

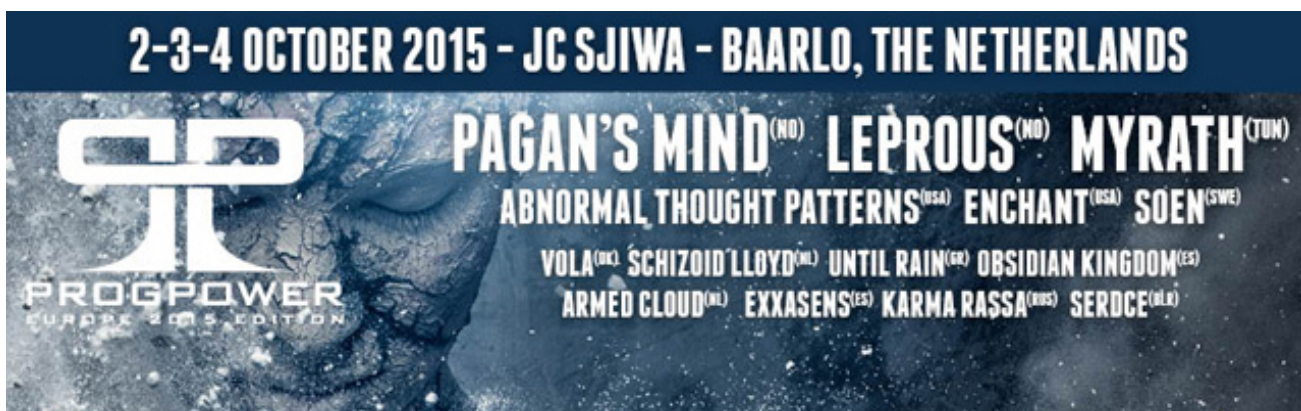
ProgPower Europe – JC Sjiwa Club, Baarlo, Netherlands 2 to 4th October

by ANDREW DOHERTY on Oct 18, 2015 • 9:12 am

3 Comments



“The UK plays no part in Europe”. There’s nothing newsworthy about that. There may have been no UK bands this time among the fourteen playing at the seventeenth edition of this annual festival, but Rene and his organising crew have set up another intriguing and mouth-watering line-up from twelve countries in and outside Europe. While we’re on the subject of statistics, I read on the excellent ProgPower Europe web site that spectators from twenty two different countries attended this event. That’s impressive but this isn’t about statistics. It’s about the people who take part and attend in this picturesque Dutch village, it’s about its open spirit and it’s about the music and the seemingly limitless variations on the harder and softer ends of the progressive spectrum. The usual combination of known and unknown bands was always going to provide an exciting prospect.



Part 1

Friday 2nd October.

The experimental rock of **Vola** from Denmark was the start of this weekend's journey. At least that was the style which my prior research had led me to expect. Four clean-cut Danish gentlemen took to the stage, including a drummer who looked so young that it appeared his mother had forgotten to tell him to brush his hair. In fact I learnt in conversation with a band member afterwards that they had been together for a few years. The experience showed in the band's cohesion. The first two songs were melodic and had interesting progressions, including suggestions of djentiness. The lofty and energetic "Stray the Skies" had a nice keyboard and bass line. The singer, who was prone to the occasional growl, held the high notes very well. I struggled a little as the band moved into "I'm Not Here", where the output was first slow, then faster and generally off centre. There was plenty of range, as slow starts led to blast offs. Then, as I was concluding that this was a band who were capable of good touches but were perhaps too sophisticated for their own good, the set took off from "Feed the Creatures". Heavy style prog filled the stage, as a combination of thrusting modern djent and the melodic songs, which are clearly a Vola strong suit, combined to produce drama. After spending my time during the performance trying to work out whether I liked Vola or not, I concluded that I did. Their invention and imagination came across evocatively, especially on the newer songs. This is an interesting band with plenty of ideas to develop.



Myrath have won themselves friends at PPE, where they played in 2010, and elsewhere. Tonight they topped the bill. The crowd waited expectantly for an explosive performance. I was there in 2010 and personally did not share the widespread enthusiasm on that occasion for the band's Middle Eastern infused progressive metal. But this is 2015.

