video, and one which furthers my belief etc etc); and 'Legend Land', one of those compilations of brief snippets of live film and holiday video glued together which looks like what it is: cheap and cheerful (and rather pointless). 'Farewell Proud Men (From Mexico To Russia)', 'New Found Land' and 'The Crossing – America 2006 AD' follow the same format as 'Legend Land': a lot of the footage you'll recognise from the main documentary, although it was a bit of a personal plus to see the Centaur

at Cheltenham get a look in in 'New Found Land' when the band performed at ProgPower UK in 2007 (God, do I really look that fat?). The jewel though is 'The Thorn', a live cut from the 'Masters Of Rock' festival which shows the band going through its paces on a festival stage; the irony here is that the second DVD in the package is a full live show, of course, but this is the band playing live without props or production, and captures the excitement of Leaves' Eyes onstage.

Which brings us neatly to the second DVD: 'En Saga I Belgia' was shot at the fifth annual Metal Female

Voices Fest in October 2007. With what's normally two side-by-side stages knocked into one, and the resulting cavernous space dominated by the replica Viking longship in the background, this was going to be a spectacle in every sense of the word and the DVD captures what was a really memorable show – although to be fair on the night it wasn't a great gig.

The contradiction arises from the fact that, because it was being filmed, because this was going to be the set piece of the tour, everything had to be perfect; spontaneity was sacrificed to stage management and as a result everything was probably over-rehearsed. This was A Production, capital 'a', capital 'p' and the normal live show came second to the fact that the band were making a film and playing to the cameras. So, for example, the opener 'Farewell Proud Men' with the band standing as, uh, proud as Liv's ancestors aboard the replica longship looks stunning on DVD, but when you see the size of the stage and how far back the longship set piece was, you realise that it was so far from the crowd that a lot of atmosphere was lost. Or 'Mourning Tree': its extended instrumental opening and onstage cellist was



just a device for frock change #1 and was actually completely dull on the night, which is why the DVD lingers more on the back projection of a forest than the dreary proceedings (or lack of them) on the stage itself.

And, let's be honest: do dress changes throughout the set actually add anything meaningful to the performance?

But whereas on the night it was all a bit regimented, every morsel of that stage management has paid off to make 'En Saga I Belgia' a true spectacle. Capturing a real greatest hits slice of Leaves' Eyes live, it is a beautifully shot and carefully edited overview of what happened on the night, and as a souvenir of that line-up and what they'd achieved through pure self-belief and self-determination it's impossible to fault. 'Oceans' Way', 'The Thorn', 'Solemn Sea', 'Leaves' Eyes'... Every song's a sure fire winner, although 'For Amelie' (introduced by Liv as "one of my favourite songs"), 'Temptation' and 'Into Your Light' are my three favourite performances on the DVD. And even though you know they'll round things off in spectacular style with 'Elegy', it's still exciting when it comes to it.

Alex covers the whole stage endless times, shouting, growling, exhorting the crowd to cheer/shout/clap; Thorsten Bauer and Matthias Röderer get a chance to show what great guitarists they actually are, as

so often on CD their contributions are taken more holistically as part of the sound than individually as virtuosos; Chris Lukhaup shows that he is a bassist of extraordinary flair; and although being so far back

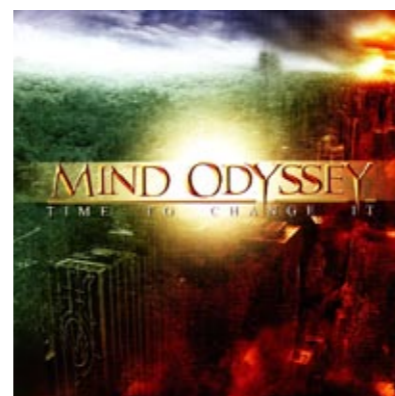
perched aboard the ship it's a bit hard to see what drummer Moritz Neuner is up to it's he who thunders the songs along. And in the middle of all this is Liv Kristine, seemingly petite and delicate, whose unique and beautiful voice is the soul of Leaves' Eyes. And if that's not enough, check out the pyro!

On the CD side of things, two crackers head the way so far – **Crimfall's** 'As The Path Unfolds...' and Mind Odyssey's 'Time To Change it'. Crimfall is



the brainchild of guitarist Jakke Viitala, and, one demo aside, 'As The Path Unfolds...' is the band's debut, a rollercoaster of an album which calls to mind labelmates and fellow Finns Battlelore, with the dual male/female vocals of Mikko Häkkinen and Helena Haaparanta clashing and collaborating over lavish soundscapes carved lovingly by guitar, violin, accordion and epic orchestration. This is a band to watch out for, because if they can come up with further albums as consistent and as exciting as this, they've got one hell of a future ahead of them.

Berlin-based **Mind Odyssey,**



on the other hand, have been perfecting their

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craft over a number of releases. Formed in the early Nineties when members of East and West Berlin bands Merlin and Gracious Violence pooled their creative resources, I suspect that the only reason they're not as big as they should be is a number of line-up changes and comings-and-goings over the years. For 'Time To Change It', their fifth album, the band is back to a core of founder members Mario Le Mole on vocals and bass and Dan Uhden on drums together with guitarist and keyboard player Victor Smolski (Rage) who hooked up with the band shortly after they released their debut 'Keep It All Turning' early in 1993 and who appears to have been instrumental in keeping things going over the years.

