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The Bled Found In The Flood Vagrant

While I'm positive it's a great big coincidence that *Found In The Flood* was released just days before what happened to New Orleans and that the title was decided on long before that fucking bitch Katrina dropped by the Gulf Coast, I'm sure the same people who were clamoring about Anthrax The Band being somehow connected to Anthrax The Infectious Disease found in the postal system back in '01 are going to jump all over The Bled, claiming inappropriateness. The Bled have other things to worry about; chiefly, their singer James Munoz. He attempts to complement the band's musical improvement, where they've subtracted most of the whiny, semi-tech metalcore from the record for a more angular Refused/Malkovich approach featuring lots of noodly, cross-genre pollination and various experiments with a broad spectrum of sound and the capabilities of all their endorsed gear, with a Patton-esque range of sing-scream-yell-bellow-hurl-etc. Trouble is that his vocals don't always fit (it's not just that he's heinously off-key when he tries to sing), it's because many of his vocal lines, whether he's screaming or trying to sing, are ill-chosen and a lot of his performance sounds out of place. How many times have you heard this verdict? Band good, singer bad. [www.thebledsite.com] — Kevin Stewart-Panko

Skyforger Semigalls Warchant Folter

Re-forged for the world to hear again is Folter's reissue of Skyforger's *Semigalls Warchant* (1997) demo. As expected, *Semigalls Warchant* was inspired by early Immortal and Satyricon, with each song careening headlong into the pits of 1994. Musically, if *Pure Holocaust* and *Dark Medieval Times* were burned into the guitar strings and hearts of impressionable, capable Latvians, then you get the idea of *Semigalls Warchant's* mystical musings. The best element of demo-period Skyforger are the homespun stories woven into the songs, which speak of a time lost but not forgotten. It's enchanting, if a little odd when placed in a black metal context. Aside from seven demo cuts, this version features three new songs and one revision straight from Skyforger's Baltic black metal take on Skyclad's complex folk metal — imagine Kreator at the Renaissance Faire. Comparing new and old Skyforger, it's hard to imagine it's the same band, especially when the current iteration of the band is so much more involved and adventurous ("Kavi"). Of the three new songs, "To The Northern Shores" and "Bloodfield" are conservative takes on mid-'90s European thrash, with occasional flashes of Latvian melody creeping into the guitar solos. "Kavi," on the other hand, is a driving, weird riffed song with a heartrending solo that only Csaba Csejtei could appreciate. Skyforger certainly have traveled a great distance since *Semigalls Warchant*, and while the music may sound off-kilter at first blush, spending a few extra listens to acquire the band's unique approach is well worth the effort. [www.skyforger.lv] — Chris Dick

Swallow The Sun Ghosts Of Loss Firebox

Sophomore albums are allegedly the hardest albums to make, or so it's thought. For Finland's Swallow The Sun, a band that literally came out of nowhere in 2003, releasing Album Of The Year material seems to be fair game, as indicated on debut stunner *The Morning That Never Came*. No band since My Dying Bride's *Turn Loose The Swans* has captured the full, horrifyingly romantic picture of a proper doom/death metal album quite like Swallow The Sun; sure, Shape Of Despair, Pantheist, even Saturnus are contenders, but they don't quite square up with Jyväskylä-based sextet. While *Ghosts Of Loss* shares the same desperate core and sense of Lovecraftian horror as *The Morning That Never Came*, it's definitely a different animal. The tempo is slower yet the dynamics (especially Mikko Kotamäki's Aaron Stainthorpe-meets-Mikael Åkerfeldt vocal delivery) are more pronounced — in fact, the songwriting, at first, seems less involved, but once the zillion layers of hopelessness and loss find their way into your cranium and heart, songs like "The Ghost," "Ghost Of Laura Palmer" and "Fragile" feel like a 1,000 years of pain crashing down in beautiful slow motion. The production at Sami's Workshop is once again unbelievably thick (loads of low end) yet crystal clear, with the guitar melodies/solos coming through clean as a frigid February night. Tracks like "Descending Winters" and appropriately named "Gloom, Beauty And Despair" share commonality with My Dying Bride and Katatonia, but take the marriage of the two a step further by being larger, darker and forging a clarity of purpose so real it's hard not to wonder why more bands like this don't exist (Slumber and Draconian are exceptions). There are several lag points ("Psychopath's Lair" and "Forgive Her..."), but even these nadirs can't keep Swallow The Sun's dark, molten art from lumbering forward like a leviathan in search of a lost love. From beginning to end, *Ghosts Of Loss* is absolutely incredible. [www.swallowthesun.net] — Chris Dick



The Mass Perfect Picture Of Wisdom And Boldness Crucial Blast

There is a moment during "Corpsewielder" where The Mass is almost a standard, brilliant heavy rock band. Almost. Come the end of this pretty ditty, "Gas Pipe" begins like Mr. Bungle being sodomized by Attila Csihar and the madness ensues once more. The best thing about this Oakland quartet is their diversity. When your front man doubles vocals alongside saxophone shrieking, it's surely par for the course. This is no regular metal band, nor is it some mathcore, pretentious wannabe soulless exercise in throwing in tons of riffs, blasts and screams to be "weird." No, instead The Mass' collective psychosis is a genuine symptom of one crazy outfit.

After their first full album, in the shape of 2003's *City Of Dis*, this group has nothing to prove. For everyone who heard the debut, there was instant respect and at the very least, a nodded approval that this was a band not to be taken lightly. A cynic might still throw the accusation of pretension at song titles such as "Meditation On The Some Carcass," or "Little Climbers Of Nifelheim," but said cynic would be devoid of a sense of humor. You see, this is a serious band who seem to find delight in amusing themselves and their growing army of fans. In parts it's silly, yet one cannot argue with the communal intelligence of the artists. They can blow your world if you allow them some space and time. [www.themass.us] — Paul Stenning

DVD REVIEW

Samhain Live 1984, Stardust Ballroom MVD

The fact that Glenn Danzig is still musically relevant (depending on who you talk to) and still making metal news headlines (controversial, embarrassing or otherwise) made watching this 1984 live snapshot of the decidedly less bulky youngster that much more interesting. Filmed competently with one camera by Al Flipside, the slightly-better-than-bootleg quality video captures a rowdy performance at Hollywood's long-gone *Stardust Ballroom* by a young Samhain, Danzig's more "seriously" Satanic and primitively metallic, post-Misfits band.

Performing most of the debut full-length, *Initium*, and the 12" *Unholy Passion* EP, as well as Misfits classics "Die, Die, My Darling" and the reworked version of "Horror Business" (called "Horror Biz" on *Initium*), the savage, 48-minute set is lapped up like an emaciated dog by the sell-out audience. As he is still prone to do today, Glenn gives the live renditions a frantic feel that is more bark than croon. The vertically challenged one even straps on a guitar for "Archangel," something few outside of diehard circles have witnessed.

Though video and audio glitches pockmark the DVD, the shots are up close and personal and the sound is more than tolerable. As Danzig states of the live document, "...there is no overdubbing or audio correction, just the raw live show in all of its pandemonium and insanity." I couldn't have said it better myself. [http://mvd2b.com] — Scott Alisoglu

