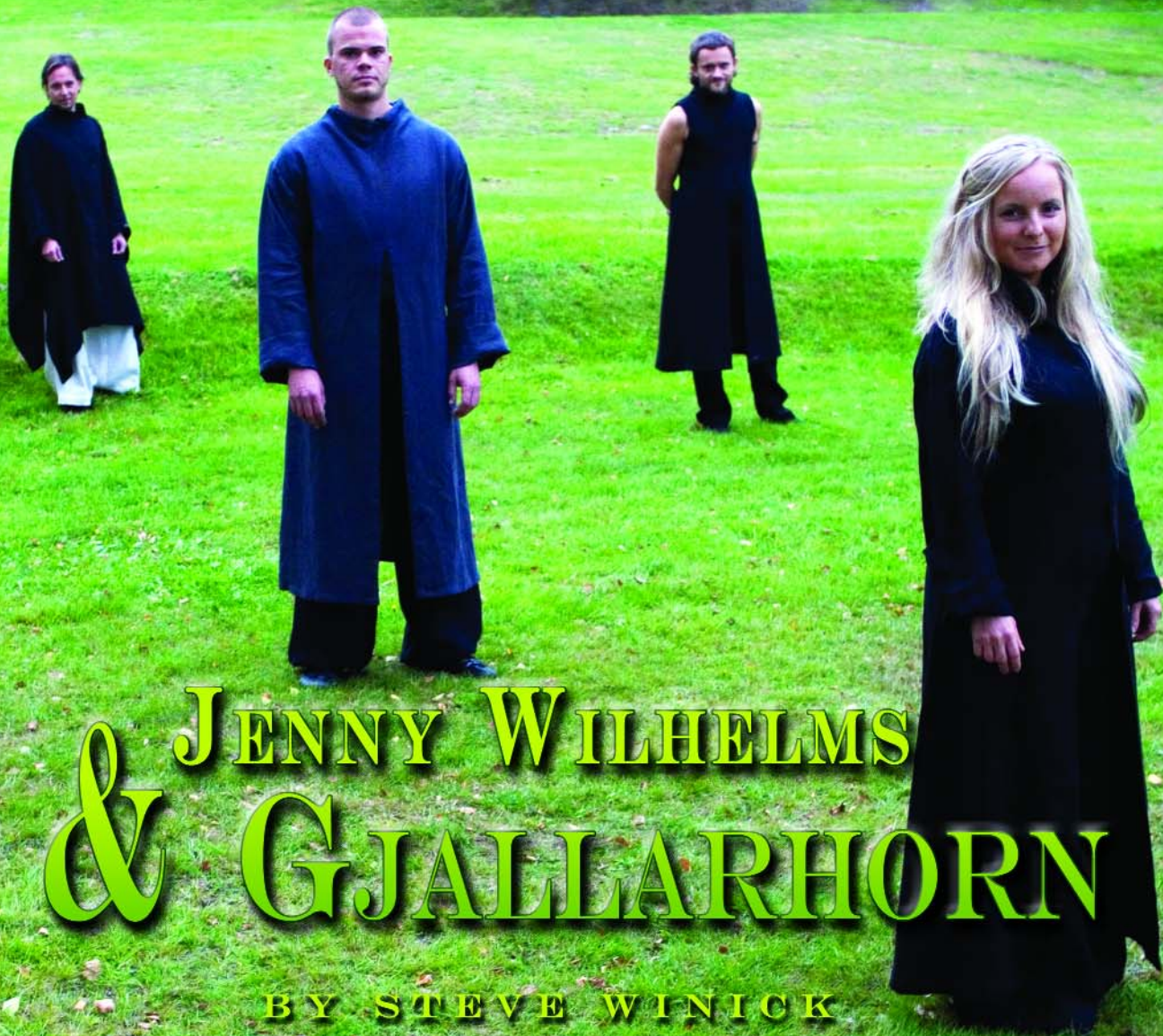


A TASTE OF THE PAGAN NORTH



Christian Yakowiel

JENNY WILHELMS & GJALLARHORN

BY STEVE WINICK

“With this band it has always been the music that chooses the members,” Jenny Wilhelms said. “It is like a living being of its own in a way.”