'Time To Change It' is melodic metal at its finest, thoughtfully constructed and delivered with precision execution – just listen to how the first minute of opening cut 'Riding And Ruling' unravels, or the kick-ass Velvet Revolver-ish swagger of 'Enemy Daggers'. Trad metal, power metal, classic metal, melodic metal... Chuck whatever label you like at them, this is metal at its finest, full stop. Mind Odyssey are certainly the Real Deal, and 'Time To Change It' is the first album of 2008 that every metalhead should own; it would certainly be justice for all if Mind Odyssey finally hit the jackpot with this album. Incidentally, Napalm have cleverly rounded up the band's previous four albums and also made them available at a budget price.

Swedish doom quartet **Isole** started life in 1990 as Forlorn,



although didn't record under their current name until 2005 when I Hate Records released their debut 'Forevermore'. With Daniel (vocals and guitars) and Crister (guitars and vocals) still around from those forlorn days, 'Silent Ruins' is Isole's fourth album and their second for Napalm, following on from 2008's 'Bliss Of Solitude'. The new biog notes that, "Musically, Isole ventured into new territories by incorporating more variation and increasing the pace of the songs," which might be why 'Silent Ruins' is infinitely more accessible than its predecessor. It still paints a bleak and sinister soundscape, eerie and forbidding and punctuated by heavy beats and deep, dark riffs, and its seven songs are plaintive dirges, each twisting and turning towards their inevitable conclusion, but this time around there's more going on, more to focus on than just a soundtrack to misery and despair. Obviously if you like three-minute happy-clappy songs Isole will never be your cuppa, but the band's approach to the material on 'Silent Ruins' should allow the album's appeal to spread beyond just the fans of darkness to a more widespread audience.

'New Shores' is the fourth album by **Lunatica** – one of the few bands to have broken out of Switzerland – but their first



for Napalm and also the first to feature new boy Marc Torretti joining Sandro D'Incau on guitars. Initially formed in 1998, Lunatica fall more at the twee Edenbridge end of the metal female voices spectrum and are highly polished and very radio friendly; billed by the label as

melodic symphonic metal, it's certainly more melodic than metal, no more so than on the excruciating lighters-in-the-air ballad 'Farewell My Love' which features guest vocals by John Payne alongside Lunatica front-woman Andrea Dätwyler. It's all very pleasant, all extremely well played, and Sascha Paeth's production pulls everything together nicely, but Lunatica are lacking the edge or excitement they need to get up into the next league. There's nothing wrong with 'New Shores' – the riffing and guitar work-out in 'The Chosen Ones' should get heads banging in the front row, the performances are top-notch and Dätwyler's vocals are flawless throughout – but it's all very sweet and the MFV scene is so bloated these days that there are countless bands doing this now. Lunatica unfortunately aren't offering anything different on 'New Shores' to make them stand out from the pack.

Hatesphere's 'To The Nines' is a brutal 30-odd minute slice of prime-time thrash metal from the band formed in Arhus, Den-



mark in 2000. There's barely an ounce of subtlety about it as band leader Pepe Hansen and his four cohorts bludgeon their way through the ten cuts on offer, but what they do they do with an admirable intensity and sincerity: it's not my thing, but I can admire what they do and why they do it and besides, 'Backstabber' with its aggressive bark and quieter contrasting passages is a remarkable tour de force. Great sound too, courtesy of producer Tue Masden. If you're interested, bear in mind before you buy that

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there's a limited edition digipack with bonus tracks and a video to hunt down first.

The **Bullet Monks** serve up what they call "mosh 'n' roll" – well, it's actually high energy rock 'n' roll for the Noughties played by a quartet compris-



ing Tyler Voxx (vocals, guitars), Dangerous Dan (guitars), Spreace Jackson (bass) and M.dogg (drums) – so what you get is twelve cuts of gonzoid metal played by four German whiskey-drinking, stage-dwelling slumdogs who almost certainly live for the road and for the hour or so when they can kick ass in front of a crowd. Their debut album 'Weapons Of Mass Destruction' is catchy in a goofy kinda way, with songs like 'Never Be A Wannabe', 'No Gain Just Pain' and 'We're All Fucked' probably summing up the band's collective take on life.

Aries, Svart, Maithus, Isiul and Desderoth are collectively known as **Hellsaw**, and 'Cold' is an



uncompromising slab of black metal, heavy as a ton of bricks and black as a winter's night. Hacking riffs and time changes abound and drums cannon loudly as Aries' diabolic growls conjure up a world with neither

light nor warmth – just unnatural cold darkness. By definition, there's no such thing as a lightweight black metal album, but 'Cold' really is as intense as they come, performed by wraiths in corpsepaint, bedecked with studs and spikes. Again, there's a limited edition version of the album with two bonus tracks and a live DVD. Shame it doesn't come with a crucifix...



Last up comes 'Storm' by **Fejd**, a Swedish quintet who came together in 2001 when Patrik and Niklas Rimmerfors hooked their folk duo up with members of metal band Pathos. 'Storm' is yet another full-length debut album on Napalm, and is a nicely played and well-produced collection of "Nordic Medieval Folk", but, to be honest, this genre leaves me completely cold. They're undoubtedly good at what they do, but this pushes not one of my buttons. Sorry...