



Newsletter February 2005

In this month's newsletter, you'll find:

- 1) **Isildurs Bane with Teater Albatross**
- 2) **Thore Rösnes RIP**
- 3) **Profile of the month: Nilla Nielsen**
- 4) **The story behind the song: "In a State of Comprehension"**
- 5) **Regarding IB: Fans and critics**

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1) **Isildurs Bane with Teater Albatross**

IB (well, Mats and Jonas really) have performed music accompanying independent theatre group Teater Albatross during the last week of January. The reason for this collaboration was that it was 60 years ago that Auschwitz was liberated. It was a fantastic week with lots of interesting meetings with teachers, students and people in general. It is wonderful to see the dedication of young people in this eternally important matter.

Three years ago, Mats worked with Teater Albatross on the performance of *Kvinnoorkestern* (= The Women's Orchestra), a play about an orchestra of women performing music at a death camp. Looking back on last week's performance and working with the music to *Kvinnoorkestern* three years ago, Mats has this to say:

- When confronted with this subject matter again, I recognize how important it was to compose and perform the music for these performances. Isildurs Bane value these collaborations and the fight against Nazism goes on with unflagging power!

An estimated 1200 people have seen actors Robert Jakobsson and Lisa Eliasson in their poetic and thoughtful play accompanied by Mats and Jonas.

See pictures from the performances at www.isildursbane.se
Go to The Ataraxia Report!

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2) **Thore Rösnes RIP**

I am sorry to inform you that a friend of Isildurs Bane has passed away. Thore Rösnes, music critic and music lover, died on January 13th.

Thore was involved with several Swedish magazines and newspapers as a writer and/or as editor. *Hifi & Musik*, *Teknik i Norden*, *Hallandsposten* and *Stockholm Fria Tidning*. His true labour of love though, was *Gränslöst* (= without limits), a magazine dedicated to jazz, contemporary art music and music that many would consider avantgarde.

Thore's commitment to *Gränslöst* was all-encompassing to the extent that he and his wife financed it themselves and refusing any governmental financial support. You can read some old issues (only in Swedish) on the website of *Gränslöst* at www.granslost.com

Thore was a fine man who I only met briefly. He was passionate about music and loved Metamorfoosi Trio and their collaboration with Isildurs Bane. He loved discussing music with Mats, even though their opinions differed most of the time. Nevertheless, Thore wrote an appreciative article on IB in *Gränslöst* 3/97. We already miss him and our hearts go out to his dear wife and *Gränslöst*-collaborator Gudrun Edel-Rösnes.



Basking in the sun on Thore Rösnes' porch
From left to right: Franco Feruglio, Luca Calabrese, Gudrun Edel-Rösnes, Thore Rösnes, Christian Saggese

Here are a few words from Mats:

A big and true music lover, -journalist, -debater and more has left us. I gradually and happily got to know Thore and Gudrun Rösnes when they moved to Steninge. It was struck with great regret and grief when I received the notion about Thore's passing from Gudrun.

To never debate music and culture with Thore anymore feels unreal. Oh how I loved our conversations! It started in the grocery store one day, and off we went. We rarely agreed entirely and I suspect both of us enjoyed provoking and challenging the other. A lot of the time we were of completely different opinions, which at least I enjoyed. I have never had a problem with people who have commitment, and Thore certainly did.

Many times our talks ended in discussions on what jazz was. What is jazz? I sometimes felt that Thore couldn't talk for two minutes without mentioning the word jazz at least three times! When I pointed that out to him, he always got upset, but realized that I meant it tongue in cheek. But still I felt that he knew I was right after all, and that made him annoyed. I think it was for the best that we had different opinions, since we shared the same musical philosophy in the end. When I was upset, Thore was always laid back and laughed. I really loved our long and winding discussions, frequently with Gudrun close by with shrewd remarks.

It is hardly possible to write about Thore and his contributions to music. They are simply overwhelming. Thore was a giant and he was always there when the avantgarde or alternative culture called. Just that makes him unique! It came naturally to him. He was almost surprised that not everyone acted in the same way. Meeting Thore was a privilege and somewhat overwhelming. I didn't know that there were such music lovers.

