

Steve Hackett in the Land of the Midnight Sun: Review of two concerts with Steve Hackett, Todmobile, Orchestra and Choir in Reykjavik and Akureyri, Iceland, January 16 & 17, 2015.

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When Steve Hackett announced a show in Reykjavik Iceland, with Icelandic band Todmobile and an orchestra and choir, I thought about how much fun it would be to return to Iceland 40 years after spending part of the summer of 1974 working on a dairy and sheep farm there. When Hackett and Genesis fan Volker Warncke told me he was planning to go, I decided I had to go. I contacted Genesis biographer and uber-fan Armando Gallo and persuaded him to join us. Then an additional show was announced in the north of Iceland in Akureyri, so we made plane and hotel reservations there and we were set for a real adventure. The only thing I knew about Akureyri was that they made Iceland's best craft beer there, Einstok.

Iceland is one of the most beautiful places on earth, with incredibly nice people and scenery second to none. The photo to the right shows the view down the street from the front door of the Mengi Apartments where Volker, Armando and I stayed in Reykjavik. I arrived a day after Volker and Armando on the morning of the Reykjavik concert and after breakfast in a nice café around the corner, Armando and I decided to go to the Blue Lagoon, a famous hot spring pool near the airport about 40 minutes by tour bus from Reykjavik. After a refreshing outdoor swim in the warm water and cold steamy air, we were ready for the first concert.



The venue in Reykjavik was the Harpa, a super modern relatively new concert hall right on the water in the north part of downtown Reykjavik. Before the show, we had tea and cakes with Steve and Jo Hackett and Ben Fenner, Steve's assistant/roadie/guitar tech etc. Steve had been rehearsing the past couple of days with Todmobile and the orchestra, and he seemed to be pleased with how it was looking, although perhaps a bit nervous about playing live with so many musicians he had not played with before.

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Most people don't realize that Iceland has an incredible music scene. Well-known acts like the Sugarcubes, Bjork, Sigur Ros and Of Monsters and Men are only the tip of the iceberg of Icelandic pop music. One of my favorite albums of all time is . . . Lifun by Trubrot, a progressive band from the early 1970s. I brought my friend Julius, the son of the late bass player of Trubrot, Runar Julliusson, to the show, and completely by chance another member of Trubrot (and Runar's other band Hljomar), Gunnar Thordarsson, sat down beside

Julius. I was ecstatic even before hearing one note of music, here in the presence of several of my musical heroes in a concert hall in Reykjavik, Iceland.

The large hall filled up pretty quickly and it looked like the 1800 seat hall was sold out or close to it. Todmobile started by playing five of their own songs, mainly from their new album, Ulfur. The stage was beautiful, with a circle of lights reminiscent of Pink Floyd. The songs were good and played with very well with great enthusiasm. The two singers, Eyþór Ingi Gunnlaugsson and Andrea Gylfadóttir were terrific. Then the orchestra, choir and conductor were introduced and out came Steve Hackett to complete the first set with Dance on a Volcano and Supper's Ready, in its 26 minute glory. Steve's guitar playing on Dance on a Volcano was fabulous, Eythor's vocals were fantastic and the band, orchestra and choir made it sound really special. In particular, Eythor did a great job of duplicating the cadence of Phil Collin's original vocals on



Dance, and matched Phil and Peter Gabriel's phrasing and melodies throughout the Genesis songs. This is difficult and if not done properly can be distracting to the Genesis fan with settled expectations for the vocals. He has a solid, expressive voice and had no trouble with the melodies or the involved lyrics. Recently, he played Jesus in a production of Jesus Christ Superstar, and the reviews were very positive.



The only negative in Reykjavik was that much of the time, it was hard to hear the orchestra.

Rather, at times it seemed to blend in like a large mass of music backing up the rock band. This was not a problem the next night in Akureyri, and even in Reykjavik, the sound of the Orchestra often filled the hall with a majesty that moved me, especially during parts of Supper's Ready. The early musical highlight of the night was the sound of the cascading horns and choir interwoven with Steve Hackett's soaring guitar during The Guaranteed Eternal Sanctuary Man section of Supper's Ready. The choir sounded great singing "we will rock you rock you little snake we will keep you snug and warm" and during the singing at the end of Apolcalypse in 9/8, the choir was singing along like a windswept multitude of disembodied souls floating above the ground. Supper's Ready ended with an extended guitar solo as Steve has been doing on his Genesis Revisited/Extended tours, this time accompanied by the choir. After Supper's Ready, there was an intermission long enough to have a drink and visit the loo.