Leather or ripped jeans? Open necked-shirt and chain? The image-conscious Myrath were like a parody of a metal band. The waffling lead singer came across as a false superstar, and he wasn't that great at singing either. It seems to me that Myrath's music hangs on the Arabic elements, which were pronounced in a way that they felt it necessary to remind us periodically of their roots. The power metal songs were bog standard and without the Arabic infusion would have had very little to commend them. So was there anything good? Well yes, as Myrath brought along a belly dancer with transfixingly snaky hips and other body parts. Said belly dancer was wheeled out for the "big tracks", so she appeared for



“Merciless Times” and “Beyond the Stars”, or “Beyond the Stars of ProgPower”, as the singer announced cheesily. “Merciless Times” to be fair is a great song and powerfully delivered. Unfortunately offset against this was a dire ballad, a band which draws some comparison with Pagan’s Mind or Queen in style but frankly is middle of the pack in its genre, and a singer who not once but twice got parts of the crowd to prove they could sing the harmonies better than he could. Lacklustre and musically unexceptional was my conclusion.



Saturday 3rd October

The obligatory Dutch band opened up on Saturday. Normally this leads to pleasant discoveries, I've found over my years of attending ProgPower. In this case it was **Armed Cloud**. It's nice to have a local band, and thinking of Day Six and A Liquid Landscape, such a discovery can be life-enriching. I won't be adding Armed Cloud to that list. The band played a bass-heavy style of classic metal while the singer did his prog thing. It didn't really work and unfortunately he didn't do it very well. His vocals were shouty and he couldn't hold a note. Armed Cloud's songs seemed to involve formulaic, drawn-out structures, which offered little by way of development. Not even the sight of the guitarist and singer appearing to simulate intercourse on the floor managed to raise my interest – on the other hand, why would it? One good thing was that the vocalist and the band were clearly excited to have been invited to ProgPower, but unfortunately his excitement merely succeeded in expanding his presentation to a proliferation of swearing. Enough said.



Karma Rassa from Russia immediately hit us with a hammer, and founded on a ultra heavy bass layer, impressed with their power and fluency. The singer, who had the haunting style of his counterpart from Alcest, struggled to match the power. "Don't trust mass media", warned the lead singer ominously. A darkly dangerous and I guess suspicious song followed this public health warning. The patterns were killingly dark and rhythmic. Whilst "From War to War" contained a lot of menace, its post metal ring didn't really go with the prog aspect of it. "It seems strange to play this when we're happy", announced the singer when introducing "Taste of Sorrow". This song was typical of the unique blend of Karma Rassa's dark atmospheric and progressive metal. There was no unique content and the cohesion was a bit strange at times, but the band proved that they are capable of creating and playing fluid, powerful and atmospheric passages.

A flashy screen in the background and a tribal drum beat signalled the arrival on stage of instrumental band **Exxasens** from Spain. Immediately they set about injecting their brand of post metal ambiance through our veins. I'd liken this to Isis rather than any of those bleak and apocalyptic exponents of post metal. This was human-friendly and had an earthly connection, confirmed by the images of a journey over the surface of the earth on the screen behind. The keyboard player was at the centre of the stage and provided the main human visual spectacle, making adjustments in his theatrical way. Meanwhile the drum continued to pound. This post metal progression and drama had the distinct air of a soundtrack. The music was in a perpetual state of epic climax as Exxasens created



exhilarating patterns and images of worlds. I could have listened to the drumming all day. A break mid-set disrupted things and snapped us out of the trance, which was unfortunate, but the journey resumed in its vivid and suggestive way. It was good that the band members did not stand like statues. Instead they responded dynamically to the movements and projected both their warmth and personality, which is quite an achievement for a band whose music is founded in the ethereal world. I appreciated both the quality of their visions and the human touch they provided to go with them.



Many spectators were not back after the dinner break for **Schizoid Lloyd**, the next band to

play. This may have been due to slow dinner service or familiarity with the band who are from the Netherlands and have played at ProgPower before. I expected good things, having been entertained by their off the wall approach the last time I saw them and having bought their ep as a result. Strange noises and thunderous drum beats pierced the air. Over the next hour we were treated to a series of psychologically challenging sounds. Based almost entirely on irregularity and completely on eccentricity, the media included the use of a megaphone, psychedelia, eerie echoes and plenty of thumping and rampant heavy metal. For vocals, you may choose from child-like, high pitched, choral harmonies or growls. It was as if the band members were all actors in a grotesque play. With each member pulling off their role immaculately, it was a remarkable achievement to pull it all off. The material came mainly from the band's 2014 album "The Last Note in God's Magnum Opus", which on the strength of this is a musical version of insanity. At one point it was as if "Bohemian Rhapsody" had been taken apart, put back together again, given the treatment and transferred to the mental prog metal of Schizoid Lloyd. The megaphone-bearing keyboard player pogo'd and symbolised the energy levels which ran through the whole performance right through to its frantic end. As you might hope and expect, it was all performed with good humour and grace. This was innovation and imagination personified. As a lesson in experimental metal, there was lot to take in. I felt exhausted just watching it.



