

WILDERNESSKING – ALWAYS UP FOR SOMETHING NEW

At the end of July, an interesting tour package passed by Antwerp underground temple Music City. Solbrud from Denmark and Wildernessking from South Africa embarked on a European tour together and treated their audience every night on an intense dose of atmospheric black metal. After the show, I talked to Keenan Nathan Oakes, Wildernessking's frontman/bassist. We agreed to do a thorough interview after the tour was over. (JOKKE)



© Oliver Kruger

Hi Keenan! You are just back home from your first European tour with Danish black metal band Solbrud. How was the overall experience? It seems that you sometimes switched place as headliner with Solbrud?

Hello! Yes indeed, and it feels good to be home after our first European tour. Overall, it was an incredible, insightful and life-changing experience, and something we hope we're able to do again. We swapped every night with Solbrud, so they would headline, and then we would the following night, and so on and so forth.

Your tour manager Alex told me that you also played on a festival with Satyricon amongst others on the line-up. Which festival was it and was that the biggest crowd you have ever played for?

It was Devilstone Festival, the first show of the tour. The biggest crowd we ever played to might have been in South Africa actually, but on this tour it was at the Fluff Fest in Czech Republic.

Must be cool to combine both festivals and smaller club shows like the one in Antwerp Music City on one tour. What kind of gig do you prefer the most?

Yeah it's really great. We're not used to the bigger festival stages, so we're inclined to say the smaller and more intense club shows, where the audience is literally one meter away from you, just like the one at Antwerp Music City (definitely a highlight of the tour). Other stand outs from the tour include most of the squat shows, where the DIY culture is very strong, and that environment speaks to us on an intrinsic level, as ultimately, we're a DIY band.

Did any crazy things happen on the tour?

Yeah, seeing as it was our first time in Europe, it was bound to get a little crazy at times. Just playing everyday seemed crazy to be honest, but what we deemed crazy probably seems normal for most touring bands. Partying after a show and then having to wake up early to drive for another 10 hours was difficult at times; playing with a backline that we're not used to provided some challenges too, but we were able to bounce back for the most part and learnt so much because of what we went through.

Is it easy to pick up your everyday life after being on the road for two weeks?

Yes and no. Yes, because we're used to life back at home, the routine, the faces and the city. It's fantastic and a special place to be in. But it's not that easy considering what we just experienced. It was a real life-affirming time, as we've been trying to tour Europe for a while now... It would be great if we could come back every two years...

Since there is no real new album to talk about, I would like to discuss some past, present and future topics. Let's start with the pre-Wildernessking era when the band was active as Heathens.

Why did you decide at a certain point to change your name to Wildernessking?

By the time we were working on the follow-up to the second Heathens EP, the music had progressed, ushering in a more matured take on our sound. The third release, the "*Morning*" single, would be the final nail in the coffin of Heathens... Essentially, we were a new band, as Jesse joined on second guitar just before the release of "*Morning*", and because we were now playing and writing music that was far from the initial intent of the project (which was essentially a fun side-project of Dylan's and Keenan's). We also felt that we could have a more encompassing and conceptual name than Heathens, one that didn't limit our audience potentially, and appealed to a wider demographic.

Instead of first releasing some EP's, you immediately went for a full album with 2012 "*The Writings of Gods in the Sand*" released through Antithetic Records. I have always been intrigued by the album title. What is the meaning behind it?

Essentially, the album is about a group of people in search of a utopia, a better life than the one they know. The title came from a lyric in the song "*Discovery*". At this point, the group of people are on their way to discover this majestic land, and the title and lyric is an affirmation that they're on the right path. "*See, see the writing of gods in the sand...*" As if they were lead to this moment by supernatural beings. The concept is just a metaphor... It's about making the most of your life, essentially.

Afterwards you independently released two EP's ("*...And the Night Swept Us Away*" and "*The Devil Within*"). Was Antithetic Records no longer interested to work with the band and release those EP's?

It wasn't that Antithetic wasn't interested anymore. We never signed a deal or anything like that, and from the inception of Wildernessking, it was our intention to always try something new; never to repeat ourselves. With the first LP, we had established a small audience, so the idea that we could release a really limited and special CD for the first EP was one that was really appealing to us. We enjoy having control over all aspects of the release, from concept to pre-production, creative direction and finally to the recording and production side of the record. "*The Devil Within*" was released independently on CD, but both the tape and vinyl format of the EP came out on labels, as well as the tape version of "*...And the Night Swept Us Away*".

Both EP's have recently been re-released through French label Les Acteurs de l'Ombre with new artwork. Did you also change something soundwise?

The "*...And the Night Swept Us Away*" side of the LP was remastered, but nothing changed other than that. The purpose of this "rerelease" was to have "*...And the Night Swept Us Away*" pressed on vinyl for the first time, and a chance to repress "*The Devil Within*", as the 100 copies of the 10" version sold out relatively quickly. So we thought why not kill two birds with one stone and release both EPs on one record (some of our fans also requested a repressing of "*The Devil Within*" and a first time pressing of "*...And the Night Swept Us Away*"). To make it more special, we added two bonus recordings (done exclusively for this release) coupled with all new artwork.

You also worked with Sick Man Getting Sick Records and some other labels for cassette or vinyl-releases. You like label-hopping it seems? Can you still work with other labels or does everything from now on have to be released through Les Acteurs de l'Ombre?

We love collaborating and working with new people. Because of this, there are always new ways to view, approach and execute a project. Alluding to a point we made earlier in the interview, we always push ourselves to try new things (to be frank, it's not that self-conscious), and working with SMGS and LADLO was no different. We can work with anyone we want to work with... To this day we have never signed with anyone. It is always an open and honest agreement, and that's the way we like it.

