

# AURAL ASSAULTS

## REISSUE ROW

### Naglfar Vittra Regain



Long before they jumped the shark and started releasing albums that were utterly useless, Sweden's Naglfar were one of the first to make a dent in the now burgeoning melodic black metal scene. Rewinding all the way back to '95, it's apparent that *Vittra* is a melodic black metal touchstone, with songs that rival the best work of Dissection and early Rotting Christ.

Relying heavily on flowing, melodic guitar lines, Naglfar was able to tap into the grisly atmosphere of mid-'90s black metal and freely embellish these tunes with melodies galore. Case in point, the somber opener "As The Twilight Gave Birth To The Night," a glorious romp through caustic Gothenburg tones and primitive black metal aggression. The same goes for the epic "Enslave The Astral Fortress" and momentous "The Eclipse Of Infernal Storms," two tracks that rank among the most potent ever recorded in this once-tiny niche market of metal.

Almost flawless (save for the throwaway "Failing Wings"), *Vittra* is a bittersweet reminder of the promise Naglfar once demonstrated. "Essential" and "must have" are words not to be thrown around lightly in these parts, but *Vittra* is all that and more, which only begs to ask the question: What the hell happened? [www.naglfar.net] — David E. Gehlke

### Ezurate Infernal Dominatio Rotting Corpse



American black metal bands are in a difficult place; they're working within a well-established template that's been mastered by Norwegian and increasingly, Eastern European bands.

There are notable exceptions — Louisiana's black metal scene and the late Judas Iscariot come to mind — but American black metal bands are usually a few steps behind the originators and even the second wave of European black metal bands like 1349.

Chicago's Ezurate have been kicking around for 14 years. *Infernal Dominatio* was originally released in 2000; the band recently decided to re-record it with a new lineup and producer. I've never heard the original version but found the new recording an occasionally frustrating experience. Just when the band starts to craft their own sound they revert to the standard black metal template. The strong moments are enticing, though and parts of the album caught my attention. "Through Haunted Caverns" sounds like sped up Darkthrone and is intercut with an intriguing acoustic guitar interlude that's utterly unexpected. It's the standout track because the band goes in a different direction — and it works. Vocalist Holocausto Inferni finds his range in the track "Seal Of The Dark Legions." His screams are infused with an unusual power and sound here and he puts his own stamp on the standard black metal vocal style, which is a good thing.

It will be interesting to see if Ezurate can combine these disparate strong elements into something that pushes them past the pack. [www.angelfire.com/band/ezurate] — Justin M. Norton

### Pestilence Spheres Roadrunner/ Metal Mind



Before the term "progressive thrash" was even coined, a handful of bands: Atheist (and paradoxically) Believer, Cynic, latter day Death and Pestilence bucked the pervasive thrash culture, picking up on the quirky structures experimented with by the likes of WatchTower and Mekong Delta, as well as incorporating large amounts of jazz and classical orchestration, topped with aggressive vocals. It was '93 and metal was a dirty word, so why not diversify? If the lyrics are removed, much of *Spheres* could pass as a Stanley Jordan or Adrian Legg release through the vaunted Blue Note jazz label. Only the guttural psychotic vocalization of mainman/guitarist Patrick Mamel, bordering on death metal, keep it from being an easy listen, the dissonant sounds tearing the ears (and brain) in two (or more) diametrically opposed directions.

While the liner notes proudly proclaim, "there are no keyboards on this album," (an underground boast at the time), there are tons of spacey, electronic guitar effects that might as well be synthesizer notes. There's also plenty of symphonic orchestration, including the 92-second cello solo "Aurian Eyes," the lilting, flute introduced "Personal Energy" and ethereal, simulated whale calls of "Voices From Within." The eleven creations feel like fragments, rather than a coherent effort, most tracks failing to break 3:30. The original format has been augmented by remixes of "Soul Search" and brass fanfare punctuated "Demise Of Time," plus two others ("Mind Reflections"/"Multiple Beings") performed live in a radio studio (smattering of applause). Nearly 15 years after the fact, *Spheres* remains as much of a mind-fuck as it originally was for most in the 14 to 20-something demographic, who just learned to enjoy the chaotic sounds of thrash. Yet, this wasn't created by some gray-beards of the '70s prog movement, but kids their own age. All the more impressive! Good to see stuff like this and the

Atheist collection get another chance, as it sailed over many heads (in part due to the preponderance of material available, then there's the complexity) and maybe the metal world's finally ready for something this heady. Maybe. [www.myspace.com/pestilence1] — Mark Gromen

### Defiance Insomnia Box Set Metal Mind



First of all, ultimate kudos to Poland's Metal Mind Productions for the absolutely stunning series of reissues they've been kicking out. Thanks to the label's cooperation with Roadrunner Records, loads of thrash metal gems from the glorious, golden '80s have been unearthed from the denim 'n' leather vault and made available for consumption by a whole new generation of 'heads.

