

AVAST – A FUCKIN’ FREAK SHOW OF MUSICAL PREFERENCES

When thinking of Norway, the extreme metal music lover will automatically link the country to black metal and all clichés attached. However, there are also bands who have their own take on the genre without using corpsepaint, bullet belts, stuts, Kiss boots and black leather pants. Avast, hailing from Stavanger, is such a band. If you’re looking for cheap devil worship or occult themes, you will be disappointed. So, what is their view on black metal? We had a chat with Hans Olaf Myrvang (vocals and bass) and Trond (guitars). (JOKKE)



(c) Katharina Ueland

Hi guys! Let’s start with a question that you probably are being asked over and over again. What is the meaning behind the band name?

Hans Olaf: To be honest, we just wanted something short and easy to remember. Furthermore, it is an old Dutch nautical term which means “stop”. So at the same time as it met the first criteria it also lined up with what the lyrical content is projecting – that it is time to stop and think about what we humans are doing to this world.

On your website is a long list of positive reviews for your debut album “*Mother culture*”. Has there also been some negative criticism and how do you cope with negative feedback on your music?

Hans Olaf: There has almost exclusively been positive feedback. The list on our website includes all registered feedback. We have not selected only the best ones. However, some of those reviews point out the fact that we sound like other bands in our segment, and that can be viewed as negative criticism. And to be honest, we kind of agree. But we don’t care. To be innovative in today’s musical landscape is more or less impossible, and there is no shame in doing stuff other bands have done before, as long as it is done in a good way. We cannot all invent a new genre. We do of course try to make our own twist, and we believe we are successful in doing so.

Before the debut album, you independently released a self-titled EP in 2016. Was it based on this release that you signed with Dark Essence Records? Was there interest from other labels?

Hans Olaf: One of the guys working at Dark Essence Records is an old friend of mine, and he has been interested in signing us to their roster since he heard the EP in 2016 and since he saw us live at a festival we played the same year. There was also interest from other labels, yes, but the connection to Dark Essence Records was strong from early on. And it would take a lot to lure us away from them.

It was not via a label advertisement that I found out about Avast but thanks to a Facebook-post by concert photographer Stefan Raduta. Are you satisfied with the effort the label puts into promoting Avast?

Hans Olaf: Indeed. The effort Dark Essence Records puts into promoting us is so overwhelming that words cannot describe it. We are extremely grateful.

The Dark Essence band roster is quite diverse with some traditional black metal bands like Taake and Sarkom, some Viking-themed black metal bands like Hades Almighty, Mistur and Helheim and also some more progressive acts like Hail Spirit Noir or post-metal bands like Dwaal and Five The Hierophant. Who are your favorite colleagues from the label and in what way does Avast fit in their roster?

Trond: When it comes to black metal, and extreme metal in general, I'm kind of a sucker for that old school Norwegian sound pioneered by Darkthrone and Emperor, so my favorite Dark Essence band is actually Taake. The music and the atmosphere that they manage to create on their records is quite unique, and the vocals are so fucking intense, it just makes for a perfect soundtrack for a grim and frostbitten winter day here in Norway. Regarding Avast fitting in the Dark Essence roster, I couldn't care less, to be honest. Black metal, and punk rock, which is the music genre I grew up listening to, is basically about not fitting in, so I don't really care whether Avast fits in on the Dark Essence roster or not.

I don't know that many Norwegian post-black metal bands. This might be due to the fact that the majority of your countrymen plays True Norwegian black metal with a more traditional take on the genre. Avast has its roots in punkrock and hardcore. What are the bands that got you into black metal and what elements attract you in the genre?

Trond: The first black metal record I listened to was "*Transilvanian hunger*" by Darkthrone over 15 years ago. I was probably around 16 years old at the time, and I was not used to listening to this type of music at all. The heaviest bands I listened to back then were probably Minor Threat or G.B.H, so listening to "*Transilvanian hunger*" was a challenging experience. However, after listening to it for some time, I noticed that there were actually beautiful melodies and lots of mesmerizing atmosphere hidden beneath all that noise. So I guess that's what attracted me to the genre – the melodies and the atmosphere.