If Gjallarhorn is a living being, Wilhelms is its head; she is the band’s lead singer, fiddler, and primary spokesperson. After 12 years with the group, she is also its only remaining original member. The next-longest-serving member has been in the band less than half as long. For over a decade, Gjallarhorn has been playing Nordic (Scandinavian and Finnish) songs and music for audiences all over the world. Its sound combines the earthy pulse of deep-drone instruments like the Australian didgeridu with the lushness of Nordic violins, violas, and

Hardanger fiddles, and the gentle ringing of mandolas with the exciting percussive attack of world music. On top of it all soars Wilhelms’ voice, pure as the driven snow and wild as...well, the driven snow. It’s a perfect vehicle for the Swedish, Norwegian, and Icelandic ballads and Finnish runo songs she interprets as the group’s main singer. The result has been critical acclaim in Europe and North America, a regular touring schedule, and three (soon to be four) highly regarded albums.

With Finnish and Scandinavian music coming from the same band, readers might be forgiven for thinking this was pan-Nordic fusion. But there’s a more organic explanation. Gjallarhorn has its origins in the community known as Finland-Swedish, the

ethnically Swedish minority residing in Finland. While the group members’ native language is a dialect of Swedish (a Scandinavian language), their other national language is Finnish (a Finno-Ugric language), and for Wilhelms to sing in both is no more contrived than, say, Celine Dion singing in both French and English.

Wilhelms explained a bit further: “Politically, Finland belonged to Sweden from medieval times until the 19th century, and most castles, cities, churches, and universities were founded during this period. The official language was Swedish in those times. Now the situation has been the reverse for almost 200 years, but the position in society for the Swedish-speaking minority is still fairly good, and we are much better off than most minorities



Jenny Wilhelms

in the world. We have our own broadcasting networks, newspapers, publishers, theaters, and schools, as well as universities in various cities, and all street signs are in two languages in the western parts of Finland. The Swedish-speaking people remain mainly in the coastal regions and in the archipelago.”

Being from this minority even has its advantages; their own Swedish sounds archaic to people from Sweden, for example. “They tell us we have preserved a much older version of the Swedish language than the one spoken in Sweden today. We speak a little like their great-grandparents did.” It’s perfect for ballads from before their great-grandparents’ time.

Wilhelms, like many of the folk musicians in Finland, is a conservatory-trained musician from a conservatory-trained family. “My grandmother studied piano [at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki],” she began. “My mother played the accordion and the clarinet, and also taught dances from various ethnic cultures, so we have always listened to ethnic music from all over the world since I was a baby. She wanted me to play the violin. I started when I was 8 and played classical music until I was 19.” During her teens, however, Wilhelms also began to explore other musical styles, seeking a direction for her own developing musical creativity. “Melodies kept coming into my head all the time, and I picked up new tunes very fast by heart,” she remembered. “Instead of practicing my etudes I found it more interesting to improvise over different modes. So at first I started to learn from all the LPs I could find with violin on them. I listened to everything from Gong and Mahavishnu Orchestra to Jean-Luc Ponty and Stephane Grappelli.”

Wilhelms was already familiar with “the green wave” movement of the late 60s and 70s, Swedish and Norwegian youth bands associated with folk-jazz-rock fusion music. Several veteran players from this movement, such as multi-instrumentalist Ale Möller, Hardanger fiddle player Gunnar Stubseid, and vocalist Kirsten Bråten-Berg, were inspirational figures to the teenage fiddler and singer.



Adrian Jones

courtesy of Guinness Irish Festival

“I decided to become a hard-core folk musician and study the traditional music thoroughly.” For 15 years she has pursued this interest. In addition to performing with Gjallarhorn, she has studied at several important folk-music conservatories, including the Malungs Folkhögskola in Sweden, the Ole Bull Academy in Norway, and the Conservatory of Keski-Pohjanmaa in Finland. She is currently finishing a master’s degree at the Sibelius Academy, also in Finland.