When IB started collaborating with the Italian improvisational group Metamorfofi Trio, Thore was an ardent supporter on every level. He even planned to come with us to Italy on our tour last year, but now I understand that it was his illness that prevented him from coming along. He enjoyed travelling, particularly when he was travelling to a concert or a festival. Is there any interesting musician that Thore hasn't met?

My favourite memory of Thore happened two and a half years ago at a garden party at my place during a warm and lovely summer afternoon. All of a sudden, Thore got up, grabbed the mike and started singing the Gershwin standard Summertime accompanied by Metamorfofi Trio. I was so glad he did it and I think he may almost have surprised himself. I have a film of it somewhere and I will try to dig it out to be able to relive this extraordinary moment.

At this point my thoughts go to Gudrun. Thore, I miss you. I have a tear in my eye as I am writing this. Damn, we never enjoyed that bottle of Opus that we had talked about for so long! But in a way it feels like it wasn't to be. Maybe it's something we can look ahead to doing. Maybe it isn't too late yet even though I have no earthly explanation on how right now. I'll see you Thore, of course I will!

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3) Profile of the month: Nilla Nielsen

One of the backing vocalists featured on IB's forthcoming DVD is Nilla Nielsen. As reported earlier, she has released her debut album *Redemption Sky* a couple of months ago. More information on Nilla and her music at www.nillamusic.com



Name: Nilla Nielsen

Living in: Helsingborg

Tell us something about your musical background

I would describe myself as an atmospheric singer/songwriter influenced by pop, country and ethnic music with lyrics that are strong, personal, sometimes dark and filled with anxiety.

I have played and performed with many constellations over the years and have come close to releasing my music several times. Once I was offered a record contract which I turned down because the record company wanted to control my music too much. There was a nice independent record label in Seattle that were interested in signing me, but unfortunately they went bust.

It's a tough business, the competition is fierce and very male dominated. Fortunately, there are many wonderful people – both men and women – around too.

You are a composer, singer and guitarist who has just released your debut album. Tell us about it.

I decided to release my debut album *Redemption Sky* on my own label, Gecko Records. My main co-worker in the studio was Swedish singer/songwriter/keyboardist Nils Erikson The record was

recorded at his studio and at my home studio. I think we feel the same way about music and it was very inspiring working with him. There's a presence and feeling in the music we managed to put on record, every song has a life of its own. A number of vocal takes are first takes because I want to get the feeling and soul of my stories.

Who are some of your favourite musicians?

Nils Erikson is my soulmate. Among the people who inspire me are Bob Dylan, Alanis Morissette, Janis Joplin, Joan Osbourne, U2, Tracy Chapman and Shawn Colvin.

I am also inspired by things that have happened in my life. Bad relationships, things happening around the globe, pure love and happiness. I have travelled a lot and meeting people and experiencing nature and animals move and inspire me to write. The song Sima is about a little orphan girl I met in the Indian desert at the holy festival at lake Pushkar. She wanted me to take her with me to Sweden and become her mother. I will never forget her.

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4) The story behind the song: In a State of Comprehension

Title: "In a State of Comprehension"

From: *MIND Vol. 1*

Composer: Mats Johansson

One day, Mats had a bright idea. He wanted to compose a song, from start to finish, by using the software sequencer program Cubase. Mats' work took three or four days. After that, the rest of the band were to add live instruments, which took a while as it were. The recordings were done here and there, the piano for instance was recorded at Studio 12 at the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation in Gothenburg.

- I recall the recordings being quite difficult since the sequencer pattern was rather stiff, says Mats today.

What really surprised Mats however, was that drummer Kjell Severinsson was critical of the melody.

- He seriously asked me where all the beautiful melodies had gone. He doesn't usually complain on melodies. He usually complains about solos, since he thinks they should be enjoyed in his flat with a beer in his hand when the record is done. Of course there was a certain critique in his statement, but I didn't understand it. The theme, which is almost one minute long, is played in unison by [violinist] Joachim Gustafsson and [flutist] Björn J:son Lindh. It's quite beautiful to my ears at least. I suppose it's a matter of taste, isn't it?

The song immediately got the working title "Where did all the beautiful melodies go". A provocation on Mats' behalf of course, but with his tongue planted firmly in cheek.

Kjell remembers the situation very well.

