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FILE UNDER: JAZZ / ELECTRIC JAZZ

Ecstasy Captures Finnish-American Guitarist/Composer/Improvisor Raoul Björkenheim, at the Peak of his Powers, Summoning Finland's Most Talented Players to Create Heart-Stopping Sonic Vistas

One of the most creatively stunning guitarists/composers/improvisers on the planet, **Raoul Björkenheim's** playing summons the transcendent power, spirit and fury of **Jimi Hendrix** and **Sonny Sharrock** to Finland's distant shores. But the title of **Raoul Björkenheim's** new album isn't a boast or a brief manifesto. Rather, *eCsTaSy* is a simple description of the intense communion achieved by his extraordinary new ensemble. The project captures the Finnish-American musician at the peak of his powers, leading a virtuosic Finnish group featuring the brilliant saxophonist **Pauli Lyytinen** and the inventive rhythm section tandem of bassist **Jori Huhtala** and drummer **Markku Ounaskari**. *eCsTaSy* is Björkenheim's fourth **Cuneiform** album, and the project opens the next chapter for an artist with a potent gift for leading improvisation-laced ensembles with a singular group sound.

Performing together since 2010, the quartet explores an array of moods and textures, from brooding soundscapes and cinematic anthems to giddy grooves and meter-shifting steeplechases. For Björkenheim, the band has become an organism in its own right, "four guys with their own voice," he says. "Pauli Lyytinen's sax inspires me with his fluency and inventiveness, and likewise Jori Huhtala, with his very rhythmical drive. Knowing these voices, my writing strives to harness the music that is within each of us so as to flow unrestricted, freely."

Which isn't to say that the quartet's music is primarily inspired by free jazz. Rather, Björkenheim writes compact, carefully crafted tunes that can unfold with a clear narrative arc or that evolve organically using brief thematic cells. Laying the foundation for every piece is the kinetic rhythm section that generates tremendous thrust, churning and burning at every tempo.

The album opens with the stirring anthem "**El Pueblo Unido,**" a bracing call to assembly that builds to an ascending Björkenheim solo full of righteous commitment. The stop and start funk of "**SOS**" jumps and skitters, propelling Lyytinen's serpentine soprano sax and Björkenheim's tuba-like low-end riffs. The morse code is the key to this title. After the delirious romp of "**SOS,**" things take a solemn turn with "**Deeper,**" a droning prayer built on Huhtala's rumbling arco bass work.

In many ways, the album's unfettered impulse, its ecstasy, flows from the way that Björkenheim and Lyytinen build intertwining lines, pushing and pulling each other in rough-and-tumble play like the athletic jousting on "**As Luck Would Have It.**" The band is equally effective on percussive workouts, laying down terpsichorean syncopation on "**Subterranean Samba,**" a piece that combines earthy, even metallic rhythm work with stratospheric saxophone vocabulary. The album's longest track, "**The Sky is Ruby**" is the closer, a forceful medium tempo burner that features a strikingly expressive Björkenheim solo at its center.

Known for his searing sound, urgent lyricism, wide-ranging musical curiosity and far-flung web of creative relationships, Björkenheim has recorded nearly three-dozen albums with an array of ensembles, most importantly **Krakatau**, **Phantom City**, **Scorch Trio**, and **Sound and Fury**. He gained international attention in the early 1990s with several celebrated sessions for **ECM**, and in the ensuing years he's recorded with creative icons such as **Toshinori Kondo**, **Bill Laswell**, and **Juhani Aaltonen**.

Born in Los Angeles in 1956 to Finnish parents, Björkenheim spent the first 15 years of his life in California and New York surrounded by artists (his mother is Russian/Finnish actress/singer **Taina Elg**). In the early 1970s, he moved to Finland to live with his father, and graduated from high school while pouring most of his energy into the guitar.

He made his most important early creative alliance in his mid 20s when he came into the orbit of the great Finnish jazz drummer **Edward Vesala**, who introduced him to new improvisational systems. By the early 1980s, Björkenheim became a key member of Vesala's pool of players, performing on three of the drummer's album including the classic 1987 **ECM** session *Lumi* by the sprawling ensemble **Sound And Fury**.

"Vesala was a strong influence when I was starting out as a jazz musician in the 80s," Björkenheim says. "I had heard him many times live, most memorably in duet with **Tomasz Stanko** in '75. His recording *Tryptikon* for **ECM** with **Jan Garbarek** and **Arild Andersen** is one of my talismans to this day. That record proposes a music influenced by the free jazz of **Ornette** and **Ayler**, but tempered by a gorgeous Nordic sensibility and an ear for free tonality, combined with an extended use of dynamics."

