



Children Of Nuggets



Ulver, 2012. From left: Kristoffer Rygg, Daniel O'Sullivan, Jørn H Sværen, Ole Alexander Halstengård and Tomas Pettersen.

JEROEN VRANKEN/PRESS



SEBASTIAN LUDVIGSEN/PRESS

The boys get ready to doctor some cult classics...

Once heroes of black metal, **Ulver** refuse to stand still. They've paid tribute to William Blake, explored techno and now present their spin on 60s psych. **Kristoffer Rygg** explains the Ulver vision.

Words: Rob Hughes

Lillehammer, Norway. May 30, 2009. Ulver are finishing their set at the Maihaugsalen concert hall as part of the Norwegian Festival Of Literature. The show has proved a glowing triumph. As the final note ebbs away, the crowd rises into a rapturous standing ovation. Not that this is especially newsworthy in itself. The band have become underground heroes in their native land since forming in 1993. But there's one curious aspect to all this: it's Ulver's first live gig for over 15 years. And only the second in their entire history. The news had originally been broken via a press release earlier in 2009. The band explained that they'd been invited to play the festival by artistic director Stig Sæterbakken and, "after long consideration," they'd decided to accept. "We had been animals in hiding, uncomfortable with the world," Ulver stated. "It took us 15 years to muster the will and want to 'interact with society', that is, perform live... We go to the job with great humility and horror."

Granted, there's a knowing sense of mischief about such a statement. But it's not exactly the conventional response to the idea of gigging. Then again, Ulver have never been the most

conventional of bands. In fact it's hard to think of any other collective who've shape-shifted quite so dramatically over the past two decades.

It's easier to say where they haven't been. They began as a punishing black metal combo, before morphing into a progressive art-rock band with a thing for minimal ambient music, bleeping electronica, improv and symphonic pomp. Some of their nine studio albums are more alarming than others. 1998's *Themes From William Blake's The Marriage Of Heaven And Hell* was a hi-concept work that somehow combined all of the above and more, made even more startling by its arrival on the back of three albums largely made up of sinus-shattering rock songs about archaic Norse legends and mountain trolls.

Theirs is a world often viewed in freefall. As fan Julian Cope has noted: "Ulver are cataloguing the death of our culture two decades before anyone else has noticed its inevitable demise." They're a band who seem eternally restless, as if in dogged pursuit of some hidden, higher truth.

"You're quite right in describing us as restless," says the band's founder and leader, Kristoffer Rygg, aka Garm. "We're generally interested in all kinds of music. It would be very unnatural for me to work in a 20-year perspective in just one style or genre. You adapt and stray into different things. To me it's a natural evolution. But sure, if you take this new album and put it next to the *Metamorphosis* EP from 1999, that's a bit of a head-shaker. That was basically techno music."

The new album he's referring to is *Childhood's End*. A record, described in typically grand Ulverspeak, whose

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It looked impressive. But where was the rest of the band gonna go?

LARS K. LANDE/PRESS



KERRY O'SULLIVAN/PRESS

arrival “will end all war, help form a world government and turn the planet into a near-utopia.” Lovely. It also signals another abrupt turn after the ambient experimental throb, and occasional noisy attack, of its predecessor, last year’s *Wars Of The Roses*. For *Childhood’s End*, subtitled *Lost & Found From The Age Of Aquarius*, is a cache of covers from the more obscure corners of late ’60s psychedelia. Here you’ll find hallucinatory new versions of songs by the likes of The Music Machine, We The People, The Beau Brummels, Les Fleurs De Lys and The United States Of America. Alongside better known perennials The Pretty Things, The Byrds, Jefferson Airplane and The Electric Prunes.

“It was one of those projects I’d been meaning to do for some time,” explains Rygg. “In my 20s I found myself coming up short with new things to like. It wasn’t until the late ’90s when I discovered a true fascination with psychedelic music, and even prog. That was when ’60s and ’70s music really took hold, and I’ve been more and more into it ever since. I listen to a lot more stuff from that era than I do modern music, but I had to do some real digging around for these songs on the album. You almost learn to rely on tip-offs, rather than sifting through entire albums trying to find that one golden nugget. But they are there if you know where to look. There’s a missionary aspect to all this too, to make an exclamation mark to that fact that there are fucking golden nuggets before your Black Sabbaths. Doing my research I found a lot of useful things from that era. For example, The Electric Prunes were actually the first band to use a wah-wah pedal. Which really made me think about it in terms of being the birth of 99 per cent of what we call modern music. Before that it was all blues, jazz and pop.”

It’s also a project that’s mindful of the wider societal sweep of the late ’60s. “It was a sort of cultural

movement, one that became disillusioned and quite dark. I was thinking of a kind of Blakean strain, a loss of innocence. I’ve always thought that this particular era and the spirituality of it was very childlike in many ways. Suddenly there was Altamont and Charles Manson, cocaine and heroin, then Watergate later. So the album title is quite literal. It also ties in with themes we’ve touched on before. The Blake album we did in 1998 explores the same idea of shattered illusions and a lost childhood. They’re common themes in our world.”

The most engaging aspect of *Childhood’s End* lies in the choice of songs themselves. The Electric Prunes’ *I Had Too Much To Dream (Last Night)* and The Byrds’ *Everybody’s Been Burned* may be the most familiar choices on offer, and therefore perhaps the least memorable, but mostly it’s a head-tripping stew of blissfully stoned oddities. Among the highlights is *The Trap*. First recorded in 1967 by LA fuzz merchants The Music Machine, Ulver’s terrific cover is dedicated to the band’s singer Sean Bonniwell, aka Mr Black Leather Glove, who died last December. “I was in contact with him for a while,” says Rygg, “and spoke to him just a few weeks before he passed away. He was very keen on hearing our version of the song, but he never got to in the end.”

