

## WHAT THE PRESS HAVE SAID ABOUT

RAOUL BJORKENHEIM / *eCsTaSy*

*eCsTaSy*

CUNEIFORM RECORDS

2014

“...Guitarist Raoul Bjorkensheim is one of those musicians whose albums are always the subject of eager anticipation. ... His playing is both emotionally cathartic and intellectually gratifying. ... Bjorkenheim’s latest project, an all-Finnish group called *eCsTaSy*...on their self-titled debut, Bjorkenheim indulges in the most lushly melodic, emotionally direct music he’s documented since his days as a member of Edward Vesala’s Sound and Fury band. ...*eCsTaSy*’s music is a rolling torrent of free jazz, African polyrhythms and hardcore punk attitude. ...musicians who value passion and visceral expression over the mere display of chops. ...That said, every member of this group is a complete monster. The album opens with “El Pueblo Unido”, a soaring, anthemic, rhythmically free piece that recalls some of Charlie Haden’s work with the Liberation Music Orchestra. ... A brawny, tightly- composed post-post-bop piece, “Sos” gives saxophonist Lyytinen and Bassist Huhtala and an ever-shifting backdrop for expressive... improvisations. ...There’s a wry humor to these improvisations that make them a real pleasure to listen to. ..Replete with rapier-sharp improvisations, quick-witted compositions, and dangerously addictive interplay, *eCsTaSy* provides... maximum musical chills and thrills.”

-Dave Wayne, *All About Jazz*, September 6, 2014

“...*eCsTaSy*... is a metal-jazz hybrid quartet which integrates jazz, avant-garde and free improv. ... The 45 minute, nine-track outing opens with the furious *El Pueblo Unido*...Bjorkenheim’s aggressive electric guitar is at the forefront, with liberal use of sustain, controlled feedback, and heavy metal flourishes. ...*Sos* has a rock and groove-based foundation...Lyytinen is afforded ample room and space to display his chops, sometimes providing a Coltrane-esque brashness. ...The foursome can be as forceful as a fanged viper with a bad attitude, but it’s not all screams, bites and lacerations. ...The cinematically shadowy “Deeper” is suffused with Huhtala’s dark arco bass, Lyytinen’s breathy bass sax, Bjorkenheim’s whispery effects and Ounaskari’s spectral percussion.”

-Doug Simpson, *Audiophile Audition*, July 20, 2014

“S. Victor Aaron’s Best of 2014 (Part 3 of 4), Avant Garde + Experimental Jazz): ... it’s hard to keep the annual Best of 2014 Avant Garde & Experimental Jazz list down to a manageable size. ... In choosing thirty of the best, I nevertheless left off some really good ones. ...THE BEST OF THE REST: ...Raoul Bjorkenheim/*eCsTaSy*-*eCsTaSy*: *eCsTaSy* roams just inside and outside the perimeter of jazz, and virtuosic players subscribe to the gospel of impulse as much as they adhere to even the outer regions of the genre.”

- S. Victor Aaron, *Something Else*, December 11, 2014

“...he’s firmly grounded in the European avant-garde that developed in the 1970s, but...also...American free jazz of the Ornette Coleman variety as well as ...Chicago style.... Combine this with a love of fiery blues-tinged rock guitar... ..he’s back on the Cuneiform label...company of multifarious sax man Pauli Lyytinen and the rhythm section of bassist Jori Huhtala...and veteran drummer...Markku Ounaskari. All three are improv veterans...well quipped to keep up with an imagination as darting as that of their boss. ...”*SoS*”...is...the work of the Bjorkenheim heard with the Scorch Trio. ... It’s a terrific track, reminiscent of some of his best material but entirely original and never less than compelling. ...“As Luck Would Have It”...begins as a showpiece for Huhtala’s acoustic bass skills and then develops into a hard-hitting and funky exercise that’s one of the album’s nastiest and most skillfully delivered compositions. ...”*The Sky is Ruby*” closes out *eCsTaSy*, ... Bjorkenheim’s most ferocious soloing of the album. ...It’s a powerful closer to a set of songs that’s unpredictable at every turn. ...Bjorkenheim shows admirable control, only letting loose when the occasion dictates, and a keen eye for properly utilizing the talent he’s assembled. ...Raoul Bjorkenheim seems just as energized as ever.”