[press release continued on verso]

By the end of the 1980s, Björkenheim was ready to strike out on his own, and he made his first major contribution as a bandleader with **Krakatau**. Krakatau's first album, 1988's *Ritual*, came out on vinyl and was released only in Finland by **Hieronymous**, as was its second, 1989's *Alive*. Not long after, Björkenheim reformed the group with all new personnel, and Krakatau rocketed to international acclaim, release two recordings on **ECM** – *Volition* (1991) and *Matinale* (1993). Björkenheim began working with Cuneiform in 1996, when the American label internationally released, promoted and distributed his *Ritual* album on CD with supplemental recordings. His second collaboration with Cuneiform, a solo album titled *Apocalypso* in which the guitarist played parts originally written for 42 musicians – coincided with the guitarist's 2001 move to New York City – and, unfortunately, with one of modern history's darkest events. A week before *Apocalypso*'s international release, the 9/11 terrorist attacks on NYC and DC stunned the world. Despite its ominous entrance, the CD received widespread critical acclaim and, in 2002, was nominated for Scandinavia's prestigious **Nordic Music Council (NOMUS) Prize**.

Björkenheim went on to work in composer **Paul Schütze**'s densely orchestrated ensemble **Phantom City** and collaborations with New York guitarist **Nicky Skopelitis**. He also wrote and performed arrangements of music from **Miles Davis**'s electric period with Finland's **UMO Jazz Orchestra**.

More recently, Björkenheim has recorded widely with **Scorch Trio**, featuring bassist **Ingebrigt Håker Flaten** and drummer **Paal Nilssen-Love** (both from Norway). In 2007 he recorded with bassist **Trevor Dunn**, keyboardist **Ståle Storløkken**, and drummer **Morgan Ågren** under the title **Box**, a project initiated by filmmaker **Philip Mullarkey** to record and play live as part of the art/film project **Box**. He documented his musical partnership with drummer **Lukas Ligeti** on the 2003 album *Shadowglow* (TUM Records).

Since his 2008 return to Finland, Björkenheim has been collaborating with Finnish musicians (UMO Orchestra, **Kalle Kalima** and **Markus Holkko**) and has, in addition to eCsTaSy, established a new trio, **Triad**, while also maintaining productive contacts with New York colleagues **William Parker**, **Hamid Drake**, and **Gerald Cleaver**. He also formed a jaw-dropping power trio with American bassist **Bill Laswell** and Swedish drummer **Morgan Ågren** trio, which released a self-titled CD, *Blixt*, on Cuneiform in 2011 and performed at international festivals including Germany's **Moers Festival** and Poland's **New Horizons Festival**, and Canada's **Festival International de Musique Actuelle au Victoriaville (FIMAV)** in 2012.

But Björkenheim's primary creative outlet these days is the **eCsTaSy quartet**, a band built on the foundation of his long-time friendship with drummer **Markku Ounaskari**. A veteran of some of the most memorable Finnish groups of the past two decades, he gained new visibility recording for **ECM**, including his first solo album, 2010's *Kuára*. Ounaskari has played with all the major Finnish jazz figures, and with international stars such as **Lee Konitz**, **Kenny Wheeler**, **Tomasz Stanko** and **Marc Ducret**.

"We recently played together as a quartet with the maestro of Finnish jazz, saxophonist **Juhani Aaltonen**, and my old friend from the Krakatau days, bassist **Uffe Krokfors**, a great band with fierce energy," Björkenheim says. "Markku is a lyrical player who has the capacity for high-energy explosions as well, so with him in the crew we're aiming for that wide dynamic/emotional range."

Saxophonist **Pauli Lyytinen**, 30, is part of the band's youth wave, a prolific recording artist who leads or co-leads a diverse array of ensembles, including **Elifantree**, **Equally Stupid**, **Pauli Lyytinen Machinery**, **Kauhukakara**, **Laponia Improvisations Experiment**, and **Skalle & Sharon**. "He's a musician and composer with an obsession for tone color and experimental techniques, enriched by his fluency on the Bb family of saxophones, from bass to soprano," Björkenheim says. "In music ranging from hardcore free to experimental pop, Lyytinen has been inventing new roles for his instrument, often limiting himself to the role of accompanist. In this quartet, he gets a chance to spread his improvisatory wings."

At 29, bassist **Jori Huhtala** is the youngest member of the band, though he's already firmly established himself on the international scene through his work with heavyweights like **David Liebman**, **Tim Hagans**, **Jukkis Uotila** and **Tim Ries**. At home, he's in constant demand as a sideman with top Finnish improvisers such as **Verner Pohjola**, **Eero Koivistoinen**, **Kari Ikonen**, and **Jari Perkiömäki**, and in the ensembles **Big Blue**, **Kvalda**, and **Jussi Fredriksson Jazz Wars**. For Björkenheim, his powerful bandstand presence "echoes of **Miroslav Vitous** and other past masters." He met Lyytinen and Huhtala during his teaching duties at the **Sibelius Academy**, and was inspired by their playing to create this quartet.

Following *eCsTaSy*'s new Cuneiform release. Björkenheim is looking forward to performing with *eCsTaSy* at jazz and experimental music festivals worldwide.

