

Interview for Hotrod Magazine with Magne Furuholmen
by Emily Mathisen, Feb. 2003

It must make you very proud that when people around the world think of Norway they think of just four things; fjords, vikings, church burning by Satanists and A-Ha < that makes you a national institution and a living legend! How does it feel being so famous that it becomes bigger than you and the band?

I don't mind livening up the picture a bit; take us out of your equation and it makes the country look pretty dismal, no?

I don't always enjoy the "ambassador" status we get thrown in our lap, though. We're not the national team of some sport.

Your father was also a musician who died when you were only tiny < how much has he been a guiding light in the career path that you have chosen?

I think his fate has played a huge part in the choices I have made in life.

Perhaps even more than if he were alive.

Most of what I have done is to some extent about building temples to a dead father.

You spent time seeking your fortune in London what did you think of it?

London was Home for 11 years.

As a city it definitely works better when you've got money than when you haven't. I've had a long-lasting love / hate relationship with London, but coming back this year, I realised I could live there again. There is a particular mix of dusty grandeur and grittiness to it that I like for some reason - it makes people seem fragile.

We are currently celebrating the release of the 20th James Bond film. How exciting was it being involved with Bond when you did the soundtrack for "The Living Daylights" in 1987 and did you get to meet the great 007 himself?

Depends who you see as the great 007 - we did meet Timothy Dalton.

Personally, I thought he was a case of bad casting. He's too good a dramatic actor.

I saw him in a play with his (even better) wife Vanessa Redgrave in London.

To see him afterwards as Bond was just a little ludicrous..

I liked Roger Moore better; his style, the way he moved those eyebrows up and down...now, that's acting!

Well, at least he brought humour to it - never a bad idea.

The whole Bond experience was a rich meal.

This "Bond-family" around the Broccolis (according to Barbara Broccoli her great grandfather genetically produced the first Broccoli vegetable on earth - she spoon-fed us all with it as some stupid ritual on the set) all behaving like royalty, and of course our "legendary" fight with John Barry left a rather unpleasant aftertaste.

Apparently he compared us to Hitler-jugend in a Belgian newspaper interview.

We became big in Belgium after that.

It's said that every band has to work on the dynamics of different personalities. Just as the Spice Girls had the sweet one, the scary one, the sexy one etc. and the

Beatles had the dreamer, the chirpy one, the intellectual one and the slightly bizarre one. How would you sum up the members of A-Ha?

All three are pretty scary if you ask me.

This whole typecasting of us in the beginning was something we were not very good at making work in our favour.

I was the lucky one: As a clown at least people take you seriously.

Have you ever met any of your celebrity idols and if so did you become starstruck, shy or lost for words?

I behaved like an utter fan once in Monaco; Morten (a-ha singer) and I were hanging out with Robbie Robertson (of The Band) and George Harrison - both high my list of influential people in my musical upbringing...(incidentally also both high on Peyote at the time). I remember standing outside some swanky nightclub - all four of us pissing in the bushes and George H saying; "now here's a shot for the Paparazzis.." A treasured rock & roll moment.

You meet almost every artist you have known about (and ones you haven't) at some point in this business, usually everyone are just nice and polite - and not so very memorable in person.

One time I was really nervous was calling Yoko Ono at her home in NY in connection with an art-exhibit at the Henie-Onstad Art center.

I was really unsure of what to say, and the very first thing she said to me was:

"Excuse me, you've caught me with my hand up a turkey.."

I thought it was some cool conceptual line, and was racking my brain to come up with a suitably clever response...it turned out I was just calling her on Thanksgiving Day, stuffing a turkey.

You have called yourself a sour puss during touring, having only recently finished a huge tour < does this still apply?

No, I've come to enjoy road-life in my old age. Pathetic isn't it?

Definitely a mid-life crisis thing, but also perhaps because I let myself go more - like playing various instruments like keys & guitar and singing lead has been fun.

I guess I get a kick from doing stuff I'm not so good at.

Touring is travelling without seeing the places you go, and meeting people without engaging in their lives. I'm pretty restless, so a nomadic lifestyle actually suits me better than I have been willing to admit to before.

Art

Your first art exhibition was in 1989 < how has your work developed and changed since then?

All downhill from there.

Seriously, I think of '95 as my breakthrough year ("Kutt" exhibition at The Henie-Onstad Art center). It was the first and last conceptually really pure exhibit I've done.

Since then my biggest fear is getting good at what I do, and falling asleep at the wheel. I've always loved actually MAKING stuff. The handicraft aspect of it, you know... Lately though, I seem to get a bigger kick out of just starting something and observing the reaction.

I look at art as way to be transported. The word "Transport" pretty well describes what I am after; a way for myself and others to be taken from one place to another.

Do you think that having no formal art training has hindered you in any way?

