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## SIGUR ROS

Sigur Ros: Ken Thomas & Jonsi Birgisson: Recording Sigur Ros

People + Opinion : Recording / Mixing

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**Over the years, Iceland has produced more than its fair share of innovative, experimental pop music. The country's latest hot exports, Sigur Ros, are currently recording an album in a disused swimming pool...**

Mark Pytlík

Iceland's Sigur Ros came to the world's notice in 2000 following the release of their sweeping, orchestral album *Agætis Byrjun* (Icelandic for "a good start"), a favourite of innumerable critics including Radiohead's Thom Yorke. Their unique sound combines quiet-loud-quiet-loud dynamism, lush instrumentation, and lead singer Jonsi Birgisson's cherubic falsetto.

Following a lengthy tour to promote that album, Jonsi and his bandmembers guitarist/keyboardist Kjartan Sveinsson, bassist/keyboardist Georg Holm and drummer Orri Páll Dyrason are now hard at work on a new record. Like *Agætis Byrjun*, the new album will be produced by Ken Thomas, who has a long track record of working with cutting-edge and experimental artists. "I started as an assistant on the early Queen albums," he remembers. "When they first arrived they were like an in-house band for Trident Studios. Then the whole punk thing happened and I worked with Martin Rushent and Martin Hamnett. I did loads of punk bands like the Buzzcocks, all the Wire albums, the first Public Image Limited single, all that sort of stuff. Then I went more esoteric after that."

Eventually, Thomas' punk travels led him to the underground label Fetish Records, with whom he worked a great deal. "We did 23 Skidoo, Clock DVA and all those kinds of alternative bands. We had Throbbing Gristle on our label so I produced the first two Psychic TV albums. I did a lot of early industrial stuff like Test Department and Einsturzende Neubauten. I also did some of the first Sugarcubes album -- just mixing, and that was my connection with Iceland."

Thomas' affiliation with the Sugarcubes would not only lead him to Iceland, but directly to Sigur Ros. "I was with [Sugarcubes guitarist] Thor [Eldon] one night," Thomas smiles. "Thor is Bjork's ex-husband. We were both drunk. He played me *Von*, the album before *Agætis Byrjun* and said 'Ken, listen to this.' And I said 'God, this is amazing.' He said, 'I think they're great, but no-one else thinks they are.'"

Inspired by *Von*'s menacing avant-gardism and the band's obvious predilection towards music with strong spatial definition, Thomas went to see the band play live. After only one show, he implored them to let him produce their next album.

### Swimming In Sound

In addition to being markedly more dynamic and rawer than previous outings, the band's as-yet-untitled recording will also stand as the first proper record to be completed in the band's new studio. Located about 30 minutes outside Reykjavik in the small, scenic community of Mosfellsbær, the unnamed recording space is flanked on all sides by a winding mountain range. It's hard to imagine a more fitting setting for Sigur Ros' stately brand of rock. The Mosfellsbær building is comprised of two levels, the lower of which once housed a public swimming pool and later, an art gallery. "It's a really peaceful place. It didn't take long to set up because we worked really hard," Jonsi recounts. "Maybe a couple of months. We got a friend who is a carpenter to build some walls for us. We also had to tear the roof off the house to get the mixer in. We brought it in with a really big crane -- that was quite a lot of work."

"The initial idea for the second album was to do an album that was different, beca

use it'd be too easy to do an album that was the same as the last," Ken Thomas explains. "So we were going to try to record at the top of a mountain, at this old army barracks, where the sound was really quite hard and concrete. When we saw this place, we'd just come back from climbing the mountain -- which was totally impossible -- and I said 'Let's forget the mountain and go here.' When we got the place together, I went in with some guys from Iceland and drew up the plans with them to do it."

The end result was obviously well worth it. The control room, a bright and beautiful space located on the second level, is built to overlook the bottom floor, where the band do all of their tracking. Although they've also built a variety of isolation rooms, there is ample space on the lower level to facilitate live band sessions. None of the premises have been acoustically treated, and as a result, the space yields a fairly generous reverb. Eager to capture that sound on album, the band and producer have been fastidiously miking the building for ambience. "We use the recording area for ambience full-on, so the whole record is going to have a much more open feel about it," says Ken.