There’s also a fittingly charged take on The 13th Floor Elevators’ astro-garage anthem, *Street Song*, alongside a kaleidoscopic *Soon There’ll Be Thunder*, first cut by The Common People in 1969. While one of the album’s most unexpected joys comes in the form of *Lament Of The Astral Cowboy*, written by mercurial LA producer and arranger Curt Boettcher, one of the great unsung pioneers of sunshine pop. The mention of this elicits a voluntary confession from Rygg: “I have to admit something that’s a bit embarrassing. I thought that song was from the late ’60s, but then found out otherwise [it’s from 1973]. Had

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I known beforehand, we wouldn’t have recorded it.” We should be thankful he only found out later.

But Rygg’s lightweight admission also highlights the extent of the self-discipline that governed this whole venture. “There’s a mixtape angle of doing something like this,” he says. “It has to be an album that you can play from the first to last track and feel like it all belongs together. The dynamic has been important. I wanted to make a cohesive presentation, so they’re not necessarily our favourite songs from that era. It’s a bit more complex than that really – the tracks are tied in a bit more conceptually.”

Most of the album was recorded live, with a modicum of embellishment later. As ever with all things Ulver, achieving a certain feel was paramount. “We spent quite a bit of time getting the sound right. So it’s modern, but it’s also very soft-rock sounding.” As for the choice of tunes, Rygg admits that the final tracklisting went right down to the wire: “We tried and failed quite a bit. The last track was only chosen literally about a week into the mixing process. That was [The Music Emporium’s] *Velvet Sunsets*. We were listening to some vinyl one night, with some green – which is usual when you listen to this kind of music – and feeling the vibe. Someone put on an album and *Velvet Sunsets* came on. We immediately thought: ‘Fuck, we need to do this!’”

Childhood’s End may be a commendable addition to Ulver’s recorded canon, but don’t hold your



Psychedelic shack: Ulver shed their heavy roots.

KERRY O'SULLIVAN/PRESS

They'd been gasping for a soothing cuppa all day.



AGNIESZKA ZWARA/PRESS

breath waiting for a tour any time soon. That 2009 show in Lillehammer was followed by a string of sold-out European shows, including the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London and the open-air Brutal Assault festival in The Czech Republic, where they performed to nearly 10,000 punters. There were also gigs in the States and South America before the band played another homecoming at the Norwegian National Opera. A DVD of that night is out this summer. But, aside from an appearance at Holland's Roadburn Festival this April, 2012 will find Ulver back behind closed doors.

The band's website issued a news bulletin at the end of last year: "We have said it before, and we say it again: festivals are hazardous, people and place being out of control. So, sorry about the grim faces, we will never be The Bee Gees..."

But surely the thrill of the live stage was something they'd missed after all those years? The roar of the greasepaint and all that? "It's a double-edged sword," sighs Rygg. "It's certainly done things to the band that are good, but also things that are not so good. That's why we've decided to slow down on that front this year. Roadburn was sort of a pre-release gig for this album. And apart from a commissioned piece up in the north of Norway in September, which involves a 36-piece orchestra, we have nothing planned at the moment. There's a lot of relief to get back into studio mode. We see now that there's a reason why we didn't play live in the

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first place. It does take a lot of focus away from what is ultimately most important, which is making new music. I do enjoy playing live, but not always. We've had some truly magical moments out there, but it can also be very distracting. We're not so at ease in our role as live performers."

Rygg's work rate, meanwhile, remains unchecked. Around the same time as the first sessions for *Childhood's End*, which began in 2008, he hooked up with Stephen O'Malley of ambient doomlords Sunn O))), "We recorded some massive jams, and now we've gone back and started rearranging and sculpting them a little. It was one of those projects that sort of disappeared for a while, so we aim to finish it with a view to releasing an album. It'll be very different to what Ulver are doing right now, full of heavy 10 or 12-minute pieces. It's a collaboration of minds really." Then, of course, there's the forthcoming orchestra show in Norway, which Rygg concedes is "sort of a big deal. That may very well turn out to be the foundation for the next Ulver album. Obviously that means it's going to be more symphonic, with long shimmering notes. It's certainly not going to be a rock album."

Opera houses? Sixties covers? Chamber orchestras? It all seems a long way from Ulver's formative years on Norway's often-notorious black metal circuit of the early '90s. Did Rygg ever envision this future when he started the band as a teenager? "I never thought beyond making one album," he laughs. "When we made that one [1995's *Bergtatt – Et Eeventyr I 5 Capitle*] we formed the two subsequent albums in our heads. But beyond that we were probably too young to think about lineage or legacy. In retrospect I'd say we started the band with a very poor singer, but the criteria was very different in that day and age. Being a band was a more involved way of being part of a culture or outlook on life that was black metal. It was very different from what I see now. It might call itself by the same name, but it's not what it was. And I'm not really sure I even care. It goes back to what we were saying about lost innocence. The magic has gone for me, so now I'm trying to find it in other places." ©

Childhood's End is out now on Kscope. See www.jester-records.com/ulver/ for info.

The Ready-Brek glow was somehow more sinister in Norway.



THOMAS RØST STENERUD/PRESS