For more information on Raoul Björkenheim / eCsTaSy, see:

www.raoulbjorkenheimecstasy.net - www.raoulbjorkenheim.com - www.cuneiformrecords.com

PROMOTIONAL PHOTOS [Digital/High-Resolution versions of these images are available for download on www.cuneiformrecords.com]



"Bjorkenheim has chops so sharp you could get cut if you got too close, but his technique serves the music, not his ego." – Jazzreview

"if you're a guitarist you better sit up as this guy is a true original" – Exposé

WHAT THE PRESS HAS SAID ABOUT PREVIOUS RAOUL BJÖRKENHEIM / KRAKATAU / BLIXT RELEASES ON CUNEIFORM:

RAOUL BJÖRKENHEIM, BILL LASWELL, MORGAN ÅGREN: BLIXT BLIXT CUNEIFORM 2011

"...the jazz fusion/progressive rock trio of Bill Laswell on bass, Raoul Bjorkenheim on guitar and Morgan Agren is a powerful one filled with tricky lead statements and intricate improvisational sections. ... The trio jumps right out of the gate, going for the throat with "Black Whole" developing a fast and torrid cosmological groove that threatens to engulf the musicians in energy. ... "Drill Beats" "Storm" and "4-4-4-4-2-2-2-5-2." ...are short tracks of great intensity...the group is able to stop and turn on a dime almost telepathically, The Ramones of intricate jazz fusion, hit hard and fast and take no prisoners. ... **Whether a fan of punk rock, jazz fusion or progressive rock, there is something for everyone here.**"

- Tim Niland, *Music and More*, October 14, 2011, jazzandblues.blogspot.com

"Sounding something like neo-prog meets outjazz, the music...is just as interesting for what it does as what it doesn't do. ...there are the considerable joys of their ear-melting inferno "Black Whole," the opening cut on Blixt, but this power trio is also more than capable of downshifting into brilliantly coiled moments like "Shifting Sands Closing Hour," with its mysterious far-east feel. ... **This is an album of muscular inventiveness** — often played hard, and sometimes quite fast — but it never gets too far afield from the nuances and textures that give Blixt its creative heft. ...Bjorkenheim...shows an impressive range, moving with deft ease between eddying distortion, crackling riffs and these atmospheric asides — all the while never losing his grasp of the composition's broader conception. ...Laswell...is fierce yet often lightly shaded — weaving a tapestry of finely controlled timbre and dynamics... Agren. ...is a persistent, challenging force on Blixt, so reminiscent of Tony Williams in the way he can shove the others through the harmonic transitions... **Together, they fashion an endlessly intriguing interplay, like a story shared wordlessly.** ... Laswell and Agren eventually settle into a furious groove...while Bjorkenheim works himself into the crevices of sound. His guitar carries the narrative — sorting through a sweeping range of emotions, from the desperate to the angry, sounding like an accusation and then a sigh... **There is a sense of controlled wonder...throughout the album.** *Blixt* is a densely constructed storm, with thunder being just one element."

- Nick DeRiso, *Something Else!*, December 14, 2011, www.somethingelsereviews.com

"**This audacious power trio delivers the sort of sonic blast that hasn't been felt since bassist Bill Laswell's '80s bands Massacre and Last Exit.** In Finnish guitar wiz and sonic provocateur Raoul Bjorkenheim, Laswell has found the perfect replacement for the late Sonny Sharrock in his ongoing mission to shock and awe. Swedish progressive-rock veteran Morgan Ågren is the perfect drummer to propel this tumultuous tidal wave of sound. ... "Ghost Strokes" and "Invisible One" recall Jimi Hendrix's decidedly jazzy jamming with Mitch Mitchell and Noel Redding... "Storm" and "Cinque Roulettes" are both post-Slayer excursions into a grinding metal maelstrom. Blixt is not for the faint of heart."

- Bill Milkowski, *JazzTimes*, March 2012

"...Bill Laswell... he told me, "I just did a recording...a mutant sort of metal." ...Bjorkenheim... an interesting guitarist — post-Hendrixian in his use of distortion and overdriven amps, but I hear echoes of Caspar Brötzmann, Blind Idiot God's Andy Hawkins, too... Laswell...locks in well with drummer Ågren, creating stuttering funk-rock grooves over which Bjorkenheim tears it up in a style that's indebted to '70s hard rock as much as it is to '90s postpunk noise-rock. **If you can imagine Ronnie Montrose sitting in with Helmet, with frequent outbursts of urban dub, you've got some idea of what you'll hear on Blixt.** ...impressively pyrotechnic..."

