

BESTE: Musicians bring reactions

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white "corpse paint" on their faces, often embellished with fake blood.

These two striking subjects sometimes meet: A long-haired musician, his belly hanging over the brim of his leather pants, corpse paint covering his face, takes a stroll through a forest or fjord.

Other photos find musicians crossing paths with other Norwegians en route to said fjord.

In one particularly memorable photograph, a musician known as Kvitrafn, from the band Wardruna, stands on a city sidewalk as an elderly woman passes by. Her mouth is open, her expression seemingly a mix

of fear and disdain.

Beste says the musicians rarely traipse about leisurely in their corpse paint. That shot was good timing: Kvitrafn "had just put on his makeup in the house; we were running to the car to drive to the forest for a shoot. In just a few seconds I caught that."

The fear and disdain on the face of the passer-by isn't without just cause.

Norway's black-metal scene earned a ghastly reputation in the '90s, when it was associated with a spate of church burnings and the notorious murder of one musician by another.

For many in Norway, the worst offense occurred when

Fantoft stave church, a centuries-old, wooden structure, was burned to the ground. Beste calls the act "a horrible tragedy that infuriated people; the news got around the world."

Because there's "very little separation between church and state" in Norway, Beste says the church became the obvious target for those who wished to rebel. An unexpected consequence of the metal scene was to galvanize Christians in the country.

"The original intention might have been to eliminate Christianity from Norway," Beste says, "which is a ridiculous goal. Instead they brought people closer together. One church would burn down and two would go up. They didn't end up scaring anybody."

Beste, who turns 30 next month, was born in Washington, D.C., but grew up in Houston, as a metal fan. He came across some tabloid accounts of this music scene and "developed this fantastical picture in my mind of what these guys looked like."

He'd go see some of the bands when they'd perform in Texas. Beste would shoot the shows and e-mail photos to the bands. After saving some money, he traveled to Norway for five weeks and worked the connections he had. Slowly some of the musicians opened up to him.

He detects conflict at the heart of the scene today. Black metal's past has, not surprisingly, been inescapable. One of its most notorious performers, Varg Vikernes, who murdered a member of Mayhem and who was believed to be involved in several arsons, remains in prison today.

Beste says there's a fatigue on the part of the musicians performing today of "being sensa-

tionalized."

Of course, when cow's blood is applied to naked people hanging from crosses on a stage, sensational is as hard to sidestep as a pool of red on the floor. But Beste also points to the old pagan mythologies that some of the musicians are trying to preserve.

"It's something stronger, in my eyes, than just a bunch of (ticked) off metal guys burning down churches. It gets deeper to the point of why Norway, one of the richest countries in the world, with the highest standard of living, has something like this happen, the rise of this culture."

There's also a recent desire on the part of the musicians for respect of a strictly musical nature.

"As time went on, the tabloid stuff became less important," Beste says. "The musicianship has gotten better over the years. There's a focus on the quality of the music. You're seeing a little less theater."

Though the theater makes for interesting images.

Beste opened an exhibit of the Norwegian metal photos in New York City, where he now lives, earlier this month. Next he'll turn his attention to editing photos for his second book, which documents Houston's hip-hop scene.

The two might seem to have little in common, but Beste notes some parallels.

"Both are image-conscious scenes, both are skeptical of outsiders," he says. "Both want to give you one tough-guy pose. But if you can get into some social situations, just hanging out and relaxing, the guard comes down. That's when the camera comes out and you get the most honest photos."

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HANGOUT: Elm Street Pub portrays headbanging rockers in their natural habitat in Oslo, Norway, in 2003.