- I think I was mostly surprised that it sounded so static. The sequencer bass line dubbed by Fredrik Emilsson's bass was the basis for my playing. When I first heard "In a State of Comprehension" I didn't get it. I thought it was just lots of bubbling notes and no inner logic.

And the statement Where did all the beautiful melodies go?

- It was my response to not understanding, I suppose. I often feel that way about Mats' music the first time I hear them. Same thing when I heard "The Voyage" for the first time. I didn't get it. Anyhow, the end result was good and that's what counts. It's typical of IB that things turn out fine in the end, even though the road seems long and winding.

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5) Regarding IB: Fans and critics

A dialogue between Mats Johansson (composer and receiver of adulation and criticism) and Thomas Olsson (musicologist and music critic)

TO: How do you relate to comments from critics?

MJ: There are few music critics that I have great respect for. These reviewers are knowledgeable, experienced, humble and have a feeling for creative activities.

I can't get rid of the feeling that it is strange in a way to still review art in the 21st century. The idea seems to be that the critic is more important than the object being reviewed.

Besides, it seems as if reviewers are gradually more sure of themselves. I think the opposite is true within all forms of art. It is a strange difference, isn't it? The critic's role has become synonymous with knowledge, while my development as a performer goes the other way.

Can you explain that Thomas?

TO: I can not explain your lack of self-confidence, but the assertiveness of today's reviewers may depend on a superficial aura of knowledge which is, in reality completely lacking. I agree with you that there are very few reviewers that I trust. The main problem for me is that most critics never really deal with the music itself. That shouldn't be a problem for a music critic, but it is a major problem simply because music critics in general have no

knowledge about music. Music history, yes, perhaps. But music?
No.

But why do you think it's strange to review art? A well-written review could be a guide for the consumer, don't you think?

MJ: Really? Consumer information? It feels like this conversation is taking place in 1973! I wonder why the words consumer information always turn up time and again? I definitely don't think a review should be only consumer information. Boooring! Personal reflections are fun. Everybody can learn to write, but where's the talent among journalists when it comes to writing something readable? Because that's something even journalistic education can't help you with.

A reviewer makes his/her career and consumer information doesn't even come into it if you are to be on good terms with publishers and record companies. That's why consumer information doesn't work in today's society where you have to be nice and have a brown tongue.

A good critic should strive to have a personal style of his/her own, but of course, a certain amount of consumer information does come into it. On the other hand, you could decide to ignore writing about the music completely, which happens a lot unfortunately. The evening press have really succeeded within this area. I don't buy evening papers anymore for precisely that reason: credibility. It must be terrible for a journalist to hear. Honesty!

TO: There are different kinds of critics with different abilities and intents, of course. I think there's a huge difference among Swedish critics. Regrettably, rock critics are the least knowledgeable and most intolerant, particularly those who come from a background in the fanzine culture of punk or new wave. The better critics tend to write about jazz, folk or art music. Is it because these types of music are less dependent on the visual aspects, commercial pressure and general tomfoolery?

A big problem is the idea of authenticity. This has been a major problem with rock music since the end of the 60's. Who's to say which music is authentic? In which context? Does it matter? Why?

Another problem, which you briefly touched upon is that many journalists and record shops benefit from so called encouragement from the major record companies. Dinners, concert tickets, CDs, lighters, jackets and T-shirts are regularly given away as promotional material. This is a small part of the reason why records are expensive. Never forget that there is no such thing as a free lunch!

MJ: I am sure you're right. I can imagine many people becoming very bitter just by seeing what's happening. But reviewing records isn't a piece of cake nowadays. There are so many of them. I remember that in the 70's, almost any record would sell 2000 or 3000 copies. It's strange that artists didn't get more involved in the production and distribution of records in those days when you really could sell records. The political Swedish music movement

did, but their basic material was too weak. In the US the biggest stars have been people like Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley. In Sweden, we've seen far too many novelty acts.

What bothers me is when you get pure nastiness from an unpleasant reviewer. I read a review where a whole genre was dismissed with the words "the corpse rises just to fall back on the ground just as quickly". Had I been editor of that magazine, I would have demanded an explanation. Sure, write a negative review about a record or a concert, but be certain to know what you are talking about. Otherwise, damn you! Are there any editors like that out there nowadays? I doubt it. Instead, they refer to their right to speak and print freely. People are afraid these days. They want to advance within the company.