How did this self-described hard-core Nordic folkie come to form such an unusual band? It was the didjeridu, she explained. One night in 1994, Wilhelms and fellow fiddler Christopher Öhman got together with didjeridu player Jakob Frankenhaeuser for a jam session. “We immediately discovered that this sound was something to build on,” she remembered. “We suddenly had an enormous range, bass from the didge, then viola in the middle, and fiddles and vocals on the top.” The didjeridu, she thought, was surprisingly well-suited to Scandinavian music; its rhythmic droning made it like a gigantic, bass version of the Jew’s harp. “It sounded like much more than just a few people, and that has been one of our key ideas since then. I remember we played all night...we just could not stop.”

After the band was underway, it added another major element to its sound: drums. Its first drummer was David Lillkvist, who was replaced by the band’s current drummer, Petter Berndalen. Although there are few drums or percussive elements in modern Nordic folk music, the drum has a long history in the region, since the days of ancient shamanic drumming. The members of Gjallarhorn see themselves as bringing back to the music an element that has been largely lost, rather than adding an element that is alien. Moreover, their current drummer has a particularly melodic approach to his kit that fits in better with folk music than purely rhythmic drumming. “Petter has this very unusual technique where he actually produces traditional fiddling tunes on the drums, a bit like a tabla player, but



Göran Månsson

courtesy of Guinness Irish Festival



Petter Berndalen

courtesy of Guinness Irish Festival

with a kit of his own. He is very much a folk musician and a melodic player, too. The fact that we are all melodic players, who are used to performing solo concerts on our instruments, makes the sound even more dynamic, and the style even more Nordic,” Wilhelms explained.

With an initial sound palette involving fiddles (including violin, Hardanger fiddle, and viola), mandola, didjeridu, drums, and voice, the band started to research and arrange material. The process is much the same today. First, the group members do research to find unusual songs and tunes. Wilhelms finds almost all of the songs. “I need to have lyrics I can relate to, and I think the boys have learned I won’t just sing any tune. So usually I do the archive digging and pick the lyrics.” The men come up with the instrumental tunes more often. From there, the process is collaborative. “Whoever comes up with a tune also presents a basic structural idea, but we don’t want to tell each other strictly what to play,” she said. “We try to leave space for everyone to add their own talent into the arrangement.

“We also aim to be modern when we create the soundscape, for example, for a dramatic ballad,” she continued.

“We work a bit like directors in a movie: We make soundscapes to emphasize stories. Or we make patterns that melodically help to bring out the wonderful blue notes in a tune. To bring out the essence instead of adding layers, we also try to stay modal most of the time. Of course, a lot of this happens via a process of experimenting with more controversial riffs. You must have that freedom in the beginning of a process, then you can start ‘killing your darlings’ and something good will remain. I read a review once where they called us musical painters. That sounds about right to me.”

One of the first steps the group took was to go into the studio and record the album *Ranarop*. “That’s when we created our sound to start with, together with Martin Kantola, our sound engineer,” Wilhelms remembered. “A lot had to be figured out back then, like how to mix a band without a guitar, drum kit or bass player...we used rocks, poles of wood, and a lot of stuff for the effects.” Among other material, the band chose songs drawn from Nordic mythology and medieval folklore, about fairies, witches, saints, and pagan gods. The title of the album is rendered in English as “Call of the Sea Witch,” but it refers to Ran,

wife of Aegir, a sea goddess of Nordic mythology associated with drowning. With its heady blend of elemental sounds and mythological themes, the band was quickly hailed as an up-and-coming force in Nordic music.

Its second CD, *Sjofn*, was a more polished production that nevertheless carried through with many of the same ideas and themes. Wilhelms thinks it’s more accessible to people who don’t know Nordic music, and the world seemed to agree. It won several European prizes and was certified a gold record. One thing *Sjofn* continued strongly from *Ranarop* was the pagan orientation; the album is titled after a Nordic love goddess, and the opening



Christian Yakowlef

song, “Suvetar,” is a hymn to the goddess of spring. “The Finnish runo singing tradition from Karelia was very well preserved in living tradition, and this was a pagan tradition. They had songs for everyday life, for hunting and for good crops,” Wilhelms explained. “Then there are elements of pagan culture and old ways of life in many medieval ballads, because Christianity adapted and renamed many, many of our pagan rituals. I like to broaden the awareness of the fact that these two belief systems lived on simultaneously and affected each other more than we know, for a quite long period of time up here in the north. For example, the people believed very strongly in supernatural beings, because we were living in the midst of nature with great forests and the sea, but people still went to church and believed in Christ as well.”