Sigur Ros (from left): Orri Páll Dyrason, Jonsi Birgisson, Kjartan Sveinsson and Georg Holm. Photo: Yoshika Horita



Producer Ken Thomas at the Neve broadcast desk in the band's Mosfellsbær studio. Photos: Sara Martel

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## From Simple Ideas

Because of their complex nature, Sigur Ros compositions tend to be built from the ground up. Most songs are sparked from simple ideas and tracked accordingly. "Some of the songs on this album

started off as quite long," Thomas continues. "Longer than usual, with nothing really happening. They've been playing them live and they kind of got away with it, but in the studio it sounded a bit boring. So we've tried editing them to make them shorter or to loop bits that sound good into another place. The way they work, really, is that you have to catch a vibe with them, and the vibe will dictate what's going to happen."

Many of the songs begin with a band performance recorded live, which is later edited and overdubbed. "The philosophy really is that the sound starts down there and then it comes up here. And then, hopefully, it'll sound the same as it does down there," says Ken. "That is a real fundamental. A lot of people will have a shitt sound 'down there' and they'll EQ it to make it sound good."

To better aid the recording process, Thomas has also supplied each member with a small Mackie mixer, which they use to create custom monitor mixes. "All the foldback they do themselves," he says. "We've set it up so they can do their own mixes and get the vibe going that they want."

Where Sigur Ros are concerned, improvisation and experimentation are all. "Everything is open," Jonsi stresses emphatically. "It's a playground and you have to be open-minded and ready to try things out without planning. If it works, it works, if it doesn't work, it's crap. You just have to be kind of interactive and open. The song is not sacred -- we can still do so

mething with it even after we've mixed it. We did a lot to the songs for *Agætis Byrjun* while we were doing the mastering -- we put a vocal into one song where we hadn't sung one yet! There's nothing in the process that is sacred."

As if to underline this, when I visit, the band's resident string quartet are recording their contribution to one of the new album's many epic compositions. "There are no notes written for the strings," Jonsi explains. "They're just improvising and playing by ear."



Recording strings for the new album.

## Beautiful Soundscapes

The band's unconventional approach extends to their choice of recording medium: they have bucked the Pro Tools trend in favor of a Soundscape PC-based DAW. "This actual Soundscape unit is the R.Ed unit, which is kind of the Rolls Royce of Soundscapes," Ken Thomas explains. "Because it was their studio, I was open to the decision. Jonsi had a little studio before, where they did their other album, and they liked editing on PCs. They did a film soundtrack in the middle of doing this album and they really used the Soundscape editing facilities to the fullest extent. They were looping drums and detuning stuff. Jonsi's really good at all of that, an



Photo: Yoshika HoritaKjartan Sveinsson's Hammond organ is central to the band's sound.

d he's totally into it. It would be crazy if I was the only one who could operate the system, so we went with Soundscape. I think Pro Tools has more facilities, especially crossfade facilities, but this is fine and I'm getting used to it. When you record in analogue you normally need a little more top end. But with this, you need a little more low end, and you compress a little bit more."



Although he's never recorded with a Soundscape system before, Thomas has found lots of things to like about the setup. "There's little things," he says. "With Pro Tools, if you fill the whole screen up, you see tracks above or below and you have to make them smaller or move them or whatever. With Soundscape, you can scroll up or down like you're reading a letter. I do also think Soundscape's A-D converters are better."

Few bands would willingly choose to clothe their recordings in the ambience of an empty swimming pool, but Sigur Ros are one. The small Mackie mixers allow each band member to create his own foldback mix.

The attraction of Soundscape for the band clearly lies in its editing possibilities rather than the availability of software effects. "We don't use any plug-ins," insists Jonsi. "We just use outboard gear and the EQ on the mixer. Plug-ins sound a little fake to me."