For your second full length "*Mystical Future*" I wrote a review in Dutch and afterwards translated it via Google Translate to South African. Because it was still understandable and sounded quite funny, I decided to publish it like this

(<https://addergebroed.wordpress.com/2016/02/13/wildernessking-mystical-future/>). Does it come close to South African or does it not make sense? Do all 4 of you speak South African?

You mean Afrikaans. It reads almost perfectly and makes complete sense. 2 of us speak Afrikaans but all of us can understand it.

In the review I named Alcest, Fen, Deafheaven and Altar Of Plagues as some of the references. Are these bands you are influenced by or draw inspiration from?

Not really. Our main influences where metal is concerned are Enslaved, Wolves in the Throne Room and Agalloch, and to some extent Deafheaven is an inspiration.

For the extremely catchy “*I will go to your tomb*” song, you released a stylish music video. Did this song open new doors for you? The link between the song lyrics and the two black wrestlers is not immediately clear for me. What do they represent?

No, not necessarily. We’ve always wanted to do a professional video, so when the time came to do one, we were more than up for it. The link is more apparent to us now than it was when we shot the video... In order for one of the wrestlers to transcend, he would have to defeat the other wrestler. By killing the other wrestler he is essentially going to his tomb, so as the title goes, “*I will go to your tomb*” refers to overcoming an opposition. In the context of the album, the lyrics deal with overcoming a difficult and long relationship, hence the line: I will raise a stone, bury time so old.



© Eckardt Kasselmann

If you start a black metal band it seems you - roughly said - have the choice between going for the satanic or orthodox style with the spikes, occult imagery and the corpsepaint or for the more atmospheric – some call it hipster BM – style that is more inspired by nature. The first one has never been an option I guess? Do you consider Wildernessking black metal anyway?

Firstly, the second wave “orthodox style” was deeply inspired by nature, amongst other things. This new wave is an extension and expansion on what black metal was in the 90s. And yes, the first one was never an option, because we, as a South African band can’t relate to it, but are inspired by it, so much that we wanted to start a band. When we started there were obvious musical reference points, but since then we have established our own sound, one that’s metal, with influences ranging from black metal to progressive rock. So we just like to think of ourselves as a metal band.

Although I have been listening to black metal for more than twenty years now, it was only after a road trip through Norway that I really understood the relation these bands had with their natural surroundings. Is the beauty of South Africa in any way a source of inspiration for your music? Are there other things you draw inspiration from?

Of course. We live in a city (Cape Town) steeped in picturesque beauty. We have no choice but to be inspired by the mountains, the forests and the oceans, and even the city. And the dynamism of the city we live in is captured in sonic form on a sub-conscious level by our music (this is a real-time epiphany), but we can clearly see and hear the influence Cape Town has on our music.

What is your relationship with religion? Some album or song titles refer to God or the devil. The songs on “*Mystical Future*” on the other hand seem to deal with more romantic topics?

We are not religious. 90% of our lyrics and concepts are metaphorical. Most of us are romantics, so dealing with more romantic topics was something we were looking forward to exploring for a while... We love the poetic and beautiful imagery of romanticism.

Your latest EP “*Levitate*” was the first one that was recorded playing live. Is this something you will continue to do on the next album? Are you already working on new music?

Again, we like to try new things, so we will do something different for our next release. “*Levitate*” wasn’t the last time we recorded (drums, bass and guitars were tracked together, with the solos and vocals in a different session)... The last time we recorded was for the “*And the Night Swept Us Away/The Devil Within*” LP release, and the two songs we did were tracked entirely live, so again, that was different to the “*Levitate*” sessions. In May 2017 we completed writing for a new record. We’re not sure when we will work on/record those songs, as the band seems to be on a break now.

Being a metal band from South Africa sounds very exotic for us Europeans, is there a real metal scene in Cape Town? Do you play a lot of shows in your home country? Are there any good bands you can recommend us to check out?

There is a scene, albeit small, but it grows every year. We do not play a lot of shows (maybe only 2 a year on average), as we’re normally focused on writing and releasing records. Check out this compilation for some recommended South African bands:

<https://secretceremonies.bandcamp.com/releases>

How was growing up in South Africa and how did you come in contact with metal music? Here in Belgium, we have always had a lot of bands coming over to tour and in recent years the underground scene has been very active. But I can imagine that you had to rely more on Internet to discover new music and bands?

We love this country. We loved growing up in it and we love it now. We came into contact with metal just like anyone else would. Hearing it on a late night radio show, or watching Superrock on MTV, or having an older sibling or cousin or friend show us some bands (granted we didn’t get a lot of shows/touring bands). And with the advent of the internet age, it’s very easy to discover bands, as anyone who listens to this kind of music would know.

A trip to South Africa is quite high on my bucket list. What should I really visit if I come to your beautiful country? It seems that Cape Town is still considered dangerous at night if you walk alone on the streets. Is that correct?

After visiting Europe, we can safely say that Cape Town is one of the most beautiful cities in the world with a rich cultural heritage, so that's a no brainer in terms of recommended South African cities. Johannesburg is amazing for other reasons. One simply has to be street smart, and if you know where to go, and where not to go, you're fine. We're not living in the stone-age here; quite the opposite in fact, and tons of international bands are now putting Cape Town on their touring destination lists, and with good reason.

What can we expect in the near future from Wildernessking?

Hopefully more records...

Thanks for the interview!

Thank you! It was great to meet you at the show in Antwerp.



© Ab Al-Tamimi (Wildernessking live at dB's, Utrecht, Holland, 2017)