

Attached you can find the interview between Markus for Soundmagnet.eu and Cris J.S. Frederiksen of Svartsot.

Markus (Soundmagnet): Hello and thank you for the interview. Six years have passed since your last album. Where does this long break until the new album come from?

Cris (Svartsot): Well, Vældet was released in February 2015, so it is actually seven years! The long gap between the two albums has several reasons. We were actually working on an album in 2015-17 that we actually decided to put on ice, as we weren't that happy with the way it was turning out, as it was continuing on the same proggy-trajectory as the previous two albums.

Ultimately, it was maybe not something we should necessarily have been doing, or really wanted to do, at that point. The decision to drop the material also coincided with our bassist at the time, James Atkin, leaving the band to concentrate on his other project, our current labelmates Heidra.

So, we also brought a new bassist into the band in early 2018, and he had to learn the back-catalogue for shows. We did a good run of shows before the pandemic, playing shows in Denmark as well as at Metalfest Open Air, Sabaton Open Air, HRH Vikings and 70000 Tons of Metal in 2018-19.

All the while, I had decided to follow my childhood dream and take a bachelor and master's degree in archaeology from 2016 until last year, and a couple of the others finished educations as teachers.

After shelving the material, we basically decided to go back to our roots, in a way, and re-find ourselves a bit by looking at some old folksongs that had influenced our folk-style since the early days of the band. I had been collection folk melodies for years even before starting Svartsot in 2005.

So, we spent 2018 and 2019 doing working on those. We had wanted to release the album in time for our 15th anniversary year, 2020, but for whatever reason we weren't quite ready to record the material before summer 2020, and the pandemic also interrupted a lot of plans. But we recorded the album that summer, and it was finished being mixed and mastered by early January 2021.

I had a large dissertation for the end of my studies, so that got in the way of getting it released last year – we also had to decide how to release the album. We finally settled on signing a deal working with Mighty Music in autumn last year, and the album is being released as soon after that as is practically possible.

All in all, we've been busy – both personally and with the band. The album has also been finished for just over a year already. It just took the time it took to get everything in place.

Markus (Soundmagnet): Your latest album "Kumbi" features your interpretation of 12 songs from Nordic folk culture and the late Middle Ages. How did you choose the songs that ended up on the album? Did you follow a certain strategy?

Cris (Svartsot): A small correction again, it is songs and melodies from mainly Denmark, but also Ireland, Scotland, Sweden, Netherlands and France. So more the northwesterly areas of Europe rather than 'just' Nordic areas.

As I mentioned just before, I have been collecting folk and medieval songs and melodies that I personally like for many years now. So, we actually had a lot of potential material to choose from. A few of the other guys from the band also had suggestions for songs. From this quite large collection, I selected 12 songs in all that we either liked, or thought would be interesting to try to do something with.

The song Rottefængereren was chosen by Hans-Jørgen (folk instruments) as that means something to him personally. Thor (vocals) suggested a slightly different another version of Kragevisen, but we ended up using the version we did due to reasons of authenticity.

Simon (bass) was suggested Ebbe Skammelsøn by someone he knows, which I had already been considering it as well, as it is one of the more famous (possibly) medieval folk ballads from Denmark. But otherwise, there was no real strategy as such, but more a case of "do I like this one enough to work on?".

Markus (Soundmagnet): During the search for songs, which songs and stories fascinated you the most and why?

Cris (Svartsot): I consider myself a composer, who also happens to writework with lyrics. So, without exception, I started from the melodic side of things. If a song has a strong melody, I'm interested. I almost don't actually care what the lyrics are. When it comes to folk songs and medieval ballads, you know that a good melody will have an interesting lyric.

As I understand it, Simon was hooked on the lyric to Ebbe Skammelsøn - a guy comes home to his family just in time to find his fiancé getting married to his brother, so he kills them both with his sword and badly injures his parents whilst he's at it, whereas I was more interested in the melodic side of the song, as the original has 32 verses or something stupid.

