

# JOHN TUCKER ONLINE - SEPTEMBER 2009



Back at the end of 2006 **Delain** was put together as a project by Martijn Westerholt, brother of Within Temptation's mainman and original keyboard player with the Dutch Metal Female Voices phenomenon. The album 'Lucidity' featured Charlotte Wessels as main female vocalist, Marco Hietala from Nightwish on bass and male vocals and God Dethroned's Ariën van Weesenbeek on drums; in addition, 'phone calls brought Sharon den Adel (Within Temptation) and Liv Kristine (Leaves' Eyes) in as additional female voices, George Oosthuck for "grunts" and Guus Eilens, Jan Yrlund and Epica's Ad Sluijter to provide the guitars. A couple of years only Delain are back with 'April Rain' (Roadrunner/Sensory), but this time as a real band. As a result album #2 is more cohesive than its predecessor and a worthy contender for album of the year with not a weak track on it. The ballsy title track kicks things off with passion and conviction – check out that kick-drum pattern! – and then the consistency and tempo is maintained for the next forty-five minutes or so with 'Go Away' and 'Lost' really pushing my buttons, and the majestic 'Nothing Left' rounding off the album beautifully. A couple of guests do turn in appearances, including the aforementioned Marco Hietala and Guus Eilens, and as an aside it's a bit odd to note that the singer who stole the show at Metal Female Voices 2007 in jeans and t-shirt is now being touted as a red-haired

vixen in gothic black, but that's just the marketing department for you! A limited edition digi-pack adds a bonus track and there is a vinyl version of the album as well on Roadrunner, but it's pretty poor quality (both in terms of the pressing and the sleeve) so I would avoid it like the plague. I've got much better bootlegs in my collection.

In an alternative universe it's conceivable that one day **Ahab** will turn in a set of short 'n' snappy happy songs, but in the meantime in the here and now



the world's prime purveyors of what Napalm Records call 'funeral nautic doom metal' (they do like categorising things at the label) have followed up their debut album 'The Call Of The Wretched Sea' with another healthy dose of brooding, doom-laden metal. Formed in 2004, Ahab 2009 is a collaboration between founder members guitarist and vocalist Daniel Droste and guitarist Christian Hector (in between gigs with their day job in Midnattsol), and bassist Stephan Wandernoth and drummer (and album producer) Cornelius Althammer from Dead Eyed Sleeper. The final part of a trilogy (the band opened their account with an EP 'The Oath' in 2005), 'The Divinity Of Oceans' is based once again around whalers, and this time tackles the story of the whale ship Essex. The subject of a couple of books (including one by Owen Chase who was the First Mate on the vessel), the Essex was attacked by a whale in 1820 and

sank, reducing the survivors to misery, despair and ultimately cannibalism – perfect subject matter for the dark lyrics, grinding, remorseless riffs and vocals which swing from brutal to plaintive. 'The Divinity Of Oceans' is extremely well written and performed, but is not easy listening by any stretch: if you think Type O Negative is too slow, then forget it. (Hector himself describes the album as "Carcass in slo-mo and Morbid Angel going beyond the slowness of 'Blessed Are the Sick'.") But persevere with it, and you'll discover an album that is exceptionally inventive and truly atmospheric, with the mariners' pain dragged relentlessly across the album's seven lengthy cuts. The production is imaginative too, and brings out the best of the dark and darker material, where twists and turns still lurk like leviathans in the deep. By the way, for those of us who've regressed to vinyl, there is a spectacular limited edition double album available direct from Napalm.