Is there a good local music scene in Stavanger?

Hans Olaf: Whether there is a good or a bad scene in Stavanger comes down to personal taste. I think there is quite a good music scene in Stavanger. It is a small city with few bands, but some of them make music on an international level within their genres.

Do you know the guys of Gehenna, one of the most well-known bands from your town and one of my personal favorites?

Hans Olaf: I don't personally know any of the guys of Gehenna, but I know who they are, and I talk to a couple of them when I meet them. Great band indeed!

Avast plays a form of post-black or blackgaze that mixes the aggressiveness of black metal with the atmosphere and emotion of post-rock like Caspian or This Will Destroy You. Do all band members share the same interest in both genres or is there one typical "blackie" in the band?

Trond: We are a fuckin' freak show of musical preferences, let me tell you that much. I'm not sure what you mean with the term "blackie", but since I am the one writing most of the music, I do not want to spoil it with a bunch of uninteresting lists with bands that everyone has heard a million times before.

"Blackgaze" or "post-black" have become dirty words in many black metal circles and is often labelled as music for hipsters. The American band Deafheaven might seem an obvious inspiration for Avast but often received bad publicity from the scene police. Did you ever receive negative criticism from the true black metal cult?

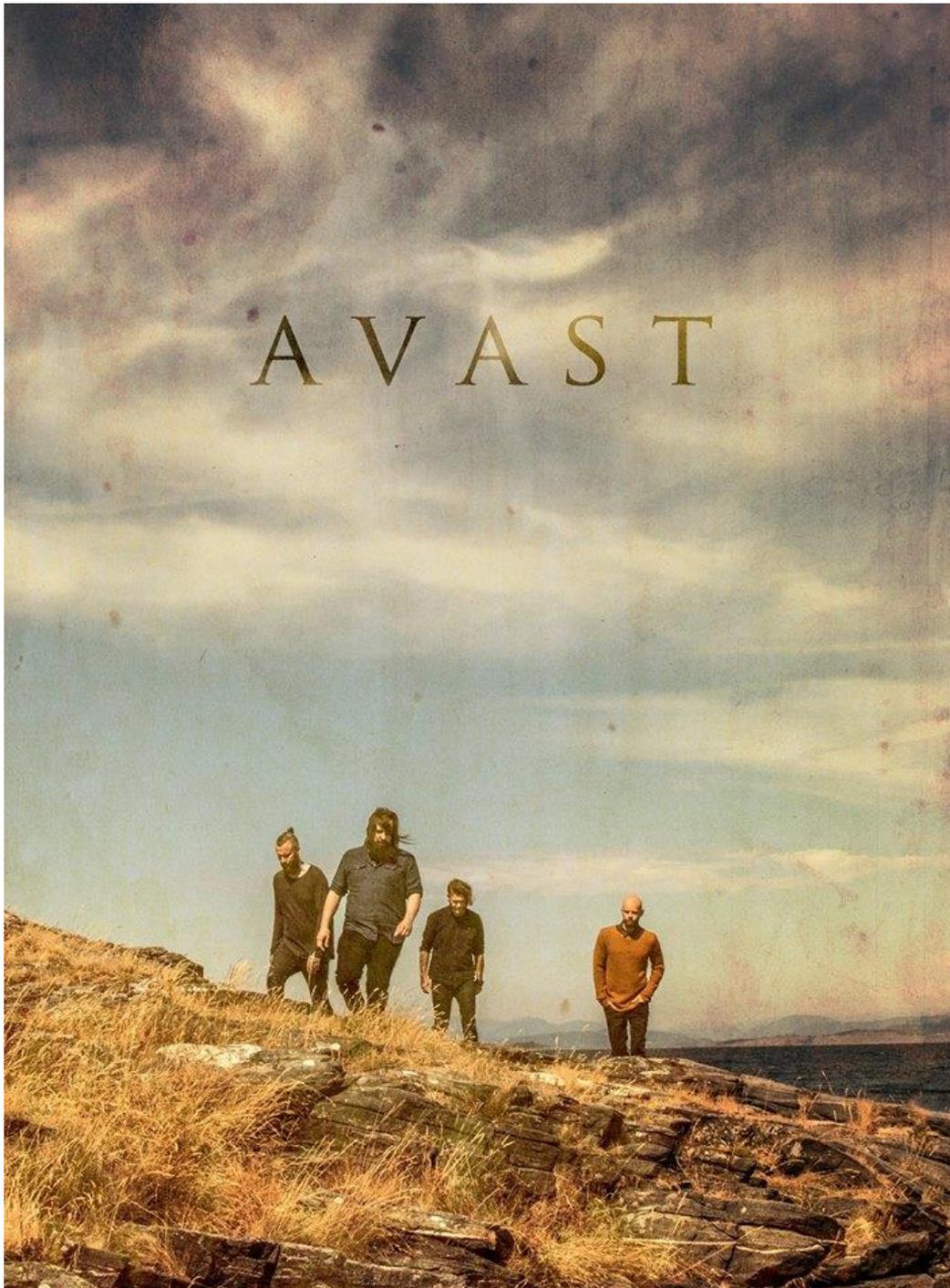
Hans Olaf: I wouldn't call it negative criticism from the true black metal cult per se, but we have noticed some "This is not black metal" comments here and there on social media.