In many cases, I had only a general idea of what the story in the lyrics were about before selecting them. So, it is definitely melody first from my perspective. Having said that, I am fascinated by the story told by our first single from the album, Liden Kirsten. It tells of a king who has chosen a young noble woman to be his queen and mother of his heirs, but he doesn't tell her of this until after she has already given birth to twin boys, who are the king's sons. She is beside herself with anger at being raped, and he just makes it better 'better' by saying "Ha! It was me all along, and now you may be my queen", as if that magics everything else away.

It is such a sharp contrast to our days' views of how to act and treat others, which for me, as a medieval archaeologist, this gives an amazing insight into how people once thought, or how people once thought other people from previous periods or different cultural strata thoughtacted. We don't really know when these 'medieval' folk songs are from.

Markus (Soundmagnet): With the song selection you prove that old songs and also their new interpretations can still sound very exciting. What distinguishes the songwriting of past eras from today? After all, almost everyone knows old folk tunes, but hardly anyone remembers last year's summer hit.

Cris (Svartsot): This kind of plays into the end of my last answer. We don't really know how old these songs are. Some scholars will say 'medieval', whilst most of the melodies and lyrics are only known from renaissance or very early modern collections.

They could be old, but they could also be post medieval. No matter what, these songs were written down at some time after they were originally composed. They have been played for maybe several generations at least before then. So, they had to have some quality that allowed them to be remembered. No doubt, they probably also changed in various ways from their first version and until they were written down sometime later.

Each little variation on the theme that worked – maybe even making the song better than the earlier versions – survived and made the song what it was when it was transcribed. In this way, they had inbuilt memorable qualities that gave them associations with certain feelings or a certain amount of exhilaration or whatever. Also, we have to think of the contexts we hear them now, and how we associate them with whatever feelings, which can influence how we remember them. Maybe it is a film or a medieval market or some shitty Danish folk metal band's latest release. This might contrast and make them easier to remember than last summer's generic crap that played in the radio three times an hour, day in and day out until some other generic crap got more airplay. Maybe also we just want to forget that generic crap.

Markus (Soundmagnet): In German-speaking countries your lyrics are hardly understood, but you still manage to convey certain moods and emotions with your music. How do you progress during songwriting and are there any aspects that you pay special attention to?

Cris (Svartsot): Seeing as the vocals are growled, it is almost irrelevant exactly which language they are in – most people, even Danes, don't recognize a language when they hear the vocals! Still, as all languages have their own melodies and rhythms, I think it would actually sound different if the lyrics were in a different language, which would probably be noticed on at least a subconscious level. One of the tracks on the new album is actually in Latin, but as Thor has never learned that language, it is probably with a very heavy Danish accent!

But as for the actual emotions being conveyed, I think it is a combination of the way the vocals are performed, the actual melodies and the choice of chords underlying the whole thing.

If we take our third single, *Drømte Mig En Drøm*, as an example, the main melody only survives as one line of music or refrain. By changing the chord in the second run through, it lifts the melody slightly, making it sound almost as if the melody has changed, when it hasn't. The way the vocals are performed as an almost melodic growl or black metal scream adds an atmosphere to the song that can't be done with 'proper' singing. We have always tried to treat the vocals as an extra instrument rather than 'singing'.

As for the songwriting process, I mostly start by playing around with melodies on guitar, and progress to the other parts from there. Most often I will work on chords and then the harmonies. Melodies are the important element for me, as I mentioned earlier. If the melody is shit no matter what I try, I don't use it.

The chords give the song the underlying basal structure to the melodies, and can be used to change melodies, as I said. Playing with the rhythmic delivery of the chords and bass lines also has a big influence on how the melody sounds. It is a bit of a game of finding the things that work together and tweaking them until the songs works as best as I can get it to until I decide it is finished.

Then the other guys arrange their parts and add their own personalities to them. But even after a song is recorded, we might change something in a song for when we play them live. Some of the recorded versions of songs actually sound almost wrong to me, because I am now so used to the way we play them live!

Markus (Soundmagnet): In your music you also use ancient instruments. How do you come to learn instruments like the mandolin and what do you think is the reason that metal and such instruments fit so well together?

