

Bio information: **RAOUL BJÖRKENHEIM**
Title: "**APOCALYPSO**" (Cuneiform Rune 156)

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FILE UNDER: ROCK

Finnish guitarist and composer Raoul Björkenheim was born in Los Angeles in 1956. He spent his first 25 years moving back and forth between Finland and the USA, finally leaving the States after graduating from the Berklee School of Music in Boston. He settled in Helsinki, where he began to integrate his interest in ethnic and electronic musics into the bands that he was fronting at the time and the rock and jazz styles he was already adept at.

Raoul first came to international attention with **Edward Vesala's Sound & Fury** band. Björkenheim says: "Vesela wanted me to let loose and totally obliterate anything that had to do with standard guitar." Björkenheim formed his own group **Krakatau** as an offshoot of Sound & Fury. In 1988, Krakatau recorded its first album, *Ritual*. The record featured a unique blend of heavy guitar work that used feedback and distortion combined with dual wailing, Coleman and Ayler-influenced horns and a rhythm section that included bass (electric and acoustic) and two drummers. Despite being released only on lp and only in Finland, it gained attention from critics and listeners alike. *The Wire* called *Ritual* "...a hotter, more raw proposition, expressionistically blowing the lid off Finnish stoicism. ...Björkenheim's writing merits comparison with Shannon Jackson's best... In short, this is a vital and important record signaling the arrival of some world-class talents."

By the time of Krakatau's 3rd release, *Volition*, it had been signed to the well-known German ECM label. ECM released both *Volition* (1992) and *Matinale* (1994) internationally, bringing Björkenheim's music to a wider audience. In 1996, Cuneiform reissued *Ritual* on CD, issuing it for the first time outside of Finland. Said one critic: "This is very strong jazz... But the real focal point is the blinding shrill guitar pyrotechnics – intricate and growling with creative feedback and distortion. Imagine Ornette Coleman with a strong John [Z]orn injection charged in a rock direction...". Indeed, as a guitarist/composer, Björkenheim has few equals. *The Wire* has compared him with Caspar Brötzman: "As with Brötzmann, ...Björkenheim is a guitarist drawn towards the physicality and expressiveness of the saxophone. Infected by Coltrane's intensity, he attempts to pull every last drop of emotion through each of his six strings."

In recent years, Björkenheim has played and/or recorded with a wide array of well known international artists, including **Mats Gustavsson, Henry Kaiser, Mike Keneally, Bill Laswell, Michael Manring, Paul Schütze, Nicky Skopelitis, Jah Wobble** and many others. His discography from the 80s and 90s includes nearly two dozen releases with Krakatau, Paul Schütze's Phantom City and 3rd Site projects, Vesala's Sound and Fury, and many other bands, as well as solo works. In addition, he has composed numerous works for orchestras, films, video, and modern dance in Finland – as well as teaching music since 1985 at Helsinki's prestigious Sibelius Academy. Björkenheim is an avid performer, both solo and in groups, performing at countless music festivals in Scandinavia and Europe throughout the 1980s and 90s. He has won numerous music awards in Finland, including the 1996 **Young Finland Prize** and 1984 **Finnish Jazz Federation Yrjö Prize for Musician of the Year**, and has been named "**Musician of the Year**" and "**Best Guitarist**" for multiple years in *Jazzrytmit's* critics poll. *Volition* won the 1992 **Emma Prize for Jazz Record of the Year**. Björkenheim has received numerous commissions in Finland for his work.

Apocalypso was written by Björkenheim in 1994-95 as a commission for the **Helsinki Juhlaviikot Festival**, which initially requested a piece for 100 guitarists; Björkenheim composed for 42 musicians instead. A documentary was made of the work in progress in Stockholm, where Björkenheim was living at the time. *Apocalypso's* August 1995 premiere at the Helsinki Festival was a 24 minute sonic spectacular, featuring the massed power of a total of 42 musicians: 30 guitarists, 8 bassists and 4 percussionists. The event was captured on film. Asked about the experience, Björkenheim recalls:

"I was inspired by Korean Sinawi music when writing the first section, the formal processional type sound gives it a sense of purpose and timelessness. Also, the first notes of the piece were meant to sound astonishing, and I must say that there was a satisfying dropping of jaws when we began. There were a lot of open mouths for the rest of it too. When writing the other sections, I was concerned with finding good contrasting material... Apocalypso (the section) came to me while I was out on the sea, and it contains echos of an Arabian cassette that I've had for decades.

Björkenheim added compositions to *Apocalypso* in the following years. He recorded this version of *Apocalypso* in 2000 in the state-of-the-art Sea & Wolf Studios, performing all of the parts himself in a tour-de-force of virtual ensemble playing. As released here on CD, *Apocalypso* is a galvanizing and exciting work, showcasing Björkenheim's energized, furious playing and intense, inventive compositions. Evoking in a single breath the rhythms of north and south, east and west, *Apocalypso* is a work born of contrasts, simultaneously primitive and futuristic. It is not unlike Finland itself, a place on the crossroads of east and west where cell phones ring without incongruity inside centuries-old walls.