The centrepiece of the Sigur Ros studio is an old Neve console obtained from a friend's TV station. "It's got compressors on every channel which are quite harsh, like you hear on the old Beatles stuff," volunteers Ken. "On cymbals and things, you can kick it a bit more. In the punk days, I used to use compression at full. If you go to a gig and you hear everything very loud, your ears have compressed to make it sound like it's a loud gig. It's especially good if people are playing really soft but very loud -- from a mixing point of view, it's really good to bring out the low points. I play around with release times a lot. On the last record, I played around with pumping levels onto tape where it'd be just screaming. In the past, I've actually stuck stuff onto cassette really loud and brought it back, just to get the smell of it and make it sound like it's kind of talking to you a bit more. It comes from being a bit of a punk, I suppose."

Other compressors include a Symetrix 425 Dual Compressor and a Urei 1178, while a TC Electronic M5000 and an AMS 16 reverb supply the onboard effects. They also use outboard mic preamps, in the shape of the Joemeek VC2 and the Avalon VT 747SP. "We had the Joemeeks in our old studio," explains Jonsi. "We hav

en't been using them a lot -- more the Avalons."

## Instrumental Choices

As befits a band that can boast three part-time keyboardists, there's a healthy selection of synths

## Jonsi: Playing The Guitar With A Bow

A novel challenge facing Ken Thomas is that of getting the desired spatial characteristics from Jonsi's guitar. As Birgisson is one of the few guitarists left in music who plays with a bow, Thomas has been finding it particularly difficult to

and organs in Sigur Ros' studio. Favourites include a Roland Juno 106, Hammond B3, Yamaha VSS30 and Yamaha SK20. "The SK20 is fun because no one uses it," Sveinsson enthuses. "I don't know anyone who does, so you can get them for about 150 pounds or less. We have three."

"He always uses the same one, that Yamaha SK20, for the organ," Thomas says. "He never uses the synthesizer part, it's just for the straightforward organ sound. And there's his Hammond. Kjartan's always looking for keyboards."

"I have a Yamaha RS7000 at home and I love that," adds Jonsi. "It's just perfect, it's like it's designed for me. I like things all to be in one box. I have a laptop computer and I did a solo record that I haven't quite finished yet with *Fruity Loops*. I usually go to the flea market on the weekends and collect toys. I have all kinds of baby toys and I sample them into the RS7000. I use my keyboard and all kinds of other instruments to make songs out of that. I also sampled some pianos and music boxes and it sounds really organic. Your voice, sounds from around your environment -- it's really nice to use sounds you create yourself, and I think it's really important."

"Sound sculpture is really important in every music. I really like electronic music when it has an organic feel to it -- for example, Boards Of Canada have a very organic feel about them and there are no fake sounds on their records. Sound is just really important. If you have a good song but it's got bad sounds, it just

doesn't work. I think we're always looking for organic and real sounds on everything we record. For example, if we want to use strings, we'll use real strings. We don't take the shortcut and use a Korg."

"We spent a lot of time on Georg's bass [*usually a Fender Jazz, played through an EBS amp*] this time, just to get it quite deep and quite juicy," adds Thomas. "It's really important to get the bass out of the way. We ended up just sticking the amp outside and turning it up really loud. On the last album, because we had to do it really quickly, I just stuck a shitty little mic in front and compressed the shit of it. Sometimes we'd use an Eventide Harmonizer low-pitched as well, just to give it some more substance."

#### Mic Issues

"There's so much difference between new mics and old mics," insists Jonsi. "The Neumann U47 is a really good tube mic. When you put this in front of a vocal, it will take only everything that it's supposed to. There's no extra bottom or hum or bass or extra top, it's just perfect, no EQ needed. We had a Sennheiser MKH80 and I was trying that for my vocals but we got like a... [*he makes a subtle sucking noise*]. This mic takes your voice, but nothing else from the environment."

The band have augmented the U47 and U87 with some more unlikely choices. "We've got some Russian Oktava mics -- we're using those as overheads," Jonsi says. "They're really good and really cheap."