No. It is my greatest strength.

In previous work you have mulled over things such as the death of your father. Was this a cleansing process for you?

I sometimes feel like a grave-robber. But at the same time, it is my story and this is my way of taking it back; to substitute memories for something as concrete as a painting or a print, an object, or whatever.

Also, it is cheaper than therapy.

What other artists work have most inspired you?

Shitloads of people. Too many to mention by name. Meeting all these world-class artists in different fields while working at the Henie Onstad art center as a 17 year old, – seeing how they put together exhibitions; hanging up works with them, learning their thoughts around it...this inspiration was of paramount importance to me early on. Also working in proximity to Norwegian artist-colleagues inspired me - people like Kjell Nupen, Olav Christopher Jenssen, Kjell Erik Killi Olsen, to name but a few.

If you could have an exhibition of your work anywhere in the world where would it be and why?

Loisiana, outside Copenhagen. It is just such a beautiful place.

Having your work on a stamp is really quite amazing, knowing that your work is being posted through doors all over the world, how did you feel when you got the commission?

I won't pretend be cool about it. It was a big deal to me.

As Valentines was the theme for the stamp was it difficult not to be predictable in the iconography that you could have chosen to use, especially on something that would be printed so small?

I am not so afraid of predictable. As a pop-musician you learn to walk pretty freely among clichés. I chose to do all the work for this project and the subsequent exhibit working in the actual size of the stamp, while trying to avoid making miniature art. I wanted to make monumental work on a square inch; the small format itself was what I wanted to explor, not a specific subject matter.

I often find imposing such limitations on myself creatively liberating.

In this case it promoted a feeling of making the visual equivalent to Hai-ku poems – that there was a new vocabulary developing as a result of limited space.

Also, I thought to myself ; you'll only ever get this ONE chance to do a real postage-stamp, so screw the occasion - just relate it to the history of stamps and mail.

I made a series that used strings and ropes graphically to generate images suggesting the romantic notion of "ties that bind".

I basically told them I would not do a stamp that had a sell-by date on it, so they (The Norwegian Royal Mail) changed it from a Valentine-stamp into a campaign for writing "real" letters in this era of e-mails.

There are few visual artists who are successful aesthetically in more than one media < you have managed this why do you think this is?

I don't agree. A lot of people have success, there are just few that are any good.

What media do you prefer to work in?

Ones I haven't tried. The times I have the most fun is when playing with medias like newspapers and television, and their expectations of me and themselves.

Other well known faces like Bowie and Lennon, Ronnie wood, Paul McCartney, Jane Seymour and Prince Charles have proved that celebrity gets them through the gallery door but you, more than any other, have proved that you have the talent and staying power. Does this make you proud?

Prince Charles is my personal favourite here...

I think you could possibly find even more interesting cross-over celebs than the ones mentioned here, don't you think?

(I subscribe to the view that all royalty in the world should be forced to work with art, and to hold exhibitions of their work - and lose their social status if what they do is shit! What if there was a new Balthus or a budding Barney among these people who are just too rich and lazy to develop?? Even just ONE good one would be worth it.. and leave less room for the pushy but untalented among them who insist on exhibiting today!)

Does staying-power make me proud as a 40 year old man?

Is that a trick question?

Well, in the end, the work is what you leave behind.

Sometimes you see stuff you've done that gives you a slight tinge of pride.

Mostly you just deal with the let-down of inadequacy.

Over the Christmas period you exhibited a piece in the Hot Rod gallery's "Black and White Xmas show" looking at the Ku Klux clan – always a sticky subject! How did you handle it?

Well, more about TV memories of my childhood, actually.

It was the title of the exhibition that I somehow associated with TV- images from the 60's. I used the song "Strange Fruit" by Billie Holiday as title.

I was doing paper-cut-outs and origami stuff for a couple of other shows around the same time, and I thought about doing something really simple in black & white paper.

White "cones" of paper with holes cut out to look like Klan hoods were stacked on top of each other and attached to a string, to make a kind of 3 dimensional white xmas tree. Human figures in black paper were suspended by the neck around the tree to form a nasty Christmas decoration.

There has been international press interest in the Christmas-tree at Oslo Central Station, that you decorated with 14,000 kroner worth of coins and notes (made into exquisite origami stars) that was subsequently stripped of all the cash by thieves. What was the original concept for the decoration and how did you feel when the money was taken after only a few days?

Yeah, I was really shocked when friends in NY told me they had seen a segment on CNN about it! - it just goes to show that anything involving money really turns people on.

I was asked along with other artists to decorate trees for xmas, and I decided to interpret the assignment in a quite simple and literal way; as the artist-fee for decorating the tree were 14.000,- kroner (\$2000) I just used the fee itself as decoration. It caused a lot more controversy than I had expected; some thought it was disgustingly decadent, some thought it was poignant, I thought it was funny. The press was all over me about whether or not I had reported the theft to the police - of course this was missing my main point.

