

VALHALLA: ROCK OF TEEN AGES



Photo: Sheila Bowman

What Goes On?

Lisa Innes, Spencer Bowman (seated), Dekar Matheson, Liam Gibson, Matt Aasen (seated) and Mark Tardif make up Valhalla, local hard rock band.

David Morrison

I have a friend whose *raison d'être* is heavy metal music, his explanation of the appeal simply, "It's all about the riffs, Dave." Vancouver "thrash" metal band Bison concurs, proclaiming: "Riffs, man. You would do just, like, anything for the riff." In recognition of the scores of gems he's penned, a popular nickname for The Rolling Stones' Keith Richards is "The Human Riff," while English writer Will Hodgkinson describes riffs as rock's "cornerstone," its "primordial essence."

But what exactly are riffs, and why are they so important in the world of rock music? Dictionaries define the word as "a melodic phrase or motif, often constantly repeated, to form the basis of a piece of music." The actuality is, while they're the foundation of music of most genres, when played on electric guitars as the perfect meeting of simplistic, unforgettable melody and teeth-gritting intensity, the riff is most at home in the rock sphere. And the perfect riff, one of true personality, is instantly recognisable each and every time it's heard. Consider The Human Riff's Satisfaction, for example, where just five notes announce a classic.

Totally unreasonable for ones so young (combined age: 103), Nanaimo's six-piece hard rock sensation Valhalla is a band already boasting an embarrassment of riff riches. Take White

Crow: a recurring, insistent earworm for this reporter, it's built on a riff from the classic rock school, surely destined to win them a rabid fanbase far beyond their island home. Yet while it may be Valhalla's most instantly accessible song, it's just one of a stack of riff-laden epics the band has already crafted.

Just a year ago, Valhalla won Got Pop? Productions' Battle of the Bands, scooping a thousand bucks prize they've since spent mainly on equipment upgrades and the recording of their just released eponymous debut album. As twin lead guitarist Matt Aasen recalls, it was a monumental breakthrough laced with bittersweetness: "I was filled with extreme happiness, because one of the bands had made fun of us because we were only, like, seventeen—but we ended up beating them, and it kind of added a little revenge!"

Since that victory, Valhalla's star has risen considerably locally. They gig regularly, bagging the opening slot at a major show featuring rock heavyweights State of Shock, Econoline Crush and Jet Black Stare at the Port Theatre in May. It proved quite an experience, as drummer Spencer Bowman explains: "It was tough, because we got squeezed out of a soundcheck and we were still throwing our equipment on the stage as people were coming in!" "And our set got cut from forty-five minutes to twenty!" adds Valhalla's youngest member, sixteen-year-old powerhouse lead vocalist, Lisa Innes.

The band's other twin lead guitarist, Mark Tardif, was cursed with technical problems on the night. "My patch cord fell out and my tuner was being weird," he sighs. "I'd never used a tuner before then and for a first Port Theatre show in front of eight hundred people, I couldn't figure it out!"

Nonetheless, keyboard player Liam Gibson speaks for the whole band when stating that despite sound and equipment problems and an onstage tantrum from Matt, pure adrenaline and the prestige of the occasion carried them through. "We still came out at the end of the night feeling really positive," he says.

And so they should have. As a witness to their powerful set, I can tell you they played with great confidence, concluding with a muscular rendition of White Crow seeing Matt writhing around on his back as Liam and hirsute seventeen-year-old bassist Dekar Matheson "headbanged" in unison like things demented. Lisa strutted her rock chick stuff while the be-Stetsoned Spencer hammered holy hell out of the drums. And Mark – some guitarist, I tell you - fell to his knees in rock bliss, coaxing every last nuance from the song's huge riff. Rough around the edges it may have been, but, as the roar of the hometown crowd affirmed at White Crow's crunching climax, it was also a thrilling spectacle and veritable triumph for the young rockers.

Collectively influenced by rock both classic (read: mainly 70s) and contemporary, Valhalla formed as Mercury in March 2006, Lisa replacing original vocalist Holly Taves just over a year ago. As should be evident, things have moved apace for the band, with that debut album already under their belts. Recording it (at Nanaimo's Raw Studios) and discovering their own collaborative songwriting process has been an education, Mark particularly enjoying the room to roam. "My favourite thing about recording was that we spent time experimenting, trying new things, and got some incredible things out of it," he says. The album's progressive arrangements categorically support this, startlingly belying the youthfulness of their architects.

Beyond their compositional skills, musicianship and obvious inter-band chemistry, the glue that holds Valhalla together is deep friendship, a factor beautifully revealed with a surprise when I interviewed these charming teens. I wondered if the band's immediate future might be jeopardised by further education out-of-town, or the desire to expand horizons elsewhere. "We do actually have that problem," states Matt. "One of us (Mark) is going off to Vancouver for

Valhalla performing at Nanaimo's Port Theatre



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Above: Keyboard player Liam Gibson

Left: Valhalla, lost in the music at the climax of their Port Theatre show in May

Left inset: Vocalist Lisa Innes

university... but we're going to try to get him to come back every weekend, and split the cost." "I didn't know that," Mark responds, clearly taken aback, "but it would help me out a lot!" It was a lovely, unexpected moment to be party to... and I assured Mark I had Matt's promise on tape.

If the members of Valhalla can remain bound by the spirit of comradeship illustrated in the gesture to Mark, it would appear this band has a very bright future. They've already taken a quantum leap in the year since Battle of the Bands, but need to keep producing material as strong as they have thus far. You know, songs like White Crow, with killer riffs—because it is, of course, all about the riffs.

On the Internet: www.myspace.com/valhalla9

All Valhalla live images courtesy of talented freelance photographer Christal Beerman: www.eotproductions.com

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