Two releases from **Leaves' Eyes** slipped out in the summer. First off came 'My Destiny' (Napalm Records), a six-track EP which served as both a taster for their



album 'Njord' and an unveiling of their new line-up. Trivia fans will be interested in the fact that, like Midnattsol (the band fronted by Liv Kristine's sister Carmen), Leaves' Eyes now also have a female bassist Alla Fedynitch in the ranks as well as a new drummer Seven Antonopoulos lining

up alongside guitarists Thorsten Bauer and Mathias Röderer and the beauty-and-the-beast front row of Liv and husband Alex. Of the cuts on offer, 'My Destiny' itself and 'Northbound' are taken from 'Njord', but the cuts that didn't make the album are equally as good as those that did; 'The Battle Of Maldon' is quite an aggressive number with a poignant refrain, and 'Nine Wave Maidens' is more an acoustic outing with some atmospheric percussion to drive it along. However, nowhere does Liv Kristine sound better than on the haunting rendition of 'Scarborough Fair' which showcases a beautiful fragility in her voice and which would be interesting to see performed live. The whole thing's rounded off with a heavy almost club remix of 'My Destiny' which should get things moving at goth metal parties across Europe. Hot on its heels came 'Njord' (Napalm Records), the band's first album in four years. Constant touring has kept them on their toes and 'Njord' is a release of some pedigree. In the six-minute title track and album opener, Leaves' Eyes have come up with the most exciting piece of music they have ever written – and that's no mean feat given the strength of their back catalogue. At the other end of the album, 'Frøya's Theme' is their most ambitious composition, an eight-minute mini-epic which could well be the centrepiece of the live show and which demonstrates that the band are not afraid to stretch themselves in the studio. In between, the likes of 'Through Our Veins' and 'Emerald Island' are welcome additions to the band's canon, and in 'Ragnarok' it's nice to hear the guitarists striking out and having some fun. Alexander Krull has kept the sound consistent yet fresh – it's still recognisably Leaves' Eyes but with an up-to-date twist to the sound – and Liv Kristine's voice wrings emotion from every line, fragile as a spider's web but just as beautiful. At fifty-five minutes the album is a bit long ('Take The Devil In Me' doesn't really bring anything new to the album

and wouldn't be missed), and I personally prefer the acoustic version of 'Scarborough Fair' from the 'My Destiny' EP to the version here which, to my mind, seems to be trying too hard. But these are minor gripes. This is a great album, the best of the best from a band at the top of their game, and one which rightfully defines Leaves' Eyes as the finest band of the metal female voices genre. As is the norm these days, there's a limited edition digipack with two bonus cuts. And if you're really barking mad, there's a very limited run of 500 which features the digipack and a replica Viking longship. And yes, I've got one...

Have a look at **Bare Infinity's** website and you'll be amazed that 'Always Forever' (Emotion Art) was ever completed at all.



The band have had more false starts than the average sprinter, starting and never completing album sessions in 2005, losing musicians, having shows pulled on them and then starting work on their debut album all over again in February 2008 only to lose their first singer and co-founder mid-way through the sessions. Fortunately, this Greek band seems to have resilience stamped all the through it and despite all adversity they've continually soldiered on, most recently finding a replacement singer at pretty much the last minute to complete their debut album. And what an album! 'Always Forever' is any offering of outstanding majesty, boasting twelve exciting compositions that pretty much showcase the very best of the metal female voices genre. The most immediate point of reference is After

Forever, and despite their relative youth Bare Infinity could easily step up to fill that particular void now that Floor Jansen's crew have called it a day. The songs are generally harder-edged – certainly less radio-friendly – than a lot of other metal female voices bands, and although there are the obligatory ballads like 'I Dream Of You' they still have an edgy balance of passion and power. New frontwoman Angel is quite a remarkable singer and one hell of a find on, apparently, the very last days of auditions and Bare Infinity now have a settled line-up with Vincent (keyboards), Sverd (bass and brutal vocals) and George (drums) joining Tomas, the guitarist who set the ball rolling six years back. There's no point me highlighting a favourite track or two because the simple answer would be 'all of 'em', although the mental i-Pod has got the ballsy 'Here I Come' lodged firmly on play at the moment.

As a solo singer **Marenne** opened her account with a single 'Pretty White Dress' in the summer of 2007. As this went Top Twenty in her native Finland a band was put together later that year, and their first collaboration as a unit is 'The Past



Prelude' (Windseekers). Joining the singer in her self-titled band are guitarist Zachary Hietala (he of Tarot fame), keyboard player Janne Tolsa (who also picks up the mixing and mastering credits), bassist Jukka Jylli and drummer Tom Rask, and a handful of luminaries, among them the likes of fellow Tarot cards Marco Hietala and Tommi Salmela, get a name-check for backing vocals.