"The problem is that you have to pump up the mic amps quite high -- they're not really sensitive," adds Ken Thomas. "But they're fine for ambience. We used them on the strings and they sounded quite good. The strings and the room were quite hard, so they took a bit of the brightness off, that high-pitched squeal. Because of the amount of money we have, we can't really have everything. We've got a lot of dynamic mics, like the Shures, which we use, and some Sennheisers. When I bought the microphones, I wanted different mics with different characters. If they had all the same character, we'd get something that sounded great but had no personality. Sometimes a shitty mic sounds good to me. I have lots of old mics that I've got from jumble sales and car boot sales and microphone scrapyards and they all sound pretty good to me, so we've tried lots of funky stuff. It's the same with snare drums -- if you have a snare drum that's got a weird bark on it, so

metimes it can be good.

"I think mic placement is really important. I spend quite a lot of time just moving mics slightly to get the right sound. You have to experiment with mics all over the place. We had mics up in the roof, up close, all in different places. We're always moving the mics slightly to get the sound that we like. It's all done very much like we're recording for the first time. It's good fun; we're experimenting. It isn't like we're in a room in Westlake Studio or something where everything's going to sound sweet. It's sort of a little bit garage-y and rough-and-ready. That's very much what they're about."

#### Don't Hold Your Breath

When you're recording in your own idyllic studio in the middle of nowhere, time pressures evidently don't weigh as heavily: Sigur Ros say that they expect to complete the album sometime this year. All of them have other artistic interests such as painting and sculpture and eventually, if all works according to plan, the Mosfellsbær space will be more than just a recording studio -- it'll be Sigur Ros' artistic hub. Until then, Birgisson says, there are other things to keep the band preoccupied. "When you have your own studio, sometimes friends will come here and you think 'Let's have a coffee -- we'll record tomorrow,'" he grins. "For some reason, this record has been going really, really slowly..." **SOS**

capture accurately on tape. "The approach is to get the sound right through the amp, and then to get it as open as possible," he laments. "We've tried moving the mics, Jonsi has played the guitar differently, we've tried moving the strings up and down, we've tried everything. It's quite a delicate job and we still haven't got it right."

Perhaps surprisingly, Birgisson hasn't needed to perform many alterations on his guitars to make them more suitable for his style of playing. "I use a Gibson Les Paul -- I find it kind of really nice for the bow," he says. "The bow isn't hard to learn -- you just play it slowly and through a lot of reverb. I use a cello bow, not a violin bow. Some people don't know that you have to use rosin, but it's important to use it; you also have to use cello rosin and not double bass rosin. The feel for the bow just comes, but it takes a long time to develop the touch."

"I use the same tuning and everything, there's nothing really strange about it. It's how you play it. With a bow you can get loads and loads of overtones so it's about how you handle them. It's like you're riding a really mad horse and you're trying to tame it."

#### Sigur Ros' Secret Weapons

##### Yamaha VSS30

Jonsi: "It's an amazing keyboard. I just use the sampler, but it's amazing what you can do, just beautiful. It's the best instrument I've had since the guitar. After you play the guitar for a while and it becomes your main instrument, it becomes a part of you because you know exactly how it works and just play it without thinking. It's kind of the same with this small keyboard -- it's so unbelievably simple. You just sample something and there's an effect where you can reverse the sample and make a U-turn, but it's all really simple. It's my main instrument beside the guitar. I really, really love it."

##### EBS Multidrive Pedal

Georg: "I use a pedal from EBS called an Octobass -- it's an octaver. I don't really use that much, but I sometimes use an E-bow and that takes all the bottom end off the bass. I use a regular E-bow -- I don't understand why they don't make one for the bass. This pedal is a drive but you don't have to use it as a drive; it can be just a great sustain and then it sounds fantastic."

##### AMS RMX16 Reverb

Jonsi: "We bought this reverb because we used it at the studio where we recorded our demos. There's some really nice sounds; it's really warm."

Ken: "We haven't even started recording vocals for this album, but on the last album, Jonsi really had to be in the right mood. If he's not in the right mood, he won't do the vocal. Now, he sings really easily, he's been gigging so it's a different ball game. But last time it was so critical. He has to have the right sound before he can sing, as well -- there has to be the right reverb, everything. It's why we got the AMS."



The exterior of Sigur Ros' studio.



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