

High Life

a rock-'n'-roll album

by

NATIONAL NIGHTMARE

On October 16th, 2019, acclaimed rock-'n'-roll producer Hiili Hiilesmaa will be meeting National Nightmare on E12 motorway service station, halfway between Hämeenlinna and Helsinki.

In the past few weeks, Hiili has been listening to the band's new demos for its second album, titled "Planet Fun Fun."

In this meeting, Hiili will share his vision, his secret sauce, and his silver magic bullets that would make National Nightmare's next album a definite rock-'n'-roll album.

Motorway restaurant's table was bristling with rock-'n'-roll legends from Helsinki; bass player Jimi Sero, guitarist MELA, lead singer Sami Haxx, drummer Tommy Gun, backing vocalist Hanna "Miss Simone" Wendelin, and percussionist Mr. Voodoo.

They all have impressive and long careers, ups and downs, domestic and international success, several bands, several published records, music in TV, movies, and games.

A total of 1313 years combined of Rock-'n'-roll lifestyle sits on that table.

Hiili arrives. Greetings are exchanged, most of the band have met and worked with him in the past.

Small talk dies, and it's business time.

'So, Mr. Hiili..how were the demos?" Jimi starts.

Hiili leans forward.

"Well, friends..this is super good material...I see colors in my mind... people clapping and

speaking in tongues...but before I summon a demon and start making deals with you, how about a cup of coffee first?"

Preproduction

First contact emails were exchanged with Hiili as early as September 2019. Mela had called him in advance, and Hiili was already familiar with the band and its first album, Sangre Salvaje. A set of raw studio demos were sent to Hiili, allowing him to get his bearings on the song material. From that moment, the preproduction phase started. In the weeks that followed, Hiili and the band discussed and corresponded numerous times on the artistic direction, sound, and arrangements of the songs.

They talked about bands like Aerosmith and Alice Cooper, groove and soul in rock, how vocals and percussion would have a big role, and they would not shy away from any style or era; they would let the Rock-'n'-roll history and modern sound mix and naturally benefit the songs.

Based on those talks, Hiili later suggested arrangement changes, tempo alternatives, key changes, etc., and the band started to record the second iteration of demos that would eventually evolve into a template for the actual album recording.

“When I first met the band, I wondered which of them might have been last arrested. My guiding idea was to bring out the personalities and handprints of the members strongly. The album features a variety of flavors of rock’n’roll, whose charismatic characters tie together seamlessly.” - Hiili

Recording and arranging of these new demos occupied the band for several weeks. From the band's home base, Hawaji Studio, demo's were bounced back and forth with Hiili. Feedback, ideas, and suggestions were processed, and good things and happy coincidences happened.

Out of fourteen songs, ten made the cut. December 29th, 2019 Haxx emailed Hiili; *"This is it! These are the songs. We'll start practicing these after new year, and if everything goes as planned, we can record the drum tracks in early 2020"*.

One big decision was made in that motorway service station. After the arrangements were locked, the band would practice the songs up to live show standard before the final recording would start. When that standard was reached, drums were to be recorded at Sound Supreme studio in Hämeenlinna and then continue with the rest of the tracks in the band's homebase Hawaji studio, in Helsinki.

2020, screw you!

Full band training was not easy to schedule in normal times, but now Finland was riding the first spike of covid pandemic, making everything difficult, stressful, and also dangerous. The band soldiered on, and in three months' time, all ten songs were in good shape and recorded (third time if you are counting) in a live setting. That really made a difference. Band sounded righteous and tight!

Late March, covid peaked in Finland. Demo vocals and few chorus backing vocals were overdubbed. Live templates were now ready for the next phase. Production!

Drum tracking

On April 14th, Tommy Gun went to Sound Supreme. Jimi was driving and performing road manager duties. Familiar tracks were waiting for Tommy. The band did excellent work creating tight live performance playback tracks for Tommy to play against.

Hiili produced the 3 to 5 days session without any compromise. Drums were thundering. Alternate takes were kept, and extra fills saved to be used later in the mixing.

Bass odyssey

Spring 2020 was awful. Everybody was tired and nervous. The world was ending, people were hoarding toilet paper, tuna, and noodles. WTF?

Anyways, overdubs for stringed instruments started (fourth time recording these songs) in Hawaji studio, and Haxx was back in the engineers and producers chair.

The band had followed Hiili's instructions and suggestions during pre-production and drum tracking. Now with the overdubs, it was the band's time to work, play and enjoy this superbly pre-produced material.

"Late April, we recorded four bass tracks, and we found out the next day that they were not in tune. Everyone felt like world class professionals. All 1313 years of experience in the same room." - Haxx

Bass guitar went to maintenance, and Mela continued the sessions with guitars.