The second set started with six more excellent Todmobile songs, then Steve, the orchestra and the choir were back. The second set of Genesis songs included Dancing with the Moonlit Knight, Blood on the Rooftops and Firth of Fifth. All songs sounded excellent—I was very surprised that with so little rehearsal this large group of musicians could sound so great together. Steve seemed to be having a great time, and his guitar playing was transcendent. During the “there’s a fat old lady outside the saloon” section of Dancing with the Moonlit Knight,



the choir sounded beautiful singing the part played by Tony Banks with the chorus setting on the Mellotron and Steve played a great introduction to Blood on the Rooftops on nylon-stringed guitar. The body of the song sounded as if it was written for the orchestra. The crescendo of horns was a perfect accompaniment to Steve’s Firth of Fifth guitar solo. After these three Genesis songs, they continued with a pair of Todmobile songs, including Midnight Sun, on which Steve added a guitar solo and wrote English lyrics. Midnight Sun is a poppy-sounding love song. Steve said when Todmobile asked him to add a guitar solo, he was afraid he would ruin the song which already sounded great. Don’t worry Steve, your solo made the song even better and adds a nice emotive dimension to a beautiful love song. The studio version of this song is available on Todmobile’s latest album, Ulfur, which also includes a DVD of a performance with Jon Anderson, and on some versions of Steve’s new album Wolflight.

The show closed with the Lamb Lies Down on Broadway/Musical Box medley ala Seconds Out. The ending of The Musical Box featured piercing lead guitar from Steve and an indescribably powerful orchestral and choir accompaniment. Imagine howling wind sounds from the choir, bellowing brass and wind instrument and crashing violin lines--what the orchestra in the holy temple in Jerusalem must have sounded like. It was a reminder to the Genesis fans of what was so special about their favorite band and of how important Steve’s creativity and playing was to the band’s sound in the 1970s. Perhaps it makes up for the disappointment Genesis experienced when orchestral instrumentation was added to their first album, From Genesis to Revelation.



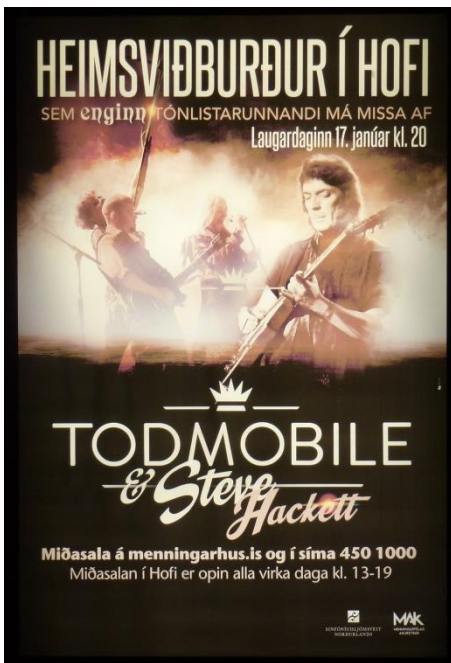
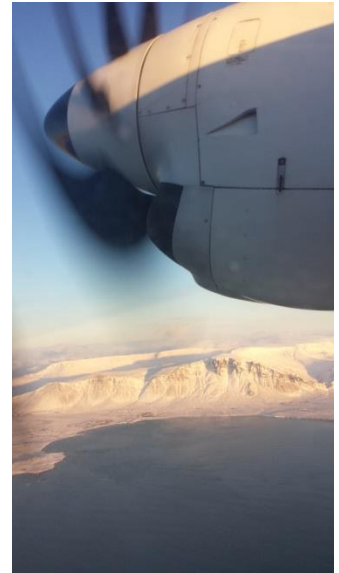
A few of Todmobile's songs stand out as highlights for me. In particular, I enjoyed *Brúðkaupslagið*. This song dates back to 1990. Live it begins with a rock version of the bridal march like the one played in Denton Texas at the wedding of Ralph and Betty Hapschatt in the Rocky Horror picture show, then goes into a Kate Bush vibe.