Artists such as Znówwhite, Blessed Death and Quick Change have already received the Metal Mind treatment — which almost always includes ultra-extensive liner notes and bonus tracks — but with Defiance's *Insomnia* collection, the label truly has outdone itself. For *Insomnia* is not a single-, or double-disc collection, but a triple CD set featuring all three of the Bay Area-based act's full-lengths, plus a truckload of demos and live tracks. The result is enough to make any thrash fan drool.

If only Defiance were a better band.

Though decent, Defiance was ultimately a fourth-tier thrash act that arrived late to the party, with little to offer other than a semi-engaging roughness and an also-ran readiness, and time has not been kind to any in this tinny trinity. The least engaging of the three is easily *Product Of Society*, the band's 1989 debut. While musically capable ("Hypothermia," "Lock Jaw," "Tribulation," "Insomnia"), the sub-par vocals of then-frontman Ken Elkington effectively squashes much of this album's punch.

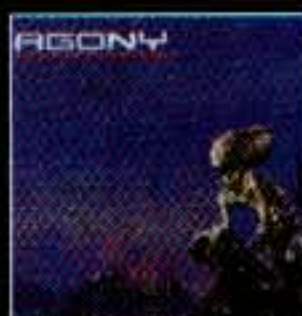
In their defense, however, it must be said that Defiance never seemed to attain a production quite heavy enough to suit what they were obviously going for: Neck-breaking, pit-inducing thrash metal. The band's sophomore effort, 1990's *Void Terra Firma*, comes closest to achieving this and also marks the debut of the band's next vocalist, Steve Esquivel (of Skinlab fame/infamy), who fronted the band until their dissolution in the early '90s.

VTF captures Defiance at their pounding best, particularly the massive skins-work of drummer Matt Vander Ende, whose style reminds me of the late Vinnie Daze, of the much-missed Demolition Hammer. The guitars of Doug Harrington and Jim Adams are also in fine form here, nimbly bouncing riffs 'n' rhythms off each other with ease, while Esquivel himself possesses a charm all his own, a Chuck Billy-esque sing/shout which caters perfectly to the Testament influence already so prevalent within Defiance's sound.

The production here is again lacking, however, and this trend would continue on through the band's third and final LP, 1992's *Beyond Recognition*. Harrington and Adams never received the punch they deserved, and so much of this album suffers for it. Esquivel's experimentation with cleaner vocals, and the album's technical/unmemorable sensibilities just never get across the finish line, stalling around the album's halfway point, never to return. Sure, album opener "The Killing Floor" is a flurry of shredded notes and lofty ideas, but combining a lack of proper sound with a somewhat confused/misguided sense of direction, results in little more than an unfocused, jarring swansong of a release.

While plans for a reunion album were announced back in 2004, an actual release has yet to surface. For diehard fans of these Bay Area boys, however, this reissue should prove to be an indispensable way to count the days, so extensive are the liner notes, lyrics and bonus tracks. If you've ever wanted to hear what the second wave of Bay Area thrash sounded like, now's your chance. [www.defiance.com] — MetalGeorge Pacheco

### Agony Apocalyptic Dawning Disconcert



Agony is a death metal band that traces back to the early '90s and this album is a reissue of old material from 1995 undeniably bows to the Suffocation method of brutal death metal. Fast, vicious and supremely pissed, *Apocalyptic Dawning* is a solid hour of destruction available on CD for the first time. The influences have more of an oldschool death metal bent than the more hardcore-influenced Suffocation, but the end result is mostly the same and Agony is perfect for the avid brutal death metal collector who thinks he has it all.

"Cyberpsychosis" starts things off on the right foot with a psychotic riff that could be straight from the pages of Cannibal Corpse. There's breakdowns and brutality, with simple, crushing power chords, but technical playing ability is apparent with some of the fast riffs and high-pitched leads. The bass is very discernable in the mix and lends some good backbone and the kick drums sound crystal clear.

Fourth track, "An Instrumental Agony," has moments reminiscent of Chuck Schuldiner and company circa *Human*. Some of the leads and attention to progressive riffs are well orchestrated and show that Agony is about more than sheer crushing power, even though they have plenty of that. Again, the bass shines through more than normal for a brutal death metal album.

"Orbital Hide-Out" displays some more of the Death influence and also includes some of the slowest, heaviest riffs on the CD. The band does a good job mixing slow, foreboding parts with faster tempos and leads that keep the listener from getting bored. "Silence" is all speed and the harsh, croaking vocals are at their bestial best.

The last four tracks are from the band's 1993 demo, *Eve Of Destruction*. There isn't much of a difference in production and these songs fit in pretty seamlessly with the rest of the CD. "Megatonic" has one of the best openings around and the guitars have a gigantic feel as they rain riffs and artificial harmonics. "Homicide" makes a second appearance in a slightly altered account, and the bizarre intro is somehow even stranger on the demo version.

Combining straightforward killing power with technical ability, *Apocalyptic Dawning* is more than worthwhile for any true DM fan. This is music that rattles the teeth! [www.disconcertmusic.com] — Keith Russo