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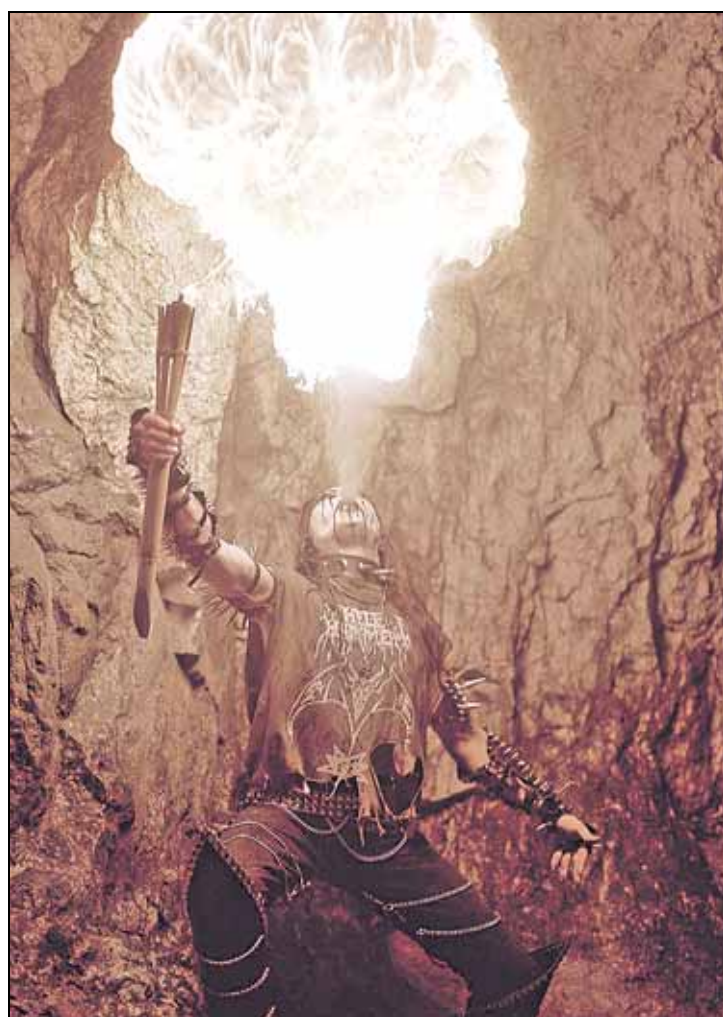
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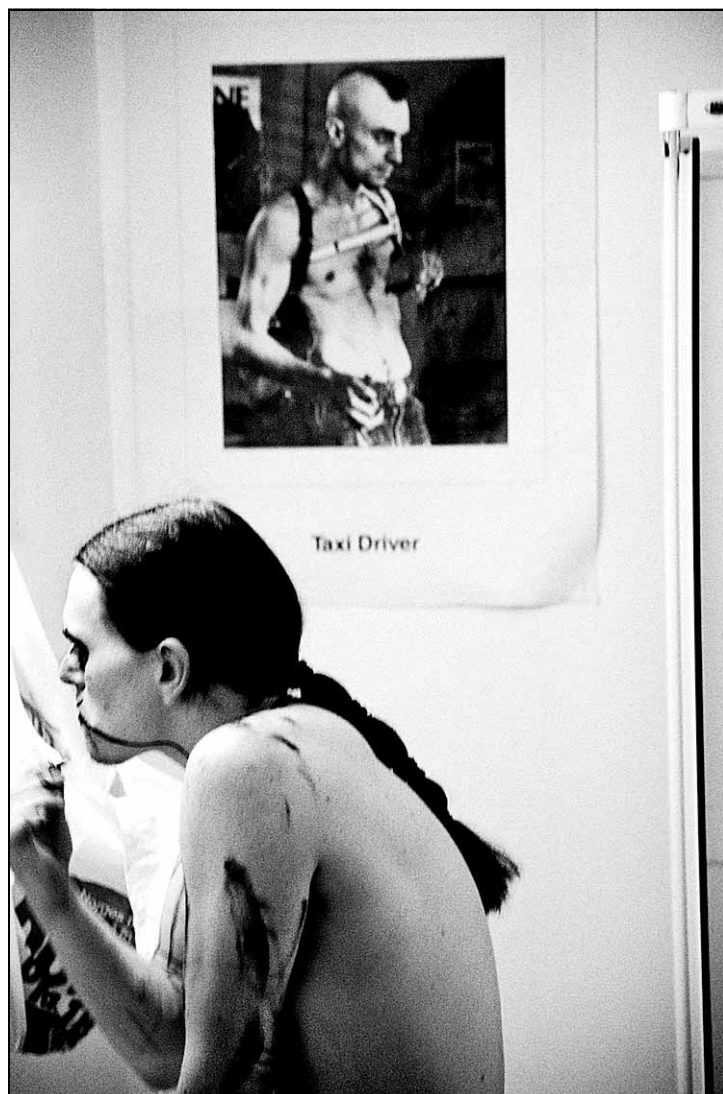
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HOT: Beste's subject breathes fire in a case in *Frost of 1349*.



GETTING READY: A metalhead applies makeup in his bathroom in Beste's *Nattefrost of Carpathian Forest*.

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