-Leonard Pierce, *Burning Ambulance*, January 1, 2014

“...It seems that every time I come across this cat, I’m listening to some of the most exciting, edgy and intelligent music experimental jazz has to offer. ...Saxophonist Pauli Lyytinen, bassist Jori Huhtala and drummer Markku Ounaskari complete this potent quartet. ...they are incredible intuitive and selfless virtuosos... ..“*El Pueblo Unido*” packs the sonic sax/guitar spiritual wallop of Sonny Sharrock’s masterpiece *Ask The Ages* but instead of a Coltranian patter, it channels Ornette Coleman through a Nordic folk strainer... Bjorkenheim, like the 1970’s version of Terje Rypdal, portrays...moods through the language of a rock guitar. ....“*Threshold*” is a pensive occasion for Lyytinen to apply a soul-immersed tenor to the rolling rhythms of Huhtala and Ounaskari. ...I’ll be damned if Raoul Bjorkenheim didn’t start another project that turned to gold. *eCsTaSy* may have capitalization in the wrong places but it hits all the right notes.”

-S. Victor Aaron, *Something Else*, January 21, 2014

“The *eCsTaSy* trio...encompasses the fire of the Scorch Trio and improvisational power of the Kalabalik Trio with some of the orchestral vision of the UMO Orchestra’s *Primal Mind*. ...it’s not quite the size of an orchestra but the guitarist’s compositions and arrangements think expansively. ....“*El Pueblo Unido*” kicks things off in a soaring fashion. ...The guitarists biting tone is big and rises above the rhythm section in a tradition that I would liken to Terje Rypdal’s more rock oriented output. ...“*Threshold*” ...reminds me of the atmospheric fusion of early Weather Report. It’s great to hear Bjorkenheim, who has been delivering power trio based recordings, add some additional sonic elements. Each piece seems carefully composed to get the most out the instruments, but leaves plenty of room for the musicians to stretch out.”

-*Free Jazz Collective*, 2014

“...a heady mix of open free jazz and psychedelia – or if you like, avant jazz rock. ...Bjorkenheim...gives you his dynamic, sonically expanded full frontal attack and all three others of the band have a kick and flourish to their playing...It’s a matter of serious avant soundings and original frameworks for smart and out blowing. ...fans of electric exploratory outness...will find this a compelling set. Recommended!”

-Grego Applegate Edwards, *Applegate Guitar and Bass Blog*, June 16, 2014

“Raoul Bjorkenheim deserves guitar hero-status, yet he has somehow – despite the bracing quality of his playing, as urgent and lyrical as it is change-taking – eluded the recognition he deserves. ...He does really well in improvisationally expansive small groups, from

the mighty Krakatau to the Scorch Trio to a hot summit with William Parker and Hamid Drake. ...Having listened for nearly 20 years, I can say that his debut from his new quarter eCsTaSy is one of the strongest things in his catalogue. ...In the range of materials they engage and their broad texturalism (not to mention their instrumentation), this group recalls Krakatau more than it does Bjorkenheim's recent power trios. They open with a soaring reading of "El Pueblo Unido ...the guitar/tenor interaction is positively bracing in its fraught lyricism. ...Crunching, stuttering "Sos," ...is the most muscular among these fairly terse pieces...In many places here, a strong sense of musical freedom contrasts deftly with rock riffage and swagger. ...Perhaps best of all are the lilting pieces "As Luck Would Have It" ...,the rubbery groove "No Delay," and the swinging "The Sky is Ruby." In a just world, these would be dance hits. ...this terrific set...will hopefully garner the attention it deserves." - Jason Bivins, *dusted in exile*, September 5, 2014

"...powerful and engaging...The first minute or so of 'SOS' tells you everything you need to know about the album. There is jazz, rock, fusion, world music, old and new colliding, and more. None of it particularly mainstream, and none of it is boring. ... At times it feels like there are at least a half-dozen players involved, as each musician brings a vast palette of soundscapes and sonic possibilities. The guitar sounds carried me from Bitches Brew through John Abercrombie's Gateway through Mahavishnu in the 80s and straight into the modern era, never feeling trite or over-done. ...'Quick Hit' Song: "El Pueblo Unido" – an amazingly energetic song with an anthemic feel." - Michael Anderson, *Gear Diary*, February 10, 2014