She hastens to point out that Nordic folk music also has Christian elements. “There are also important influences that the church contributed to folk music; the Catholic Church with its Gregorian chant, for example, gave birth to the wonderfully beautiful tradition of folk hymns. In these hymns, preserved in remote valleys with strict religious movements,

we find, in living tradition, a trace straight to the medieval perception of sacral vocal music. And this is, in my opinion, a true treasure for a folk musician.”

Sjofn also gave the band a chance to make videos for the first time; they are included on the “Enhanced CD” release. “We went out to a remote island here in the archipelago with a film team,” Wilhelms recalled. “The island is very special; it has old mazes from the Bronze Age. The fishermen who brought us there said they would pick us up after five days. So what do you do on a remote island in Finland? Well, first you heat up the sauna!” It wasn’t all a big party, however. “We started with the structural

planning of camera angles and in-ear monitoring with remote controls. Then the rest was all about waiting while the mosquitoes ate us alive when we stood in the woods covered in body paint, waiting for the right moonlight or sunset or morning mist to arrive. But there was lot of sauna in between, and very much fun. And the video made it all the way to German MTV and World Link TV in the U.S.”

After the success of *Sjofn*, the band spent three more years touring and developing, and replaced both Öhman (with Adrian Jones) and Lillkvist (at first with various session players). With a new lineup and a new repertoire, Gjallarhorn produced a third album, *Grimborg*. “Musically, I consider it the most dynamic and varied album,” Wilhelms stated. The critics agreed. *Grimborg* won the prestigious Prix Charles Cros in France, an award given to only seven albums a year across all categories. Still, *Grimborg* is not “easy listening,” and may be a bit more introspective and less accessible than *Sjofn*. “I have to admit that it requires more time and devotion from the listener to really get into the mood of this CD,” Wilhelms said. “It has beautiful and dramatic themes — I always recommend it to our fans. Perhaps it is like a chapter in the end of a book. You need to be familiar with the previous chapter a little before you can enjoy it. And it also was like an end of a certain area on our journey. Now we are on to something totally different!”

What is so different about today’s Gjallarhorn? Well, one major change since its last album has been the decision to give up the didjeridu. After three albums and two Finnish didjeridu players (Frankenhaeuser and Tommy Mansikka-Aho), the Australian Aboriginal

woodwind has been replaced by a little-known European Renaissance instrument called the sub-contrabass recorder. Requiring between eight and nine feet of length, it's an impressive-looking flute, to say the least! Why did the band members choose this obscure sound? "We always had as a goal to remain acoustic," Wilhelms said. "We feel it is more fun to experiment with sounds and delve as deep as you can into your own instrument, bring every weird sound out of it, and use it to emphasize the essence of the tune or story we want to tell, instead of using synthesizers." For 10 years, they experimented with the didjeridu, including using a pitch-adjustable "slideridoo" so they could play in more keys. But any didjeridu has limits in melodically oriented music, and they felt they had come to the end of that road. "We needed something with more possibilities but the same qualities, and still acoustic. So we asked this great flute player who played the sub-contrabass recorder, Göran Månsson, who lives in Sweden, if he wanted to join the band. It has been a lot of fun recording the new album with him. He produces a bass boost, very modern club sound sometimes, but he is also a melodic player on this flute, and plays various traditional Nordic pipes as well. He has a master's degree in early music, but has played in pop-music constellations as well. So we have broadened our dynamic level again."