I told them the thief had in fact just completed the work, getting paid in the process. The media is so often unaware of their own role in events - as the tree was placed a good three meters off the ground, no-one would have known it was real money unless it had been broadcast on the TV-news.

Solo career

Who have been your greatest sources of inspiration musically past and present?

Growing up, "The Doors" opened up a whole new world.

The Beatles became role-models as for everyone else.

I remember being into groups - that was the big thing back then.

Lately my focus has shifted a little: Jeff Buckley, Kurt Cobain, PJ Harvey, Sinead O'Connor, Beck, Radiohead (Thom Yorke), Aimee Mann, Leonard Cohen etc.

Do you think that there is any current musical talent in Norway or do you still see it as empty?

There is a lot of talent with international potential.

Much more so than when we grew up, mainly because of attitude probably.

The whole "nordic-miracle" thing will in turn ensure a new generation of people operating quite effortlessly on a larger arena.

What sucks in this country is still the business surrounding it -

good management, record companies, A&R, agents etc, are still in short supply.

Artists here create virtually everything around themselves a lot of the time.

That's not necessarily only negative, though.

Do you manage to find enough time for your personal projects due to your commitments to A-Ha?

I will vote for whichever party that makes 28-hour-days their main political objective.

Is it still nerve racking when you first go onto stage or has this disappeared with time?

No. (no?)

What have you gained from your time as a solo performer and would you like to explore this avenue of expression further?

Coming back to the band has reawakened my belief in the 4 minute pop-song. For the first time, I would like to make a "proper" record on my own, not just off-the-wall experimentation and film-scores like before.

I believe that you can play a range of instruments including more unusual ones like the clavichord < which is your favourite instrument and why?

Playing to me means exactly that - to be unafraid of "playing" with any instrument. But you couldn't sit me down at a piano at a party and get much use from me. My all time favourite instrument is the Chamberlain – a temperamental mellotron of sorts.

Morten Harket is quoted as once saying you were totally disorganised and with no self-discipline. Has this changed as you have pursued solo interests?

Ask Morten.

I am the most self-disciplined person I know.

I have been too many people in my life to defend old versions of myself.

Family life

Does the current state of the world frighten you as a parent?

Yes, but fear is good. It takes you away from apathy if you use it well.

After over 10 years of marriage and a long courtship what would you say is the key to maintaining happiness within your relationship, family and at home?

Every relationship has its own rules. We've been in ours for 22 years. Ask me in another 22. I've been an egotistical bastard. That's my success-formula.

Your thoughts

After travelling the world with A-Ha what made you decide to move back to Norway?

The need for isolation. To get out of and away from showbiz.
Also raising our then newborn son in an environment I could relate to.

You Oslo people have some very funny names for your areas with Skullerud (sounds like Skull road in English), Bogerud (sounds like snot road in English) and of course, Manglerud (a mangle is something crushed and twisted together like cars which have crashed in English) (we won't even go there with Hell up north!). It is not really surprising that tourists may think that there is a dark and strange feeling to the city < how would you sell it to them?

Cheaply. I don't use Oslo much. When I do, I am always shocked how "metropolitan" it has become on the surface. However, I do like to observe the seemingly effortless confidence of the urban young (said the old fart enviously).

You have got a good Viking name (literally translated as "pine island"), what does being Norwegian mean to you?

Having to spell my stupid name at every hotel check-in counter in the world.

Do you believe in Heaven?

Heaven is a place where nothing happens.

If you could choose the perfect funeral for yourself what would it be like (music, where, how etc.) and how do you think friends could sum up your life in one line?

"... boy, he was a demanding fucker.."

Where is the most amazing place you have ever visited?

China. I spent two months in Shanghai in '96. It made me think I was an alien.

What is the most beautiful thing you have ever seen?

I saw a reportage on CNN recently: A 94 year old women in Australia taking up a bank-mortgage to own her first ever house.

I have read an interview in which you were quoted as saying that you suffered from periods of claustrophobia, agoraphobia and hypochondria when the fame became too much. How did you manage to escape from this and what advice would you give to someone who was experiencing similar feelings?

Enjoy them while they last – not feeling anything is worse.

Having just celebrated you 40th birthday do you still believe in the old adage that life begins at 40 when you have already achieved so much?

I really feel like I have achieved little of what I want to do in my life.
I have come to terms with the fact that you must live with everything you've done,

but I still cling to the thought that you can change it all at any given point;
that you can revise your own history by taking new actions –
life as a restoration-project.

Shakespeare famously said, "If music be the food of love play on". As art and music are both universal languages, what message, emotion or idea would you most like to pass on to humanity through a painting or song?

If you're going to love someone; love me.