

SIVERT HÖYEM BIOGRAPHY

BIG NEW BEGINNING

“It’s kind of a new start for me.” says former Madrugada frontman Sivert Höyem about *Moon Landing*, his enthralling third solo album. “I just feel I have a lot to prove to myself. I wanted the title to tell people something about the ambition I have for this album, this being the first thing I have done since the band broke up.”

Madrugada, Norway’s most successful rock band ever – give or take a-ha’s icy pop – split up following the tragic death of Höyem’s bandmate, guitarist Robert Burås, in July 2007, and one last tour in 2008. “It’s been a rough couple of years,” admits the singer who completed the group’s sixth and final album, fittingly called *Madrugada* and released in January 2008, with the help of bassist Frode Jacobsen. “We never discussed *not* finishing it. It just seemed like the only sensible thing to do. Everybody, Robert included, had been very enthusiastic about the album. It would have been a double tragedy if we hadn’t finished it,” reflects the vocalist. “With songs like *Look Away Lucifer*, it felt like a fresh new direction. Robert was a real rock and roll guitarist but he also had a very sensitive side to his playing. He had a great ability to squeeze a really haunting melody out of simple chord structures. *Valley Of Deception* is a great testament to his ability.”

Høyem looks back on his 13 years fronting Madrugada, and the five studio albums the group made, from their brooding debut *Industrial Silence* (1999) to the moodier *The Deep End* (2005) via the kick-ass *Grit* (2002), and their *Live At Tralfamadore* offering issued in record-breaking time at Xmas 2005, with a great deal of pride, now tainted with a degree of sadness. “There hadn’t really been a band like that coming out of Norway. We shared all these ideas and it all came together. A band is kind of an adolescent thing, really hard to keep alive,” he stresses. “The whole break-up of the group after Robert died was very painful for me. My father died just two months after and I was very lost. I didn’t know what to do with myself or my music. I didn’t really know if I wanted to release an album for a while, or if I needed some time away from it.”

Yet the pull and the joy of music-making remained strong for the singer. “I can’t quit, I have to do it. I just end up writing songs and I want to see them realised. I think that’s a pretty good sign. I guess I’m doing it for the right reasons,” he now says before documenting the way *Moon Landing* evolved organically and naturally from demos made in a rehearsal room in Oslo with guitarist Cato Salsa and drummer Børge Fjordheim, through three stints in a cabin in the mountains, using analogue equipment provided by Kalle Gustafsson of Swedish group The Soundtrack Of Our Lives, who also played bass. “We moved these great mikes and vintage amps and stuff into the cabin. It was strange being up there. The 16-track tape recorder caught fire a couple of times but it worked out. We re-recorded some of the material at Kalle’s studio in Gothenburg, then overdubbed for a week back in Oslo,” expands Höyem.

The vocalist with the rich, haunting baritone made two solo albums while fronting Madrugada, *Ladies And Gentlemen Of The Opposition* in 2004 and *Exiles* in 2006, but *Moon Landing* is the first one his creative energies have been fully focused on. “I’m starting up as a true solo artist without the twin careers. All the best stuff I could come up with has gone into this one. Before, my solo work was never my first priority. If I had some kind of positive reaction from Frode or Robert to a song I was working on, it always went into Madrugada. Even if it wasn’t released, it stayed with the band,” he explains. “Mostly the rock tunes and the grand, big, epic stuff made it

into Madrugada, and I got to use the folk-inspired, melodic, the cute stuff in my solo work.”

Høyem was keen to feature every facet of his songwriting. “We wanted to make sure *Moon Landing* was a rock album. It’s mostly electric, but very melodic, just four people playing. Cato was in the last version of Madrugada. We got to be great friends on that last tour. He’s a really solid guitar player, a perfect collaborator for me. Like Robert, he knows a lot of styles and can blend them together and make his own thing. He’s been my creative partner in the process of arranging and recording the songs, and also co-produced with me,” says the singer who again called on the services of noted US engineer and producer John Agnello to mix the album. “He’s been doing some great work with Sonic Youth, as well as The Hold Steady and Drive-By Truckers - that kind of new wave of classic American rock that’s coming out,” notes Høyem. “He worked with Madrugada and it was just natural for him to come in on this project as well.”

Yet, the vocalist admits it’s not been easy to move on. “I was ready to put all that stuff behind me for a while, not make this project one more album made in Robert’s shadow. But, of course, it’s there in the songs. *Moon Landing*, the title track and the first single, is about the whole situation of starting again. It has a West Coast rock, Neil Young feel, it’s a pop tune really. *Lost At Sea* says a lot about where I was at in my life when I wrote these songs. It has a very strong urban vibe. *Exiles* seemed to have a common theme about the North and the sea and the elements. This one comes from Oslo and Gothenburg and it’s going to New York City. It’s a different story, but it’s still my story, places I’ve been and people I met.”

Moon Landing is definitely the most varied, diverse offering of Høyem’s career so far. “There’s a track called *Shadows/High Meseta*, which plugs into the whole thing that we did with Madrugada, these huge semi-psychedelic Doors-y kind of songs, but then it kind of warps into an Amon Düül, Krautrock thing. I’ve been developing it in the back of my mind for almost ten years now,” says the singer. “I like to change things around half-way through, to try and challenge the rules of basic song structure a bit.”

Høyem tried out some of this new material at a couple of festival dates in the summer, and also during a prestigious support slot with Leonard Cohen in Langesund. “He’s been a huge influence since I was a kid. He was always there and I’ve developed my own relationship with his music in what I’ve done,” remarks the vocalist. “I also listen to a lot of British folk music, Fairport Convention, Sandy Denny. To me, Richard Thompson is up there with Bob Dylan, really gloomy, dark stuff. Jacques Brel has also been an inspiration. I can see how he has influenced other people I listen to, Nick Cave, David Bowie, and obviously Scott Walker, that really expressive vocal style.”

Høyem can’t help measuring himself against lyricists and songwriters of that magnitude. “I have great, maybe even unrealistic expectations of my abilities. Maybe it’s just some kind of psychotic thing I’ve got into,” he muses. “I really feel I have a lot to prove and a long way to go. I want to be like my big idols, sometimes I feel that I can be but, most of the time, I just feel like a complete idiot. I guess that’s just the way it is.”

The singer is selling himself short there. Madrugada certainly made their mark outside Scandinavia and punched above their weight amongst the Anglo-Saxons groups. “We managed to touch a lot of people and it was really powerful stuff,” says Høyem who intends to visit Greece,

where his former group had a big following, before Christmas 2009, and mainland Europe and the UK next year.

Now managed by Per Eirik Johansen, who signed Madrugada to Virgin in 1998, the singer has formed his own label with distribution by Universal in Norway, and is already planning ahead and looking for licensees and distributors elsewhere. “We’re definitely going to put a lot of work in Europe, we’re going to do whatever it takes,” he stresses. “This is a fresh start, something that I’ve done with new collaborators, a natural next step, both from my work in Madrugada, and as a solo artist. The inspiration comes from a lot of different places. There’s a kind of newly-won freedom, in a way.”

Moon Landing? Mission accomplished.

Pierre Perrone