The album is a cracker; from the off-beat yet catchy opener 'The Stone' to closer 'Land Of Misery' this is an interesting and diverse offering with a clutch of really strong songs and some very clever lyrical touches. As a point of reference, fellow Finns Nightwish would perhaps unsurprisingly be a good indicator of the range and style of Marenne's material, and 'Cold Mornings' and 'I Wished (Who Can Tell Me)' are not unlike the more commercial cuts Tuomas Holopainen and his crew served up on 'Dark Passion Play'. But Marenne are nobody's clones: there's a wide range of colours to their palette, and elsewhere on the album 'My Time' is a forceful, driven piece, 'Under My Hand' features some deft folk touches over some heavy riffing and 'Frozen Tears' is a powerful, tour-de-force, lyrically sentimental and epic in construction. My only real gripe is that the mix is a bit too radio-friendly; there's a lot of top end and there are times when the sound could do with a bit of punch and bite to bring out the full range of what's going on within the songs. But hey, just whack up the bass and enjoy what is an extremely exciting debut.

Just before the release of **Trail Of Tears**' fifth album 'Existencia' the band completely fell apart during an ill-fated tour of Mexico in November 2006 and it looked like theirs was probably



the most apt name in metal: a trail of tears indeed. However, nearly three years later they're back, although in 2009 it's very much a new-look outfit with only vocalist Ronny Thorsen remaining from days gone by

which has stepped up to record album #6 'Bloodstained Endurance' (Napalm Records). From the off it's worth pointing out that 'Bloodstained Endurance' is a very likeable album indeed. No, scratch that: it's a great album indeed, darkly gothic as you'd expect but also easily accessible; it's powerful – hard as nails in some places – yet melodic. It's almost an album of counterbalancing contrasts, not just in the dual vocals but also throughout the layers and textures of the songs. The album features eleven tracks – twelve on the almost obligatory limited edition digipack – with not one duff one amongst them; 'Farewell To Sanity' is as good a pick as any to highlight, as are the opulent opener 'The Feverish Alliance' and 'A Storm At Will', but there's nothing not to like on offer here. These are songs orchestrated by masters of their craft. Aside from the strength of the material, the success of the album – and therefore the success of the band in reclaiming any ground they may have lost over the past few years – rests heavily on the extreme male vocals of Thorsen and the clean female vocals of Catherine Paulsen who appeared on the band's very first album and whose incredible voice sounds not unlike Floor Jansen at times (check out her performance in 'Once Kissed By The Serpent (Twice Bitten By Truth)' and 'Triumphant Gleam'). Behind the singers Thorsen has assembled an exciting and creative line-up to take Trail Of Tears forward. Guitarists Bjørn Erik Næss and Pål Olsen, bassist Endre Moe and drummer Cato Jensen have forged a unit of such seeming strength and integrity that it would be easy to forget that this is their first album together.

Spheric Universe Experience are fantastic live band and if they've not quite managed to nail that on CD before, with 'Unreal' (Sensory/Laser's Edge) they've finally come of age, presenting an album that's a dream (theater) for fans of progressive metal. 'Unreal' is

the French band's third album, and builds on the success of 2006's 'Anima'. The band have changed drummers since then, with Christophe Briand replacing Nico Muller; otherwise the nucleus of S.U.E., with vocal-



ist Franck Garcia and keyboard player Fred Colombo lining up alongside guitarist Vince Benaim and bassist John Draï (who formed the band as Gates Of Delerium back in 1999), remains as it was when they cut their debut 'Mental Torments' back in 2004. Despite having all the trappings of a progressive metal album – the multi-time changes, generally lengthy songs (nine in 49 minutes, although 'Near Death Experience' is a sub-two minute keyboard interlude), and extended guitar/keyboard workouts, 'Unreal' is an extremely accessible clutch of songs. It's also a very cohesive album too. Although the majority of the material comes from the pen of Benaim, virtually everyone in the band gets a music writing credit – it's not often the vocalist gets the sole credit for coming up with an instrumental – and the songs all blend together to create a unified and quite distinctive sound. Although there's not a duff track on offer, the highlight for me is '3rd Type' – a great galloper of a song, with some glorious vocal harmonies from Garcia and a solo to die for from Benaim as the song reaches its climax. Elsewhere, shades of Evergrey haunt 'Lost Ghost' and 'Lakeside Park', and the subtleties of Porcupine Tree and aggression of Zero Hour vie for attention as other songs skip from light to dark and back again. And 'O.B.E.' is a short jazz rock work-out

