

The Gentle STORM

A musician who dislikes touring, who has stage fright and actually thinks touring is a complete waste of time. A social recluse that happens to be a brilliant composer and musician, although not a good stage performer (in his own opinion), with several highly acclaimed releases in his discography – it is of course Arjen Lucassen and Hallowed has been speaking with him.



It is a somewhat tired Arjen Lucassen that calls me having just arrived from the small acoustic tour that he and Anneke Van Giersbergen had just performed at ten locations. They have a full on band doing the rest of the tour, a band where Arjen is not a part. But we'll get to that later as there is some background that needs to be addressed first.

Arjen had the idea to build a something around two contrasting style and he wanted just one vocalist to sing both these styles and for that you need someone really good according to Arjen and Anneke is his favourite female singer which she was there in the back of his mind for being this vocalist. But it was still a bit of a coincident that it all turned

out with Arjen and Anneke doing this project.

- Right at that time (when he was thinking about who was the best female vocalist) she sent me an email and asked, "hey do you want to write some songs together?" And I was like "hey it is a

big coincident that you approach me now because you are in the back of my mind for the project I am working on right now" and I sent he a couple of demos and explained the idea.

She liked the demos and the idea and wanted to brainstorm about it and that is how The Gentle Storm started out as a project between Arjen and Anneke it

is built around a concept album set in 17th century Holland, the reason for it being in Holland is because both Arjen and Anneke are from there.

- It is a love story between a sailor and his lover back home.

The story comes on two CDs but it is not any two CDs, the concept is a tad different.

- It is one CD that is an acoustic atmospheric CD and the other CD is like a big bombastic metal CD so there are two different sides.

And this project then turned into a band, a band that Anneke is going to play live with.

- We got together the best musicians in Holland for this band, it is really an exciting thing and everything really came together on this band.

Anneke is so easy to work with according to Arjen, both technically brilliant and an easy-going person and always optimistic, not a diva at all.

- She has the brilliant combination of technique and emotion; it is a complete balance there. She is also a very charismatic person, so it is an honour to work with her.

The Gentle Style

After the last Ayreon album, Arjen didn't know what to do as he was in his usual black hole period without any inspiration. So he took to the interweb and asked the fans what they wanted to hear next and he gave them a multiple-choice question.

- One option was something heavy, and most fans wanted something heavy. Another option was something folky and about 30% wanted something folky so I had this two styles and wondered: should I combine them? Like into folk metal but so many bands are doing that nowadays so I thought that maybe it would be cool to do the same songs in two completely contrasting sty-



les with two completely different sets of instruments and different vocals. Basically I am looking for a challenge with everything I do and that was a great challenge.

So what about this challenge? Which was the biggest one, Arjen says he thought that the acoustic part would be the most challenging because it is much easier to impress someone with a heavy, bombastic, orchestral album but much more difficult to impress with a gentle acoustic setting.

- I thought that would be the challenge but as it turned out I had so much fun doing it. I think it has about 30 different instruments on it so I think the acoustic version has many layers to it and it was really fun to do a lot of things that I have never done before.

And it wasn't just fun, he learnt a lot during the process as well - like new instruments and doing arrangements for orchestras and many things, even in the song writing process he had to learn new things.

- Instead of writing songs on the guitar I had to write songs with a whole orchestra in mind but I think I learn a little bit with every album I do.

If we compare this to Arjens previous work he thinks that the biggest difference is that there aren't any keyboards on this album.

- If you're listening to Ayreon there are keyboars all over the place with Hammonds and Mini-Moogs, Mellotrons and all kinds of weird synthesizers and this album doesn't have that, it has no keyboards at all, just a real piano.

But it is not only that, the more eagle eared and eagle eyed have already noticed that there isn't many singers on this album like it usually are in Arjens works like eight on the latest Ayreon album.

- Of course you will always recognise my style that is always

there but the ingredients are very different from anything I have done before.

The interviewer points out that the guitar sound is always recognisable and Arjen agrees with that.

The favourite song is sometimes something that seems quite difficult for musicians to pick out and Arjen also has one or two suggestions.

- I think *Shores of India* has a great chorus, it is big and the last Ayreon album didn't have any choruses at all so I was a bit afraid that I had lost the ability to write a good chorus. To me that is a great chorus and I love the power of the song *Storm* which is basically the only guitar riff song on the album. I love the opener *Endless Sea* because it is a very good average of the album; it is a good build up.

The best part of the two on this album depends on the song in Arjen's opinion and explains that some songs works best in the acoustic setting while others need that power to excel. Sometimes it is even down to certain parts in songs. And according to Arjen the album turned out just the way he wanted.

- 100% , you know I am my own boss and have my own studio and only send something to the record company when I am a 100% happy with it. And I have been working on this album for a year without weekends, without holidays; really everyday I have been working on it - until I was a 100% sure about it.

The Gentle Tours

The Gentle Storm's debut album sees two different tours, one where Arjen and Anneke tours with an acoustic setting and another where they have gathered their favourite Dutch musicians to follow Anneke on tour. The first part where Arjen was out

touring was a big challenge to him as it was a while since he was playing live.

- It was a big challenge for me because I hadn't played live in eight years, it was very scary sitting on stage two people with acoustic guitar and every mistake you make is heard but I must say that it was fun to see the people enjoying the music, singing along with songs they know and when you meet the people after the show and they tell you how much you mean to them. That was great but the whole touring thing is not for me with all the traveling, waiting, the stage fright and all that shit - it is really not my life.