What black metal bands have influenced your sound?

Trond: The black metal bands that have had the most influence on our sound are actually Darkthrone and Emperor. With Darkthrone going in a more crust punk direction for a brief period and Emperor being a symphonic black metal band, I'm guessing these bands also received lots of negative feedback from the scene police. In the end, we do not make music to satisfy anyone else but ourselves.

It seems you only like the musical elements that define black metal since you do not dress up in spikes, leather and corpsepaint and also the lyrics do not cover the typical satanic or occult themes. So, can we label Avast as black metal or not?

Hans Olaf: The genre-discussion is a fascinating one. Most of the members in Avast come from the punk and hardcore scene, where the same silly questions are constantly asked: What is punk? What is hardcore? Now we are making metal, and the same types of questions appear. What is black metal? Is Avast black metal? And what always hits me is the question "Who's to say?" It is quite obvious for me that it all comes down to personal definitions, as with most variations of art. Of course, you cannot label ABBA or Bee Gees black metal, but if a band uses tremolo picking, blast beats and vicious screams on top, why not call it black metal? Because that band doesn't look like or sound like all the other Norwegian black metal bands from the 90s? For me that just seems weird. With that form of rationalization one can argue that the Sex Pistols and all bands sounding exactly like the Sex Pistols are the only bands playing punk. I personally label Avast as black metal amongst other labels, cause of course, we put a lot of genres into the mix, as most bands do today. But in the end I nor the rest of the band really care. We enjoy playing it whether you call it black metal, post-metal or post-black metal. And that is what it's all about. We cannot change our music simply because some purists don't like us.



(c) Katharina Ueland

Your lyrics deal with social and environmental issues. “*Mother culture*” is based on the philosophical novel “*Ishmael*” by Daniel Quinn and addresses the potential for a global catastrophe. This book was written to evoke knowledge about how the human race operates and to help people realize the way they are acting is serving as a catalyst which is speeding up the end of the world. Do you think it is still possible to change the mindset and behavior of humanity in order to save the planet from self-destruction?

Trond: Wow, that’s really hard to say, to be honest. It’s probably already too late to reverse all the damage we have done to the earth and considering the political climate in Europe and the United States at the moment, I’m not very optimistic about the future of mankind.

The album title is also inspired by the novel. The term “Mother culture” refers to the set of "unquestioned influences" or "hidden premises" that the members of a culture merely take for granted as being universally true (rather than, in fact, being culturally-specific), and that largely determines how the members of that culture experience and view the world. Can you link this quote with some examples from the Scandinavian way of living?