Cris (Svartsot): Just to nit-pick, the instruments are modern instruments that have older origins. The mandolin, like the guitar, is originally based on different types of lute, butand seems to have been developed in Italy in the 18th century but is tuned like a violin. The Irish 'tin' whistles we use are modern proper musical versions in plastic, as the old-fashioned tin ones don't tune very well, especially if they get dented - which can easily happen when touring.

The bagpipe we use is made by a German made company called Redpipe and is an electronic bagpipepipe that works and is played like a bagpipe with an airsack that has to be squeezed to get sound and a chanter for the notes but is actually midi. I think also Eluveitie have used them.

We had a real Swedish bagpipe to begin with, but it was VERY sensitive to humidity and went out of tune just by looking at it - which is why most people think bagpipes sound horribly out of tune – they are!

Right back in the start, we were just a 5-piece standard metal set-up with bass, drums, lead and rhythm guitar and growled vocals. I've had a mandolin for many, many years, and whilst recording the very first demo I had the idea of putting a mandolin part in one of the songs – Jotunheimsfærden, which also got onto the first album.

But we never used it live in the early days. Also, during the first period of time, we drafted our first whistler (Stewart Lewis) in, who is a guy I have known for years. When Stewart had to sit out of a tour, we got Hans-Jørgen in as stand-in, and he took over when Stewart dropped out completely in late 2008. Hans-Jørgen is the kind of guy that will try learning to play all instruments, so we just expanded to the bagpipe as well as using the mandolin live, although it was still me that recorded them.

Now Thor is also taking some mandolin responsibilities on recordings, and hopefully also live soon. So, then we can get some of the mandolin/whistle duo things in our live sound too.

I think one of the reasons these instruments work reasonably well is that they are in higher registers and cut more easily through more bottom-heavy riffs - we play seven string guitars in standard BEADGBE tuning, though sometimes with a drop A.

The lead guitar sits somewhere in between for the most part, but when I do play in the same register as the bagpipe or mandolin, there is still a tangible sonic difference between the instruments. Both of these do have a slightly distorted sound, though. The whistles are mainly in the harmonic range of a guitar or voice and have a very clear sound, so they sit on top.

Markus (Soundmagnet): Folk Metal is a popular genre with many well-known representatives from Northern Europe, but apart from you, there are hardly any bands from Denmark known in Austria. What do you think is the reason for that?

Cris (Svartsot): I can't really answer that question, because there are/have been several.

Even though we often are considered the first folk metal band in Denmark, Týr was actually conceived in Copenhagen, from what I have heard. And the Swedish/Danish power metal band Wuthering Heights also often included folk-style melodies. After us, Vanir came along but have since dropped all folk aspects and are melodic death/Viking metal.

Sylvatica were also originally folk metal but are more melo-death now. Heidra, who I mentioned earlier, were also formed shortly after we started, and still play folk metal, I guess. There was also Huldre, who were a bit like Lumsk. They disbanded, but two of them have started Ætir instead, which is similar to Huldre.

Also more recently, some new folk metal bands have started up: Idaslet, Trolld and Vanvid. We were also pretty lucky to get a deal with an Austrian label already quite early on, and that probably helped us reach outside of Denmark. Either that or the others just haven't had the same appeal to Austrian audiences as we have?

That said, Heidra and Vanir have toured outside of Denmark, and Huldre also won a third place in W:O:A Metal Battle in 2014. So maybe you just haven't noticed the other Danish folk metal bands for whatever reason?

Markus (Soundmagnet): If COVID-19 allows it, can we expect to see you live again in Germany or Austria soon?

Cris (Svartsot): We hope so, as we have normally had regular concerts in Germany since the first album and have played Austria several times too. However, there are no secret plans or anything waiting to be announced, as we haven't been able to guess when the situation will allow for us to play outside of Denmark.

But we are just starting to look into some touring possibilities, now that the weaker variant of SARS CoV-2 seems to be going endemic and touring will (hopefully) soon be easier.

Markus (Soundmagnet): Thank you for the interview. The last words are yours.

Cris (Svartsot): I have no pearls of wisdom just now. We just hope that the old and new fans will like the album, and we're looking forward to getting back on the road as soon as we can!