

LOST AND CATATONIC

The death of Aleah Stanbridge threw all of Swallow the Sun into a pit of bitter confusion. Some of the band members had no other tools to deal with the stress than getting wasted. Even though the band had lived through some deeply inebriated years, mainly it had all been good fun, life in technicolour. Now, the future was black.

In addition to worrying about their bandmate, they were also concerned about the fate of Swallow the Sun. Honkonen says that soon after receiving the news, he assumed the band would be the next to go.

“I thought to myself, that man will not be writing any more songs.”

Everyone’s spirits were low, but they still had shows to perform. The band played in St Petersburg with guitarist Janne Markus only a couple of days after the tragedy. Honkonen remembers finding it “incredibly difficult” to perform. He says he had never fully understood the feelings Swallow the Sun’s music could evoke until that moment.

The emotional load wasn’t exactly alleviated by the fact that some in the Russian crowd had printed out pictures of Stanbridge and lifted them to the skies, even though there had been no public communication about her passing.

The aforementioned Swedish band Draconian was one of the first to share the news on social media, after which many online publications picked up the story. Even in the age of modern media, Honkonen still finds it amazing that the audience in Russia – a country the band had only visited a few times – knew the details of what had happened so well.

“I don’t know how I felt about playing. Was it defiance or empathy or what? I have no idea. I was just a mess. Were we making a mistake, or an act of service, or what?” Honkonen ponders. “And then to be playing music like that, music that kind of embodied the tragedy, while crying on stage. Mikko’s beanie was lower than ever that night.”

His sense of disorientation only grew during the band’s visit to Cairo after their shows in Russia. The expedition was almost surreal. The band played for an audience of 3,000 people, all of whom were men, as the women had to be home by 10 pm. The signing session happened in a daze – there were so many people that Honkonen felt like a member of Iron Maiden. The event had to be cut short after only a few minutes, as the audience seemed fit to tear the Finns to pieces.

In Egypt, drinking alcohol is basically forbidden, but the Finns found a way to partake even in the face of danger. Raatikainen, who was drinking less than some of the others, remembers thinking the band couldn’t carry on the way they were going.

“I could see this band would destroy itself with alcohol.”

Standbridge, who had occasionally been on the road with the band, had seen the same thing years earlier. Raivio’s later decision to clean up their act in one fell swoop was primarily based on this. Before that, however, the band still had to play a whole bunch of shows. Substances played a large part in helping them get through it all. They were in survival mode, night after night. The days of having fun were a distant memory.

“It was getting very self-destructive on my end. Nothing mattered. And it wasn’t just booze for me, either”, Kotamäki says.

“I only ever drank alcohol, but it’s as good as anything to make you feel like shit”, Honkonen says.

In the summer of 2016, Raivio tried to take part in a couple of shows. The Fortarock Festival in the Netherlands in early June was the first time he and the band had seen each other since March. Kotamäki says meeting the guitarist again was very difficult, and communication was sparse.

“It was hard to know what to do”, Kotamäki says. “No one really said anything. Juha and I went to watch some band and just stood there quietly.”

The band had promised to perform the entirety of *Songs from the North* on three consecutive days during Helsinki’s Tuska Open Air in July. Raivio wanted to take part, but warned in advance that he couldn’t play all the songs in the trilogy. He suggested switching up the order of the songs, at least for the first album, so that he could stay on stage as long as he could, with Rähä taking over after that.

Kotamäki felt it made no sense to break up the album’s narrative arc and suggested that the guitarists could switch places between songs. This is what the band ultimately decided to do.

Prior to Tuska, the band rehearsed for about a week in Viitasaari, at the same studio *Emerald Forest and the Blackbird* had been recorded in. Preparations for the week included Kotamäki and Jämsen visiting Tallinn to bring over a few dozen bottles of Koskenkorva vodka, four cases of long drinks, and a couple of cases of beer. The haul was pretty impressive, considering Rähä and Raatikainen never touched the hard stuff – and Raivio obviously didn’t drink at all.

The rehearsal went ahead anyway. Honkonen says the band got through the days with the attitude that this was a test. Would they really be able to pull off such a massive project, requiring such intense presence and focus, in such challenging circumstances and states of mind? Later in Helsinki they found out that they could – “sort of”, as the bassist puts it.

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For Rāihä, who stood in for Raivio for at least one song during each of the Tuska shows, the performances kicked up some “really fucking complex feelings”. He had been grappling with them ever since Kotamäki had asked him to play with them at Klubi in Tampere in early 2016. He had one and a half days’ notice.

“My first thought was, is it even possible? Can I learn a 90-minute setlist in one day? I hadn’t even listened to the material all that much. But I immediately said yes, anyway”, Rāihä reminisces. “After putting down the phone, I asked myself what the hell I’d got myself into. Then I decided to go to bed early and play the songs all day tomorrow. I think I played for sixteen consecutive hours before I just cracked up laughing. Fuck me, it *is* possible!”

The chaos that defined those days was apparent in that Raivio ultimately showed up at the venue as well. The ‘double booking’ was still serendipitous, however, as it gave the guitarists the chance to talk through the songs face to face. There would definitely be other shows where a stand-in was needed.

“That conversation felt almost... spiritual. That’s the first word I can think of. On a personal level, I felt I was now part of something bigger than myself. Like I simply had to do this, and with the utmost respect for what I was doing. It was an emotional thing more than a musician thing. It felt great to talk things through with Juha in person.”

Following a few shows both home and abroad – including in Greece – Rāihä found himself on the Tuska main stage, playing material from *Songs from the North*. One of the songs Raivio wouldn’t play was ‘Heartstrings Shattering’. Wearing his signature beanie even in the sunshine, Kotamäki told the audience the song also featured Aleah, though “only on tape, unfortunately.” Raivio stood by the side of the stage.

“When ‘Heartstrings Shattering’ started playing, I tried to cover my face and wept profusely inside my hood”, he says. “I could feel people scattering away, and my whole body cramped with overwhelming pain at hearing Aleah sing those words. I’m glad I was left alone. If someone had touched me in that moment, I might have broken beyond repair.”

For Raivio, merely arriving at Tuska had been “like stepping through the gates of Hell towards my own gallows.” What made it even more painful was that June 1 was Stanbridge’s birthday. But Raivio did what his late partner had taught him to do: he walked straight into the darkness and did what he could.

He wasn't easy on the eyes that day. The guitarist had always been thin, but now he was skeletal. His suffering had left its mark on his body, inspiring deep sympathy and love just by looking at him. At each song, you couldn't help but worry whether the man would make it to the end.

During the acoustic set the following day, performed in an intimate indoor setting, Raivio almost played through the whole thing. He endured most of the doomy Sunday as well. Prior to the latter, Jämsen was also in a terrible mental and physical state, enough to nearly pull out only an hour before the show. He made it to the stage in the end, however. As the last notes of 'Clouds Prepare for Battle' were fading in the thick sombre atmosphere inside Kattilahalli, Raivio – entirely uncharacteristically – slammed his guitar into the floor and ran off stage.

"Holy shit, I had chills", Honkonen recalls. "It was a brutal session all in all, with candles and us wearing masks and so on."

Räihä says he felt physically ill himself, witnessing Raivio struggle through the last Tuska show in the flickering light of the sea of funeral candles.

"When I was done with my part of the show, I gave Raivio a hug and went to sit on the side of the stage. I looked at the guys and thought, we'll get through anything if we just stick together. I also thought, these guys can't see how important they are to each other. That friendship was deeper than even they themselves realised."