Trond: Because of the globalisation that has been going on for the past couple of years, it is very hard to come up with only a few ways of Scandinavian ways of living. The entire Western world is slowly turning into a big old giant melting pot. However, if there were two words I'd link with Scandinavian culture, it would be “humble” and “polite”. I cannot give a simple explanation why, perhaps it is my own “mother culture” telling me that these are two relevant and important values in our society. Nevertheless, working as a teacher for the past four years has taught me that these values are slowly disappearing from the Norwegian culture, only to be replaced by, what I consider American values, such as individuality and selfishness.

Norway is known for its enormous Oil Fund, high state employment, low unemployment rates, high personal taxation and employment benefits weighted heavily in favour of the employee. But what about environmental issues? Can other countries learn something from the Norwegians?

Trond: Well, considering Norway's enormous Oil Fund, I do not think we can brag about being number one when it comes to environmental issues. On the other hand, when it comes to other social and political questions, I do believe that most countries in the world can learn a thing or two from, not only us, but Sweden and Denmark, too. However, there's no point in turning this interview into a political debate, so I think it's better not to go into further detail here.

One of Daniel Quinn's quotes says that “Our lifestyle is evolutionarily unstable--and is therefore in the process of eliminating itself in the perfectly ordinary way.” Can you give us a few examples of how you and the other band members deal with environmental issues and reduce your ecological footprint?

Trond: Well, I ride my bike to work, eat only vegan food and try my best to reduce waste by recycling as much as possible. Also, I'm not taking as many showers as I probably should.

Quinn also states that being surrounded by nature has a positive effect: “It's the idea that people living close to nature tend to be noble. It's seeing all those sunsets that does it. You can't watch a sunset and then go off and set fire to your neighbor's tepee. Living close to nature is wonderful for your mental health.” What is your relationship with the beautiful Norwegian nature?

Trond: The Norwegian nature is, as you put it, beautiful, and majestic, to say the least. Hell, nothing beats the feeling of walking around in the cold, Norwegian forests listening to “Inn i de dype skogers favn” by Darkthrone. I am going to ruin this whole interview talking about it, so if you have a forest and a Darkthrone record nearby, you know what to do.

You released a stunning video for the track “An earnest desire” with beautiful nature scenery. Where was this video shot?

Hans Olaf: The video was shot just south of our home city of Stavanger. There is this rural area called “Jæren”, which is known for its plain scenery, where you find these huge beaches known as “Jærstrendene”, or “the Jær beaches”. The video was shot at one of those beaches,

namely Borestranden, or “Drill Beach” to use an English term. Ivar Vasstveit, one of my best friends, shot the video, and the girl in the video is my girlfriend Katharina. It is a beautiful video indeed.



You also made a lyric video for “*The world belongs to man*”. This song is about the contemporary story of humankind and reflects where we find ourselves today as we begin to realise that our way of life is slowly killing the planet. The song also expresses anger and frustration at not being able to stop this process, knowing that to be able to do so would require such radical political, economic and cultural changes that certain powerful people would lose both money and power in the process. The video shows footage of an old black and white movie. What movie is it and how does it relate with the song?

Trond: The old black and white film is actually “*Dante’s inferno*” from 1911. The song and the video shows how our interpretation of Hell, as a place of pain and torment, is closely related to our culture and our cultural values. The song’s repeated lyrical content (“*Mother, what have I done to this world?*”) underlines our cultural understanding of being born in a world that closely resembles the biblical myth of Hell, yet being unable to do anything about it, a realisation that causes fear and anxiety among us, and, consequently, causing us to turn to different distorted versions of reality, such as religions and mythologies, for answers.

In 2016, you toured with Swedish crust band Myteri and also played in Belgium. Where was this gig and was it a good show?

Trond: The gig was at a place called Bristol (I think) in Ghent. Link (crust band from Belgium) also played the show, and yes, it was an awesome show!

Do you have plans on promoting “*Mother culture*” with a new tour?

Hans Olaf: After several years of touring as DIY-musicians, we want to wait and see if we can build a solid fan base before going on a European tour. Right now we only have shows within Scandinavia planned for the next six months. Maybe next autumn or winter. We will have to wait and see.