"Ecstasy recalls the thornier side of the ECM Records catalog, especially the works of fellow Scandinavians Edward Vesala and Terje Rypdal. Bjorkenheim attacks the guitar the way the late great Sonny Sharrock did – like Coltrane and Ayler "attacked" their saxophones (mad-fierce abandon) – yet blues is never very far away. There's also the chunky focus of pre- Mahavishnu John McLaughlin and the searing wit of Frank Zappa. The way RB cross-pollinates between jazz and rock recalls fellow traveler Nels Cline...oblique swing, gnarly noise, predictably unpredictable, swell." -Mark Keresman, *Icon*, July 2014

"El Pueblo Unido"...sounds like nothing less than a lost Ornette Coleman theme delivered by Sonny Sharrock's *Ask the Angels* band. ...fiery and visceral...eCsTaSy is his fourth release for Cuneiform, and...draws on his progressive-rock chops and free-jazz execution, with surprises around every corner. ...The key to the album's excitement lies in the group interaction; Pauli Lyytinen plays both tenor and soprano with a force that holds its own alongside Bjorkenheim's guitar. And the leader's role is primarily as a conduit for feeling, able to leap from yowling leads to melodic textures without turning either situation into an opportunity for indulgence. eCsTaSy ends too soon, a delightful rarity in these days when more often means less." -Mike Shanley, *Jazz Times*, July 29, 2014

"Guitar Moderne Top Records 2014 ... Raoul Bjorkenheim eCsTaSy ...Appearing on the scene between Rypdal and Aarset, Bjorkenheim is an example of...Scandinavian guitarists push the envelope. His eCsTaSy band's Ornette meets Jimi meets Fela sounds recalls his '90s power quartet, Krakatau." -Michael Ross, *Guitar Moderne*, 2014

"The band communicates on a very high level and revels in bringing the exciting spiritual jazz sound of the late 1960's into a thoroughly postmodern setting. "El Pueblo Unido" opens with a blast of raw saxophone and cathartic guitar in an exciting Sonny Sharrock-esque manner... Solo bass opens "As Luck Would Have It" and then guitar, saxophone and drums fill in...On much of the album he is very generous in giving space to his band mates, but he takes the wheel and stomps on the gas here..."The Sky is Ruby" powers the album to an excellent finish...a lengthy solo that is very exciting and well built, hopefully we will be hearing more from him soon. Bjorkenheim...spraying hot metal notes and combining with Ounaskari's drums to develop an overpowering sound that ends this excellent album in glorious fashion." -Tim Niland, *Jazz and Blues*, January 24, 2014

"Perhaps the most distinguished Vesala alumnus was the one first to detach from the leaders bearhug and set up on his own – Raoul Bjorkenheim. The guitarist's first group as leader was Krakatau... Despite the boiling hot drive of most of the group's pieces, influenced by Cream, Lifetime, The Jimi Hendrix Experience...there was a lyrical side to the guitarist's playing as well... The group on eCsTaSy is similarly configured, with Pauli Lyytinen on saxophone and kalimba, Juri Huhtala on base and Markku Ounaskari providing as convincing an extension of Vesala's stratified approach as any we've heard since the great man's passing. ... "Sos" ...is cast in a tight, hectic neo-bop form, reflecting...Bjorkenheim's early debt to Eric Dolphy. Huhtala even does a convincing Ron Carter solo. The improvised "Deeper" moves closer to the slow free-jazz of Sound and Fury... This textural and dynamic variety is one of Bjorkenheim's great strengths. ...eCsTaSy is as carefully put together as a great pop set. ... The other impressive thing about Bjorkenheim is that his groups...[are] proper groups with strong individual personalities as well as a clear collective aesthetic. ...Huhtala is integral to the sound and mixed well forward. The saxophone man plays well in some very u-saxophonic keys and Ounaskari is...a player of serious lineage and considerable originality. ...The title's well chosen. ... Excellent." - Brian Morton, *Point of Departure*, 2013