Bass came back, and Jimi recorded almost all the bass tracks for the album in just a few days until Haxx noticed that few notes in scale were not in tune. He could not fix it on the computer; Bass had two misaligned frets. Galaxy class professionals.

"I had this 'hard to describe uneasy feeling'. Band was tight, playing was great, but something was off. Finally, I took that bass and tested every fret with a tuner. That bass was very close to complete annihilation." - Haxx

It was a hard moment. Days of work that were hard to schedule into the end of the world circumstances and restrictions. Bummer.

A break for coffee, cigarettes, cigar, beer was needed.
Thinking. Pondering. Cooling down.

Band hopped in Jimi's Mercedes and drove to pick up Haxx's Precision bass, which ended up being the bass instrument for the whole album.

Breaking Back

Jimi tried to start from the beginning, but he developed a painful nerve pinch between the 5th and 6th vertebra. He was out of action the whole of May and the better part of July.

The sessions continued with Mela and guitars.

Mela is a guitar instrument builder and plays exclusively his hand crafted instruments. Finding the perfect sound was not easy, and playing with the unfinished bass tracks was a risky move.

Jimi got back into action later in June and recorded bass tracks again; this time in the pocket and in tune.

Bass sound and playing style with Precision changed so much that Mela decided to record guitars again for the most part. Mental, but definitely worth it. This time Mela had brought in a selection of Mad Professor effects pedals, which were the foundation of his guitar sound in this album.

At this point, songs of the album were recorded four times in total. Bass and guitars a few times more on top of that. But who's counting, right?

Stringed instruments and keyboards and blues harmonicas took until the end of July. And then some more guitars. Most of the keyboard parts were recorded in Haxx's home studio setup. It's always on, so it's convenient to do a quick drive-by-recording in the days between actual studio bookings.

In June, Haxx started tracking lead and backing vocals.

Percussion concussion

Band decided early on not to opt for a second guitar player. Instead, percussion player Mr. Voodoo joined the band after playing a couple of shows together with National Nightmare.

For this album, Mr. Voodoo arranged percussion parts to every song and utilized a wide array of instruments; congas, timbales, shakers, quiro, tambourines, and more.

Percussion parts were recorded in three sessions to get the best possible performances. After all, Mr. Voodoo is the band's "rhythm guitarist."

"It's not just a tambourine or a shaker - it's the heartbeat layer of the song, part of the foundation." - Haxx

Wanna be a rock-'n'-roll shhinger

Haxx started singing lead vocals on his birthday, June 7th, 2020.

"After 32 years of doing this one would think that it gets easier... It's hard to engineer yourself, operate the recording software and computer, touch up preamp, compressor and equalizer, then sing your best material ever and kill it with every take, evaluate the takes, edit and comp the takes, and so on. After a day's work, your brain is fried, and your nervous system is so overloaded that you cannot sleep. Still enjoying every moment." - Haxx

Work went along well enough, considering what a shitty year 2020 was trying to be. And that he was working with unfinished bass and guitar tracks.

"A funny thing happened...I had this broken plastic fill in my front teeth gap. I didn't get it fixed before we started practicing, and I got it fixed before I started doing actual lead vocal recordings. My "S" sounds changed. After I recorded two songs, I had to give up. It sounded horrible. I needed to take a training break and learn how to sing with my new and shiny tooth gap. It took all of June to relearn how to say "S" again." - Haxx

Miss Simone - Missing in action

In August, Haxx's lead vocals were ready. He's backing vocals were ready. Hanna was in school.

The band was not in a hurry; covid had postponed all plans to the unforeseeable future.

While Hanna was concluding her master studies, the rest of the band made polishing touches, added acoustic guitars, re-recorded a few guitar solos and some other small things like effect bass.

"Hiili either cuts it, or dials it to 11, haha! I don't care anymore!" - Haxx

Hanna let loose her inner empress 19th of September. She sang like an angel who's been around the block a few times more than it was allowed.

"Recording with Hanna causes goose bumps, weak knees.. can't think, can't talk.. sudden clumsiness, shallow breathing. I think that voice should be a prescription drug only." - Haxx

Hanna did it again on November 14th. The album's last recorded line was Hanna's.

"I have no idea what I've done right to get to land in this nightmare with these guys. All of the held back sexual aggression, and, you name it, forbidden emotions are suddenly expressed and saved in the tracks of this album! Recording with Haxx was like a safe haven of rock'n'roll. What can I say? Ease of mind, you're welcome. Can't wait to get on the tour bus again!" - Hanna

Haxx uploaded tracks to Hiili for mixing on November 18th.

"If you want this lifestyle, this High Life, it's there waiting for you, if you are willing to pay the price.

Most aren't but don't worry; National Nightmare went the extra mile for rock'n'roll. For you. "

- Haxx

National Nightmare's new album High Life is coming!