A second change is the decision to add some electronically processed acoustic sounds, courtesy of the band's producer and engineer, Martin Kantola. Kantola had already been an important part of the band's sound from its inception. From designing its studio and live sound to physically building custom microphones for the group, he has made sure its sound is state-of-the-art and consistent through over a decade of touring and recording. He is also an inventor, and has recently innovated in the field of surround microphones. "I've actually seen him sit with his kit repairing a microphone on a beach, while everyone else is swimming, or during a festival in Shetland, on one of the remote islands while the rest of the festival crowd was dancing about and fiddling frenetically in a pub. That's a true technician." Now he's also contributing to the music in a new way. "He imitates our instruments with his tech board and so we improvise live on stage with him," Wilhelms explained. "Sometimes he takes over a tune with the sounds he creates from us, then we answer him back. It's very funny!"

The group has several plans for the future. One involves collaborations with jazz musicians, jumping off from recent work it did with the Kvarken Big Band. "Composer and conductor Ralf Nyqvist made big-band arrangements of our tunes, and we did a tour with them last year," she said. "I have worked with Ralf over the years in many projects,



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making music for theater plays and such. A great guy to work with. We are expanding this project in the future and will play with the UMO jazz orchestra in Helsinki. They usually get governmental funding to work with soloists and artists from all over the world, so that's an honor."

The Gjallarhorn members are also working on their fourth album, *Rimfaxe*, with Bruce Swedien, engineer for such albums as Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. Swedien has won 13 Grammy awards and worked with everyone from Frankie Valli to Quincy Jones and from Paul McCartney to Duke Ellington. He is currently finishing an album with Jennifer Lopez in Miami. He will be mixing and producing with Kantola, whom he knew from sound engineering circles. Swedien heard Gjallarhorn's sound and offered to work with them.

DISCOGRAPHY

Rimfaxe
(2006)

Grimborg
NorthSide (2002)

Sjofn
NorthSide (2000)

Ranarop
NorthSide (1997)

www.gjallarhorn.com

A Scandinavian by descent, as his name implies, it's appropriate that he should work with this leading band from the Swedish diaspora. "We are about to go to Mr. Swedien's studio in Florida for the finalizing of the CD in March 2006. It will be an honor to work with a man who recorded so many great productions. What a perspective he must have on working with music!"

Rimfaxe means "the frost mane," and refers to a horse in Norse mythology that carries the goddess Nott (night) over the skies every night. As Wilhelms explained, the foam of his mouth is the morning dew, and his mane is made of moonlight. (Among other things, he and his daytime counterpart Skinfaxe seem to have been the inspiration for Shadowfax, the horse that carries Gandalf in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.) "On this album, many songs relate to the magic horse," Wilhelms said. "There is the ballad, 'Blacken,' about a horse who has supernatural powers and wins every battle with the king; there is the Catholic theme about St. Stefanos, the guardian of the horses, in heaven; and the Icelandic Rimfaxe story. I believe this album will be accessible for new audiences. Even though we stay true to modal music, we will have a very modern soundscape through the arrangements, and more strange sounds from Martin's adaptation of our acoustic sounds, as well as his surround-mic inventions. I can promise that much."

Wilhelms also cautioned music fans not to get confused; there are two bands called Gjallarhorn. The other Gjallarhorn, which didn't start using the name until almost a decade after her band did, is a heavy-metal band fronted by an Italian and a Norwegian. "I don't see any major threats for us with them using the name, although they could have asked us, of course," she said generously. "We have gotten some complaints from fans who bought music on Amazon, and got confused by this metal band. So be careful which category you choose there. And to our fans: Our new CD is called *Rimfaxe*. No Viking battle ships on the cover!"

Finally, Wilhelms invited North American readers to see the band in concert, in July and September 2006. "Live concerts are great," she enthused. "I mean, we get a kick from the audience, from good sound and big PA systems and from whatever our technician is up to at the moment, and he in his turn gets his inspiration from what we are doing at the moment. And there's the interaction with the audience. Yeah, we like it a lot. It's a journey of its own."

Most of all, onstage the band enjoys the music. "The energy and flow that comes from enjoying playing great tunes over and over again. Never lose that, no matter how fine the arrangements you have. Every musician can agree with that, don't you think?"