- Phil Freeman, *Burning Ambulance*, October 7, 2011

"Few musicians are more aware that music has no borders, and—more than anything else—that the word "genre" is anathema, than Bill Laswell. **...on the brilliantly crafted BLIXT...Raoul Bjorkenheim—Bill Laswell—Morgen Agren. ...are involved in the creation of some of the finest music of the year—music that has no easy home anywhere and yet is comfortably at home everywhere.** For here are three musical terrorists inhabiting more so-called genres" at once, and blurring their edges to mix more metaphors, more than anyone except possibly Charles Mingus circa 1957. Music that sings the ears as it strikes like bolts of lightning deep into the soul—palpitating, fibrillating with Laswell's rumbling bass, the shredded harmonies of Bjorkenheim's guitar scorching with the rolling thunder of Ågren's drums. ... These melodies and their shuddering harmonies are so overwhelming and so beautifully oblique... **Calm after the musical blitzkrieg—the Blixt—continues to taunt the senses until the very end of this utterly fabulous album."**

- Raul D'Gama Rose, *All About Jazz*, March 14, 2012, www.allaboutjazz.com

"...**Blixt...the sonic degree and variance hits you at 1000 miles per hour as total carnage breaks loose from the harmonies that transpire. ... Blixt have offered a statement with only a few resting spots to breath and the rest is a savage cyclone of musical exaltation.** ...*Blixt*, the odd shapes and angular flow of shattering sonic substance from groups like Massacre and Last Exit are reintroduced along side the atonal feedback that Hendrix was known for ...guitarist Raoul Bjorkenheim ...in a league akin to a list as diverse as John McLaughlin, Sonny Sharrock, Jimi Hendrix and Buckethead. There is a weight captured in the way the album was recorded that sheds light to the genius of Laswell as a producer and a musician... Laswell's bass tone rumbles in a midst of the frenzy and torrent of devastating annihilation that is served up from the drum kit of Morgan Ågren. ... Laswell stretches the limitations of the low end..."

"...Blixt ...simply put...it's the kind of groups dreams are made of. Cream and Emerson, Lake and Palmer are two perfect examples of groups that reflect how Blixt has been put together. Hammered out in a very short window as a group recording, the live feel of the record stays through and little over dubs are used for the record. ...

"...Morgan Ågren implanted himself at a very early age around some of the brightest minds in music and you can hear every single trace of that history in the works he has given to *Blixt*. He is always exploring his kit... In the song 'Tools', there is a phenomenal drum intro from Morgan Ågren that displays his genius level technique. Raoul Bjorkenheim is a guitarist who is much like Morgan in that he is one of the most explosive and trained in his field, yet is under the radar ...

"... The song that really turns the page...is the number 'Ghost Strokes'. ...the song builds on a very open and strident recycled theme that allows Raoul Bjorkenheim to explore his guitar in every way imaginable. ... The closing number '10 4-4-4-4-2-2-2-5-2' is a ferocious and grimacing ending to a very dynamic ride. Laswell and Ågren begin things slowly and by the time Bjorkenheim fully displays his techniques, you are fully encased inside orchestrated madness through sound. ...Bjorkenheim goes off in a way few guitar players could even imagine going. ... The closest thing I could wrap my mind around describing this sound is new age speed jazz and experimental space rock, or more honestly something unlike anything I have ever heard in my life.

Cuneiform Records has officially closed out their last quarter and *Blixt* is a part of the last batch they launched. The label is one of the strongest in the

experimental scene and *Blixt* tops anything they have presented thus far. With no lyrics and only a landscape of music to absorb, it's the perfect ride for anyone who enjoys all the conceptual building to rely in the music itself. ...Raoul Björkenheim and Morgan Ågren are an equal musical force and have proven themselves to be just as innovative and important to modern music history as Laswell has been. *Blixt* is yet another window into why the legacy of Laswell will never be touched.”
- Erik Otis, *Sound Color Vibration*, December 3, 2011, www.soundcolourvibration.com

“Imagine a bass line so heavy and doom-laden it sounds like some kind of nightmare remix of Black Sabbath’s *Paranoid* and Pink Floyd’s *Ummagumma*. Add an absolutely manic Keith-Moon-lightning-meets-Jon-Bonham-thunder drum solo across the length of a track. Top it off with the most intense Robert-Fripp-as-Frank-Zappa guitar pyrotechnics. That might give you a tiny glimpse of what’s in store for you on *Blixt*, one of the most revelatory albums ever dropped into the “Rock” section by your favorite purveyor of recorded music. ... The sounds on *Blixt* range from Weather Report-effect jazz fusion to a kind of electric gamelan music. It’s a veritable third rail of sound created by a trio of musicians—bassist Bill Laswell, guitarist Raoul Björkenheim, and drummer Morgan Ågren-working in uncharted territory. Cuneiform Records has a long history of releasing genre-destroying artworks from some of the most iconoclastic musicians on the planet. *Blixt* unites three of these players in a group that offers a kind of synopsis of the Cuneiform philosophy: an open-eared approach to music that unleashes terror, sublime beauty, and deadpan humor, sometimes all three at once. Each member of this trio epitomizes Cuneiform’s absolute disdain for categorization. ... *Blixt* is Swedish for *lightning*-an apt metaphor for this supercharged power trio. ... *Blixt* makes Cream sound tame and obvious. King Crimson’s most avant moments might be a better comparison, though Crimson never rocked this hard. ... Every moment on this recording sounds like a fresh step, making *Blixt* a fitting addition to one of the most challenging and rewarding catalogs of music ever assembled.”