for the instrumentalists to have some fun before the monumental 'Tomorrow' rounds things off. Spheric Universe Experience may still be relative unknowns at the moment, but 'Unreal' should change all that. The dog's sphericals, indeed!

**Nightwish's** 'Bless The Child' EP, originally issued in Europe in 2002 to tie in with the 'Century Child' album has now been granted a UK release seven years and one singer later



(Spinefarm Records UK). It's really just an EP in name only as at 39+ minutes it's longer than the average good, old-fashioned LP, and its release made great sense way back then, rounding up as it does three Japanese bonus cuts, two live tracks from the 'From Wishes To Eternity' DVD, two cuts from the limited edition version of 'Angels Fall First' and of course the title track. But with the band's Spinefarm catalogue being given a hefty facelift recently, the previously only available in Japan tracks 'The Wayfarer', 'Sleepwalker' and 'Nightquest' have been added to the re-issues of 'Century Child', 'Wishmaster' and 'Oceanborn' respectively, and the lesser-known 'A Return To The Sea' now appears on the revamped 'Angels Fall First'. So, if you didn't pick this up on import when it came out, all that's in it for you now are the live renditions of 'Come Cover Me' and 'Dead Boy's Poem', and the rare 'Once Upon A Troubadour'; It's a shame that the CD hasn't been spruced up to resemble the rest of the back catalogue as the packaging is quite basic, but that's just a minor quibble because the music, as you'd expect

from Finland's finest, is top-notch. The other thing about it is how well it hangs together as release in its own right, rather than sounding like a batch of tracks pulled from different sources. You obviously can't just skim through the Tarja era of the band in just eight tracks, but this isn't a bad summary of what they could achieve before it all went pear-shaped between singer and band.

The shrink-wrap sealing the digipack bears a sticker which screams in bold, 'GOTHIC METAL!' Underneath runs a quote from Arjen Lucassen: "...After hearing the excellent 'The Flame Within' it's clear that I'm



not needed at all!" Welcome to **Stream Of Passion** 2009, and their second album 'The Flame Within' (Napalm Records). It's true that the band now is a very different animal from the one that released 'Embrace the Storm' four years ago with the double-edged sword of being allied to musical genius Arjen Lucassen and at the same time being seen largely as no more than a vehicle for his prolific musical output. Only vocalist Marcelo Bovio and bass player Johan van Stratum remain from that original line-up (joined now by guitarists Stephan Schultz and Eric Hazebroek, keyboard player Jeffrey Revet and drummer Davy Mickers), and whereas I pretty much assumed that without Lucassen and with such upheaval in the ranks Stream Of Passion would be dead in the water, 'The Flame Within' is actually a really strong offering. Much as I hate to agree with a band's biography, this time around their

songs are indeed more mature, and overall offer more light and shade than those on 'Embrace The Storm'. The band's principal strength is now Bovio herself, and on 'The Flame Within' her voice is simply breathtaking. Throw in some beautiful yet accessible songs, and clever instrumentation and the result is almost astonishing. It's the way of things that Stream Of Passion are going to have to live with the tag of being an Arjen Lucassen side project for many years to come, but the man is right; the band don't need him any more and 'The Flame Within' is all the evidence you need of that. As ever, by the way, there's a digipack which adds a bonus track 'Far And Apart' which is no slouch and could have easily appeared on the CD proper; as such it is definitely worth forking out the extra quid or so for this version. Yes, I know it's annoying but virtually every record company does it now: write a letter of complaint to your MP or something...