TO: What about comments from the audience?

MJ: I know that some musicians and composers don't care about their audience, but IB have always been very appreciative of our listeners. They are fantastic and keep us alive. They make it possible for us to exist as a group, not a record company or the reviewers. To paraphrase Frank Zappa: The audience is our boss.

TO: Is the audience or the reviewers more important?

MJ: The reviewers are important, sure, but regrettably they are part and parcel of this strange business, which makes it difficult to understand who's who.

The business of reviewing is certainly not a serious business the way I look at it. At least not most of the time. It's strange that so little is required of a music critic today. I can't imagine something similar within the fields of nursing, sport or technology for instance. A reviewer should not be holding hands with a record company, but what's worse is that the hand is making its way into the pants. And both parts seem to like it! Do you think I am being harsh? Maybe I am, but I have learnt the methods of the business we're talking about and I think they have to be able to take some criticism too. But they don't, which is even more astonishing. If you criticize a reviewer, you will get your punishment the following day in the same paper you criticized yesterday.

TO: My question was intentionally provocative and evocative. Who do you have in mind when you play or compose music? Yourself? An imaginary audience? There isn't just one IB audience, there are several, and they differ. How can you play and compose music that everybody likes? Well, you can't of course. Same thing with the critics. There are critics who are write very favourably about IB, others don't.

Nevertheless, through their reviews they are a channel to potential listeners. You know very well that a bad album review can make you take interest in a particular record, right? And when the review results in a sold copy of an album, the review – and, following that, the reviewer – has been important for the artist whose record has just been bought by someone reading a review of it. What if ten people read the review and bought the album? And so on.

If IB want to reach people, don't you think that the band needs to keep their old audience happy while also attracting listeners? That was my slightly hidden point.

MJ: Hmm, I know that some people prefer bad reviews so that they can get some attention. Superlatives aren't enough in the 21st century. Some people seem to think even a lousy review is better. But this is tactics and promotion, right? Right?

Recently, I read an article on singing out of tune, which shouldn't be necessary with the devices that exist today (autotune). But that's maybe one of the few ways you can actually make a mark today. Goddamn! Listen to me, I can't sing, but I do it with feeling and in a very personal way.

A reviewer probably thinks the aim of a composer is irrelevant to the audience. I think many composers write music to fight against something. Within art music, it can even be a revolt against your teacher or your peers. Some aim to make lots of money with their compositions, or to be famous and established.

Personally, I write because I am driven by an inner musical urge. Afterwards, I can sit back, listen and think: Damn, this was interesting! It doesn't have to be harder than that. Honestly! It hasn't always been like that, but it is at the moment. What's wrong, what's right? I don't know, things are always in flux.

The audience comes further down the scale you are describing. The critics have no relevance whatsoever as long as they write good things about my music. If they write bad things, it can affect sales figures, which is never good from the artists point of view of course. What a terrible part they play! I consider myself to play on the right part of the pitch, if I can choose, he he.

TO: I can't be easy to hear different opinions from your audience, sometimes regarding the same album or even the same concert. Same thing with reviews, some like what they hear, some don't. Isn't there a risk that you as a composer or musician get lost among the different opinions on your music submitted to you by audiences or critics?

MJ: Yes, but hardly if you have been in this business for almost 30 years like IB has. If you have these kinds of problems after all these years, you should probably benefit from seeing somebody who can get your thoughts together.

I often feel sorry for young musicians and composers who are in the hands of an audience, a publisher, a record company or the media. It will end in a revolution, that's what I think. Maybe things will start happening again after that. You can always hope, can't you? It would be liberating.

I heard an established musician talking surprisingly the other day about the disastrous lack of knowledge that seems to be inherent and completely natural within a big, well-known Swedish music publishing company. He had been confronted with a suggestion for

a contract by the company. I didn't understand why he was surprised.

How have music publishers and record companies managed to get the enormous amounts of power that they have today? I used to feel that the music business consisted of people interested in music. This was in the 70's. Things have changed, and it's not like that any more. Not at all.

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Best wishes from Isildurs Bane!

Thomas Olsson
Newsletter editor

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