- John Swenson, *Stereophile*, January 2012, Vol. 35, No. 1

“...*Blixt* (which is Swedish for ‘Lightning’) may be among its creators’ most raw and urgent recordings, but it’s also as tight, slick and devastatingly effective as its name suggests. ... In a radical update of the Tony Williams Emergency blueprint, the Blixt trio combines with explosive potency the talents of LA-born Finnish psych rock guitarist Raoul Björkenheim, NY producer/bassist Bill Laswell, and Norwegian drum prodigy Morgan Ågren. In the spiky opening run of “Black Whole”, “Moon Tune” and “Tools”, the Nordic free-jazz fusion of Björkenheim’s Scorch Trio is married to the funk- and dub-inflected deep bass of post-Massacre Laswell power trios Soup and Episome... But drummer Morgan Ågren of the Mats/Morgan Band is the real catalyst here. ...his scattershot power and reigned-in freneticism marries the intelligent hardcore of Laswell’s Praxis buddy Brain...to the powerhouse jazz refinement of former Scorch Trio drummer Paal Nilssen-Love. ... If you’re either a long-term follower of Laswell who thinks he’s past his prime, or (like me) a big Scorch fan who wasn’t entirely convinced by Melaza, then you should definitely give Blixt a listen. It’s the freshest, hardest-hitting power-jazz trio recording I’ve heard in years.”

- Dalston Sound, June 27, 2012

“... This is...beautifully brutal and scintillatingly snarling, an arctic blast of synapse-cleaning, focused, furious racket with some capricious serenity... Björkenheim has a feverish, bittersweet tone with some judicious sustain (evoking John McLaughlin and late-period Jimi Hendrix); Ågren rumbles and rages with subtle flair, and Laswell’s lithe, rubbery throb is the glue holding it together. *Blixt* is a zone where jazz erudition, punk/metal aggression, and intuitive free improvisation come together with the harmoniousness of a honey badger honeymoon. [4½ stars out of 5]”

- Mark Keresman, *ICON*, June 2012

“...the best of the best... Laswell has rarely been involved with a project with as much raw but focused power since *Last Exit*.”

- S. Victor Aaron, “Best of the Best: The Official™ Something Else! Top 10 for 2011,” *Something Else! Reviews*, December 26, 2011, www.somethingelserreviews.com

“ALBUMS OF THE YEAR... RAOUL BJÖRKENHEIM/BILL LASWELL/MORGAN ÅGREN - *BLIXT* (Cuneiform)”

- Andrey Henkin, “Best of 2011,” *The New York City Jazz Record*, January 2012, No. 117

“Mark Keresman’s Baker’s Dozen, Best CDs of 2012... Raoul Björkenheim/Bill Laswell/Morgan Ågren - *Blixt*”

- Mark Keresman, *ICON*, December 2012

“...the image conjured up by the opening salvo in the 11 minute long ‘Invisible One’ is precisely that of Cream’s extemporizations at the Fillmore... ***Blixt***’s music is described as a Cream ‘2011 aftershock’. This comparison could be construed as slightly misleading as *Blixt*’s improvisations are more rooted in jazz than blues and Raoul Björkenheim is by no means a guitar traditionalist amidst a musical maelstrom that is more angular and hued in darker shades than anything in the 60s. ... The drummer is Morgan Ågren and ‘Tools’ is a vehicle for his considerable and varied skills behind the stool. ... Riffs both primal and prime abound in *Blixt*’s music providing hooks that prevent this album from going right over the edge. Penultimate track ‘Storm’ shows a Hendrix influence while the savage closer segues perfectly into the opener. ...”

- Phil Jackson, *Acid Dragon*, May 2012

“...we shall deem guitarist Raoul Björkenheim’s prime musical fetish as being the power trio. ... *Blixt* will be appearing at The Stone... Most definitely a power trio. Björkenheim will also be gigging with another threesome...at Le Poisson Rouge to celebrate the 21st anniversary of the mighty disc’n’vinyl emporium Downtown Music Gallery (DMG)... The *Blixt* trio features Björkenheim along with bassist Bill Laswell and Swedish drummer Morgan Ågren. The album makes a fierce attack on the ears, but Laswell’s bass is limber and Ågren’s stick-style skitters nimbly. They provide an agile bracing for Björkenheim’s molten topping. *Blixt* enjoys the heaviness of hard rock, the suppleness of funk and the improvisatory speed-reflexes of jazz. The combined result is mostly cataclysmic... There’s always a subtlety of step, despite any onslaught of excess. Björkenheim first recorded with Ågren in 2006, under freely improvising conditions. This resulted in the *Box* project for the Rune Grammfon label. ... Björkenheim’s relationship with Laswell stretches back much further, to their late ‘90s membership of Paul Schütze’s Phantom City. “...I originally wanted to be a bass player after being mesmerized by Jack Bruce with Cream, so I have a great affinity for that instrument. Playing with Bill is great...” A few years later, Björkenheim also toured with the Ethiopian singer Gigi, who also happens to be Laswell’s wife. “I started to imagine this wicked power trio thing,” recalls Björkenheim. “So I corresponded with Morgan and asked if he was into doing a recording with Laswell, which he indeed was. Then I called Bill who was also into the idea.” Bruce Gallanter, one of the owners of DMG, set up a gig at the Bowery Poetry Club, which was followed by two days of recording at Laswell’s Orange Studio in New Jersey. “...it felt very organic and exciting all at once,” says Björkenheim. “I hear this wild music based on unusual polyrhythmic combinations. I’ve always been a rocker at heart and I’d love to create an anthemic sound with *Blixt* that would defy so-called music genres and even compel people to move their asses to some heavy sounds!” ...”