That is why they assembled a band of the best musicians in Holland and they are going on tour with Anneke, but they do also play on the album so it is a new band Arjen points out.

- And that is great for me because finally one of my albums is being promoted live which is not the case with Ayreon.

But a musician not into touring, that is a bit of a strange thing considering that many bands I speak with tends to see touring as the best thing about being a musician. Arjen is different and explains that he lives a very reclusive life and wants to be in his studio to create new things.

- For me the touring is just a huge waste of time and it is not creative, you play the same song every night. Also, I am not very good at it - I am not a good performer, I am a much better composer.

But I think you were good on the Star One tour...

- That was a magical tour and it was really fun. It was the last real tour I did and it was great because it was only eight shows so there was no routine - if you are to do 50 shows I think that after ten shows it becomes routine and you make the same jokes on stage

and play the same songs over and over again. The Star One tour was just perfect as the spontaneity was still there in all shows.

In that regard you are a bit different from many other musicians...

- I know, the tour manager told me that, he used to come in and say that there were like 600 people out there and I just: "no, don't tell me that!" I got sick with nerves and Anneke was like "yeah, cool" and I was like "oh, no" and he told me that I was different from other musicians. I think I am not only different from other musicians but from other people too, I think that's why I live a very reclusive life - to not bother any other people with my weird stuff.

This made the reporter think a little bit, does he also dislike speaking with the media? Am I annoying the great musical mind with my silly questions about one of his projects? That would be bad since he is in many regards quite similar to myself, but it turns out that interviews is a whole different thing to this Dutch mastermind.

- I love doing promotion, that's really cool as I am here at home

wearing my headphones, walking through the house and the garden talking about something that I love and something that I am really proud of. That is something that I enjoy.

He calls himself a social recluse as he does like to have contact with people as long as he doesn't need to meet them too much.

- I love to be alone but I love to have interaction and be social like through social media and stuff like that.

The Gentle Opinions

The interest for the album seems to be quite high as the presales that has just started through their shop has been amazing. Anneke and Arjen has been signing and packing albums for days, which is promising according to Arjen. And the press reaction is amazing as well according to Arjen, which is apparently likes as he thinks that thing is a bit scary.

- You give it to someone and you have no idea what the reaction is going to be but we did this little promo tour in January through London, Berlin and Paris - and that was the first time we heard reaction and they were basically all positive.

Experience has it though that you tend to get the positives first and the negatives come a bit later, much as Arjen's experience tells him as well as mine does.

- So it is still a bit early to say something about that but so far I have read like ten reviews and they have all been positive so the start is good.

For Arjen good reviews is important, as he describes it as he is expecting something good because he is proud of his work and all the time that has gone into it. Much as I think most artist think when they have finished something they have been working with for a long time and finally achieved what they set out to ac-

hieve. Thing is though that artist and beholder might not always see things the same way and that can be disturbing.

- The shitty thing is that the positives you expect and the negatives hit you and I am very sensitive for reviews but Anneke just doesn't read them as she doesn't want to but I want to know what reactions are but negative reviews always hurt.

But if you get a negative review that is constructive?

- I love it when it is constructive, when I can sort of agree with someone but I get pretty pissed when someone hates it because it is not his kind of music. When I got those kind of reviews I used to contact these people and ask them about it but when it is constructive it is another thing.

So far the only negatives Arjen has seen about this album is that the storm part isn't that stormy which is something he can live with. But he hopes that people have an open mind and gives the album a chance and don't dismiss the thing because of the acoustic part not being metal and so on.

- I think that a journalist should have a certain degree of objectivity; if I was a journalist and was to write about something that was totally not my style I would try and find the good and bad thing about it within its style. Sometimes I see reviews that are very opinionated and sometimes get into a discussion with these people and it starts really heavy but some of these people I become friends with as we mail for weeks and we each express out thoughts and don't have to agree in the end. And I think that is good to come to some kind of conclusion about it.

But if you are a reviewer and doesn't like Arjen's music you might be safe from his emails as he doesn't do it as much anymore as it is too much work and

doesn't really benefit his creative side and it takes too much time.

One has to wonder, will I get an email from Mr Lucassen after my review that I have yet to write at the moment of writing this article. But what about the future? How do the coming plans look?

- First of all I really hope that this album will become a success in that it sells well and that the live shows goes well and that there is a lot of interest in the band because I would love to do a second one. I did so many projects, like Ambeon or Guilt Machine, that were just one-off projects because they were not successful enough and I really hope that this one is successful enough so that we can do a second one. In a couple of month we will probably know how it works.

Apart from the hope to make a sequel to "The Diary" Arjen doesn't know as he really doesn't like to plan ahead because he doesn't stick to the plan anyway - I keep changing my mind when I start something, he says.

And with those hopes that the spontaneous ideas of Arjen will keep bringing out interesting stories and albums it is time to end. The album called "The Diary" is out on March 23 and will be available as CD digipak, artbook and as a 3 LP-version that also contains the CDs. I think it might be worth looking closer at those, especially if you like what Arjen has done before.

Hallowed Links:

Ayreon - 01011001

Ayreon - Theory of Everything
Arjen Anthony Lucassen - Lost in the New Real

Anneke Van Giersbergen - Drive
Devin Townsend - Epicloud
Devin Townsend - Z2

Star One - Victims of the Modern
Guilt Machine - On This Perfect Day

Gentle Storm - The Diary