A gentleman who bore a striking resemblance to the Rocky Horror Picture Show's Richard O'Brien took to the centre of the stage. He was wearing a black suit and was surrounded by religious imagery. Sweden's **Soen** started their set. At first the guitar sound drowned out the singer but it was clear enough to distinguish a sweet voice. As we went into "Canvas", the singer inexplicably started waving a large black flag. A comment followed about Martin Luther King. Then after this bizarre beginning, everything fell into place. The sound was sorted out and we had the pleasure of seeing Mr O'Brien's alter ego sing with clarity and feeling, accompanied but not dominated by his team of instrumentalists. From being prog at its excessive worst, including the band congratulating each after one song, we became overwhelmed in the nicest possible way by the vocalist's beautiful and expressive tones, and the exotic and exciting guitar sequences. This fell somewhere between Katatonia musically and Subsignal vocally but in truth the band made their own distinctive mark. "One more or two?" enquired the vocalist as we approached the finale. We got two, an immaculately sung ballad, which expanded into magnificence, and "Pluton", a powerful song which demonstrated nicely the qualities of Soen, which earlier I had wondered about. I did mention later to someone who was more familiar with the band that they didn't sound like

the few recorded songs of theirs that I had heard, and the response was that they have a practice of creating separate live versions. That would explain the deliberate structures, which seemed tailored to this performance, and such respect for audiences is a further quality of this band.



If there was a competition for the most dysfunctional-looking band in the world, Norway's **Pagan's Mind** would be contenders, competing with Sweden's Tribulation. My recollections of some great performances in the 00s was of a studenty guitarist, a rotund and jolly bassist, an XXL keyboard player and a rock star vocalist who must have done himself an injury squeezing into tight trousers. That was in the days of "Enigmatic : Calling" (2005), and for no obvious reason I haven't seen and followed them since in spite of two subsequent album releases. I greatly looked forward to their fourth appearance at ProgPower Europe, as musically this is one dynamic band.

A twenty five minute instrumental medley to start was not what I expected from Pagan's Mind, but that's what we got. When you have a group of talented musicians, and in particular a guitarist who can make his guitar talk, it's a sheer delight. I noted that the guitarist has visibly reached adulthood, now sports a beard and has bulked out a bit. He, the now grey-bearded bassist and the others played around for a while, and set the scene for the world according to Pagan's Mind. The plan hasn't changed. It seems to be to take us to higher places. The singer came in, looking more worldly worn than the last time I saw him, but still in leather trousers and providing suitable incitement and gestures. The guitarist gurned, the keyboard player smiled and the bassist played with the audience. Without doubt Pagan's Mind have presence. The essence of their music tonight was rock n roll, infused strongly with power metal, astronomically brilliant guitar playing and underrated keyboard input. The vocalist seemed to be struggling a bit but overall it was all performed well. The band played old and new material but there was nothing to suggest I'd missed anything by not going beyond "Enigmatic : Calling". The vocalist was a minor irritant with his constant posing and posturing, "shadowing" his fellow musicians and the "I can't hear you" routine, but Pagan's Mind were with us, the audience, and we were with them as they put on a good but not spectacular display. I was pleased that they interwove "New World Order" with their adaptation, and after a brilliant adaptation of Bowie's "Hello Spaceboy", I thought "Through Osiris' Eyes" was a bit flat, especially for the final song. So it wasn't perfect, and a number of people left after forty five minutes of this two hour set because they'd heard enough, but personally I felt I'd spent some time in the heights thanks to the gurning guitarist and his mates.



Part 2 here <http://www.avenoctum.com/2015/10/progpower-europe-baarlo-netherlands-part-2>

Review Andrew Doherty

Photos Håkan Lundbom