- Martin Longley, “Artist Feature: Raoul Björkenheim,” *The New York City Jazz Record*, May 2012

"Originally commissioned for the Helsinki Juhlaviikot Festival, which called for 100 guitarists... Here, **Bjorkenheim performs and multi-tracks all guitar, bass and drum parts for a sequence of works that seem to herald the advent of doomsday.** ...the guitarist sports an enviable technique whether utilizing a slide to make his axe weep atop thumping rhythms or when executing fiery and often scathing single note leads. ...rippling harmonics, textural dreamscapes and moaning choruses. ...Bjorkenheim is an adventurous soul who possesses a distinct craft..."

- Glenn Astarita, *All About Jazz*, December 1, 2001, www.allaboutjazz.com

"**Guitarist Raoul Björkenheim wields his instrument like a knife on the ironically double-entred *Apocalypse*.** Sometimes he stabs, other times he engraves; or he might twist and jab, or simply scratch. ... ***Apocalypse* does not once relent in intensity, even if quiet moments pop up occasionally. It's something of a testosterone-rich performance, remarkable...** Ever since his appearance on Krakatau's landmark debut, *Ritual*, in 1988 (a true masterpiece of guitar experimentalism), Björkenheim has made himself known as something of a rebel. ...he adopts pounding tribal rhythms as a foundation for otherworldly excursions... **he uses every tool at his disposal to color notes... Those colors just happen to be penetratingly dark...** He may enter into a temporary dream state... Or he might assemble a squad of coordinated piledrivers for the heaviest dark metal you've ever heard... the composition seems quite flexible... Björkenheim's "solo" lines wiggle and squirm, twisting and winding their way along uncharted territory. ... pensive moments...have a sense of foreboding.

A most unusual disc, ***Apocalypse* manages to be both brilliant and apocalyptic at the same time. It stands among Björkenheim's best work... pure, undiluted Björkenheim...truly glorious in its relentless blackness.** With 42 voices, it's got the depth to really penetrate. Like a knife."

- Nils Jacobson, *All About Jazz*, October 2001, www.allaboutjazz.com

"...This Finnish guitarist and composer has never been afraid of the big gesture and *Apocalypse* aptly fits... **Originally written for 30 guitarists, 8 bassists and 4 percussionists, Bjorkenheim's decision to record the work as a solo...piece is nothing short of heroic. It is simply a triumph.** By turns languid and aggressive, laconic and terse it is a work of stark contrasts held in tension by **Bjorkenheim's depth of vision and sheer technical brilliance.** ... **A plethora of guitars produce a huge range of tone and texture:** soaring slide, unearthly metallic arpeggios, sitar like drone, chordal vamp, bowed strings and heavy throb... Bjorkenheim has dragged the ruins of an ancient edifice into a high-tech laboratory and created **a hybrid that has identity, meaning and significance.** It is pan cultural: the title track...mixes gamelan with King Crimson like Frippery to produce a truly original soundscape as guitars scream in an act of catharsis and percussion stomps wildly. ..."

- John Cratchley, *Avant*, #62, December 2001

"This Finnish composer's works for percussion and one-man guitar orchestra are **sonic playgrounds**, as he blends joyful melodies with little surprises that leap from the mix. **The opening "Oracle" and closing "Last Oracle" frame the disc with slide-guitar melodies that twist like sidewinders until they cross minefields of feedback and noise.** ... Björkenheim's love of the possibilities of digital delay is in evidence everywhere...his guitar mimics the qualities of drops hitting puddles...he uses an E-bow and...effects to re-create a mournful cello. And at times, he just stomps. ... What's hip about Björkenheim — beside his embrace of rock-and-roll attack — is **his concentration on tone.** ... **Björkenheim's signature sound seems as blue and wailing as Peter Green's, yet he's game for employing a half-dozen guitar sounds for a single piece to cover as much of the spectrum as possible. That makes for a wider emotional range...a fretboard feast."**

- Ted Drozdowski, *The Boston Phoenix*, May 30, 2002, www.bostonphoenix.com

"**I first heard Bjorkenheim's guitar antics when he was with Edward Vesala's Sound and Fury, a band that took jazz into sometimes startling territories. Apparently, the Finnish drummer told him to 'totally obliterate anything that had to do with standard guitar', advice he has certainly tried to take to heart.** ... '*Apocalypse* is composed of 9 sections and was originally commissioned...to be performed by a mammoth group of 42 guitarists, bassists and percussionists. Here Bjorkenheim does it all by himself, a one man virtual ensemble. ...primal...other-worldly... furious and intense.