"What a neat little album of freakouts! Nine of 'em there...none of them longer than six and a half minutes, ...any type of guitar/sax/rhythm squalor you could ask for. ...The album's first song "El Pueblo Unido" alludes...to Sonny Sharrock's iconic *Ask the Ages* album. Bjorkenheim's fills and solos here are gorgeous diatonic things that cascade their notes into mountainous heaps. As with Sharrock, Bjorkenheim's guitar digs through effects and tone color, searing for transcendence. He's less interested in melodic or harmonic invention...eCsTaSy mixes straight-up tunes with noisy experiments... There are more tune tunes, including a 9/8 funk with some wicked slide guitar, but just as important are what I'll call the skronk tunes. Be warned, the band never descends/ascends into full-blown skronk mode. They instead give you little self-contained packages of radness... Finding just the right tone color seems to be a Bjorkenheim specialty...he's paced this one very well...Bjorkenheim and friends...know how to put together an album." - Josh Langhoff, *Pop Matters*, February 19, 2014

“Raoul Bjorkenheim has been known for some time as one of the most creative guitarists, composers, and improvisers of our age and has been known to transcend the spirit and power of “Jimi Hendrix and Sonny Sharrock to Finland’s distant shores”. ...Aptly titled eCsTaSy, the ensemble is named after the intense sense of energy and presence cultivated together.”

- Nickabitia, **Sound Colour Vibration**, January 26, 2014

“...this versatile quartet...do not disappoint. ...The swaggering funk of *As Luck Would Have It* weaves emphatic saxophone, wailing guitar, and a madly assertive bass and drum team into a formidably propulsive track, one of the highlights of the disc. ...Bjorkenheim’s playing as been consistently impressive in a number of different contexts, and this latest venture is no exception. A great release, highly recommended.”

- Stuart Kremsky, **Mr. Stu’s Record Room**, October 2014

“You won’t require any of that mosh-pit “substance” being used so frequently these days as you scope out Raoul’s high-energy guitar work (he’s joined by saxophonist Pauli Lyytinen, bassist Jori Huhtala and drummer Marrku Ounaskari in a sonic adventure you will never forget! The fantastic, “As Luck Would Have It”, is enough to make the entire CD worth the purchase price – Super bass intro on this one! For jazz that explores the outer regions (while still remaining very accessible), you’ll love...”No Delay”... give Raoul & his friends a MOST HIGHLY RECOMMENDED...”

- **Zzaj productions**, 2013

“Spotlight: Raoul Bjorkenheim... The first profile I ever did for *Guitar Player* magazine was about Raoul Bjorkenheim. ...was stunned by his Hendrix meet slate era Coltrane approach. ...Like Bill Frisell, he has a distinctive, recognizable style that nevertheless fits in a variety of contexts. ...

Bjorkenheim: ...The music of my new quartet, *Ecstasy*, puts new demands on me as an accompanist, including playing both rock-type rhythmic figures and riffs, and sensitivity following Pauli Lyytinen’s sax or Jori Huhtala’s bass lines. Since we don’t use set forms as in most jazz...I have to really listen closely so as not to destroy the harmonic implications of their solo lines. For this I have worked a lot on ear training, ever since 1978 ... any so-called “original” music is really a filtering and reassembling of all the music a composer/improviser has heard during his/her life. It all affects what is conceptually possible to convey. Coltrane said some beautiful things about us, so without directly quoting him, I’d say my main mission in music is to elevate the spirit of the listener, to transport them to a brighter space. I want my audience to undergo a catharsis of sorts, to burn away its troubles for a brief instant and give a huge dose of positive energy. I want the person who has been to my concert or heard my recording to feel lighter and stronger. I’m aiming for an inner spiritual reaction to my music. ...The musicians I play with today are so inspiring and dynamic that I don’t have a longing for brief collaborative projects. I think the result of a band playing together a lot and actually spending days/weeks rehearsing is the best route for what I want to achieve.”

- Michael Ross, Interview with Raoul Bjorkenheim, **Guitar Moderne**