The title track... Pounding, metallic percussion propels...harsh, angular guitar while other guitars chatter and howl...creates a storm that teeters on the edge of feedback and occasionally topples over it. ... **For density it recalls, to my ears, some of Miles Davis' most electric work.** But it isn't all flat out sonic attack. Not quite. 'Rain' is an impressionistic take with notes spinning and echoing while 'Lament' has the guitars sounding more like cellos... This is, however, completely shattered by the opening of 'Circles...staccato hammerings... followed by swooping trebly feedback. ...**if your tastes incline to Pat Metheny or Wes Montgomery this may not suit. ...his explorations are compelling and open strange, disturbing vistas where some notions of what electric guitar can/should do will be refreshed. [5 stars]"**

- Paul Donnelly, *BIRDpages record review & JAZZITUDE*, 2011

"...guitar virtuoso Raoul Björkenheim...musically erupts with his own explosive multi-instrumental dub orchestra of guitars and cataclysmic jungle of mind trips. **The cover art...a macro shot of a human eye, is the portal... The listener gets sucked into...a black hole of sound...where guitars stretch beyond their human limits. ...Björkenheim, like the great Caspar Brötzmann, lunges right at your throat with his guitar and stops...anything can happen without warning.** ... Björkenheim is highly inventive, dangerous, correct, clever and an extreme pleasure to listen to."

- Roman Sokal, *Exclaim!*, March 27, 2002

"...While the guitar is the main focus of the work, the percussion and bass both play important roles as Björkenheim's atypical rhythm section. ... **The rhythms are...world-beat sounding...** Several...pieces have a very trance-like quality about their rhythms and beats — especially the 9-minute title track. ... He is a truly unique player who smoothly combines...heavy rock, jazz, avant garde, ethnic...often in the same piece. ... *Apocalypse* is definitely worth checking out."

- Mike Grimes, *Exposé*, #24, April 2002

"... This time out, it's all Björkenheim. ... **Björkenheim's interests lie...to the sonic possibilities of the guitar as sounds rather than traditional notes.** He uses slides both on bass and guitar, and often the noises are mangled... The drum parts...focus on throbbing toms, slow and moody as on "Sages" or faster and building to an incredible frenzy on the title track. ... My favorite is undoubtedly **the title track, which features a chorus of chunky rhythm parts and a wild melody voiced in octaves... like Snakefinger on steroids, and an edgy solo...like Henry Kaiser in a really bad mood.** This track alone is worth the price of admission."

- Jon Davis, *Exposé*, #24, April 2002

"... Adapted from his own orchestral arrangements, "*Apocalypse*" is now a self performed multi-part piece of gloom and doom. ...by down scaling...the challenge is in how to preserve the intensity of the original live performance made by 42 musicians. ... **On the short transitional piece, "Rain" the guitarist gets a bit introspective which reminds me of Terje Rypdal's work on ECM... The title track is purely the**

centerpiece of the entire work; with the main theme stated by a grungy lead guitar break like many of Adrian Belew's solo works... At times, the presentation is a bit like free jazz icon Derek Bailey's explorations...but...an identifiable structure is in place. ... Overall the nine tracks embody a fierce anger where the composer shows more than adequate restraint." - Jeff Melton, *Exposé*, #24, April 2002

"...not unlike...Terje Rypdal, his guitar sound practically radiates a sunny, below-zero chill-laden energy. ...the passion is there, but the usual "hot licks" style common to most jazz, rock and blues doesn't apply. ... This is dense, glacial music - think Terje Rypdal and King Crimson (at their Discipline'd Red-est) collaborating on re-scoring some Hitchcock movies. Bjorkenheim has chops so sharp you could get cut if you got too close, but his technique serves the music, not his ego. If you can think of the guitar as a six-stringed orchestra instead of just a solo or instrumental voice, *Apocalypso* will send you into orbit." - Mark Keresman, *Jazzreview.com*, December 2001

"...when listening to it, you would never suspect this was not forty-two musicians playing together. ... The overall effect is an impressive tour-de-force of guitar playing... this album...aims for the senses not the intellect. ... When his massed electric guitars hit a riff on the title track (and centrepiece of the work) overlaid with screaming soloing, the sense of excitement is tangible and it is impossible to resist the adrenalin surge it produces. " - John Eyles, *Sonomu.net*, Mar 18 2002

"...the sound here is *massive*: wide, instrumental vistas of truly alien, expansive sound. A nine-piece suite, it plods along with clanking, tribal drums, textured by guitar that alternates between the stuttering crunch of *Ride the Lightning*-era Metallica and the sour, de-tuned style of Marc Ribot. Punctuated by wind chimes, odd, tin-sounding percussion, and some real "Land-of-The-Rising-Sun" gong action, there's the steady flow (within each track and as a whole) of monolithic, well-oiled machinery. ... A great soundtrack to a sci-fi movie that doesn't exist, this'll make you wonder what it would've been like had Mr. Waits enlisted those Neubaten fellows to compliment Ribot's work on *Bone Machine*." - Peter Aaron, *YOUR/LESh*, Spring/Summer 2002

"Finnish guitarist Raoul Bjorkenheim...has just been nominated for the Nordic Nomus prize for his album *Apocalypso*... It's an ambitious magnum opus premiered with 42 players at the 1995 Helsinki festival. On the recording, Bjorkenheim plays everything himself: bass guitars, acoustic guitars, bowed guitars and the plinky noises...on the wrong side of the bridge. ... *Apocalypso*, chundering away over the kind of beat once favoured by Gary Glitter, generates the most heat, with a great guitar solo. Bjorkenheim has stamina, and his command of sheer noise is impressive..." - John L. Walters, *Guardian Unlimited*, March 1, 2002

"...dark orchestral colours in a rock setting. ... There is a remarkable integrity across the nine sections of this multimovement suite, its repetitive pent up energy sustained for almost 30 minutes before the guitar histrionics of the title-track offer a highly-charged release. ...a bold...experiment that shows that there is a future for the guitar orchestrations well beyond those of Rhys Chatham and Glenn Branca." - Chris Atton, *RUBBERNECK*

RAOUL BJÖRKENHEIM / KRAKATAU RITUAL HIERONYMOUS 1988 / CUNEIFORM 1996

"This is very strong jazz, thick with constant roll drums and a variety of horns, flutes and bones. 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...like an ECM album with a shade more fury. **Blasting out of Finland, this great album from 1988 finally sees release in the USA...**" - Matt Howarth, *Those Annoying Post Brothers*, #54, Feb 1997

"The ritual in question could be the exorcism of all the adjectives that leap to mind when "jazz" and "Scandinavia" are paired off.... *Ritual*...is a hotter, more raw proposition, expressionistically blowing the lid off Finnish stoicism. It is very exciting. "Foot Talk" is the most invigorating and celebratory piece of music I've heard all year. Guitar strumming a big chord while the horns shake with a religious zeal, bursting with passion like Ayler on "Our Prayer"... Tapio has a tremendous alto solo that bounces over the rhythm with great cunning, dipping in and out of a melody that Ornette would be proud of. Yes, Prime Time and the Decoding Society have to be mentioned here, as signposts for the uninitiated only, for Krakatau can't be written off as copyists. **Prime Time...have never made a record as focused as *Ritual*, and Björkenheim's writing merits comparison with Shannon Jackson's best... Björkenheim's guitar style leans heavily towards feedback and distortion; his solo on "New Day" is a metal poem...In short, this is a vital and important record signalling the arrival of some world-class talents. Raoul Björkenheim and Jorma Tapio. Remember the names.**" - Steve Lake, *The Wire*, Nov. 1989

"This is one of the best records I've heard in a few months... it's got a great metal grind - **Raoul plays guitar - that mixes Ornette with a bit of hardcore and free playing. The saxophonists... can sound scarily like Ornette, and, harmonized over a John Deere-goes-urban backbeat (two drummers), they ignore soloing in favor of fevered riffing. Raoul like[s] dense distortion and pig-howling sounds; it all finds its place.** Finns give good rhythm, I guess." - *Musician*, Sept. 1989

"...this music is not cerebral, but instead highly rhythmic and full of energy... This is not a pale imitation of some American jazz-fusion band, but **strong music that still shows a unique local style.** The music has done very well among Finnish jazz fans...This is music worth listening to." - Walter Schwager, *CODA*, #229, Dec. 89-Jan. 90

"Finland's Raoul Björkenheim combines feedback wrestling, strange jazz, and a heady dose of outside licks in a heady soup of practically indescribable music... he experiments onstage with constantly varying rhythmic structures and disturbing sonorities, **taking his band about as far from a traditional jazz trio format as one could imagine.**" - T.M., *Guitar Player*, Jan. 1991

"Raoul Björkenheim & Krakatau make tribal percussion-heavy, raucous fusion on *Ritual*, a reissue of the band's 1977 debut, never before issued outside of their native Finland ... they're over the top with squalling saxophones, biting electric guitar leads and two drummers pounding away. **Great rocking fun...**" - Stuart Kremsky, *IAJRC Journal*

"...Krakatau's first album, another interesting choice by Steve Feigenbaum for reissue. Krakatau now resides in ECM's stable since their third album... Raoul Bjorkenheim is just one of those intense guitarists, a man who just won't play it like you'd expect and wrings such tortured sonorities from his instrument. The music here is maybe more raw than the albums on ECM and thus more rocking... **for those who like the freer jazzier and more dissonant aspects of fusion, and if you're a guitarist you better sit up as this guy is a true original.**" - Peter Thelen, *Expose*, February 1997