After the show there was a pretty big party celebrating the concert. The highlight of this was a cake with edible pictures of the covers of the new Todmobile album, *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* and *Selling England by the Pound*. Eythor, Steve and the leader of Todmobile, cut the cake and we all enjoyed some very sugary lamb.

The next day we boarded our propeller plane for the 45 minute journey to Akureyri for the second show. The scenery from the airplane was breathtakingly beautiful. Icy

mountains, icy valleys, low winter light shading blue and brown. I never saw anything quite like it. Landing in Akureyri looked like coming down into the middle of a fjord that had just dried up. We were over water and then suddenly we were over land. The airport seemed to be just on the edge of the city. Inside the small airport there were ads for day trips to Greenland—it was tempting but we had a concert to attend!

We arrived at the Hof early enough to have dinner with Steve and Jo. They were already sitting at a table with a member of the local choir, Giorgio Baruchello, who is also a philosophy professor at U. of Akureyri. The show in Akureyri was announced only a couple of weeks beforehand, but I learned that it was pretty much sold out. The theater, which was smaller than the theater in Reykjavik, seats



about 500.

The set list was exactly the same as the night before but the sound was better and Steve seemed a



bit more relaxed after having a successful show the night before under his belt. The orchestra was very distinct during every song—this was how it was supposed to sound. What sounded special in Reykjavik sounded too good to be true in Akureyri. I was in awe. There were fewer mistakes and overall it was a better performance. Steve talked a bit more, about how great it was to be there, how much he liked the song *Midnight Sun* and how impressed he is by the vibrancy of the Icelandic music scene.

With only a few hours of daylight much of the year, young people in Iceland spend lots of time inside working on musical ideas and they have been very successful. I can't describe what the Genesis songs sound like with the full orchestra and choir—you'll have to hear for yourself if and when the shows are released on CD or DVD, hopefully sometime in the near future. One important point—in my view, the addition of the orchestra and choir helped realize the vision of the original composers of the songs—banks of electronic keyboards and guitar effects replaced and augmented by dozens of acoustic instruments and choir voices. Tony Banks et al should be proud.



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My bottom line—these two concerts reminded me of what is so great about music—that it can move you, open your heart and make you feel like you are flying in tune with the universe. I have had few experiences like this—my first Genesis show in 1976, Steve Hackett's 1980 show at the Park West in Chicago and his recent Genesis Revisited/Extended shows, Sound of Contact on the Cruise to the Edge, Peter Gabriel's Secret World

tour, Marillion's Marbles tour and The Musical Box's re-creation of the Lamb Lies Down on Broadway tour come to mind.



The next morning, we flew back to Reykjavik and then set off on an excursion along the south coast of Iceland. We were joined for the first part of this by Steve, Jo, Ben and my Icelandic relative Bjorgvinn Gudjunsson and his wife Margret. After some beautiful scenery including a view of the Westmann Islands and some spectacular waterfalls, we arrived at the volcano visitor center at Þorvaldseyri, where an eruption a few years ago disrupted European air traffic and coated south eastern Iceland

with ash. Left to right in the photo, taken by the woman running the visitor center, are yours truly Jack Beermann, Ben Fenner, Jo Hackett, Steve Hackett, Armando Gallo, Volker Warncke, Bjorgvinn Gudjunsson and Margrét Harðardóttir. We did a bit more touring, including a visit to the farm I had worked on in 1974, where I discovered in a pile of 45 rpm records a copy of Jonathan King's single Everyone's Gone to the Moon on Parrott records, the US brand of Decca, which reached number 17 in the USA, back in 1965. King was the Charterhouse old boy who gave Genesis their first break.



The three musketeers had our last meal together at the Chuck Norris restaurant in Reykjavik. As far as I can tell, it's just a place with bad sandwiches and lots of



Chuck Norris sayings on the walls, like "the dark is afraid of Chuck Norris." It must be a tourist trap but what tourist in Reykjavik is actually interested in Chuck Norris? The next day I visited Runar Juliusson's home and studio, which has been transformed into a shrine of remembrance to his musical career, and I made a stop at the Icelandic Rock Music Museum, both in Keflavik. Then it was onto my flight home, delayed a bit by weather, but soon I was back in Boston, tired

but happy, feeling like I had lived a lifetime in four crazy days in Iceland. I am looking forward to the release of video and/or audio of these shows—Genesis and Hackett fans will be astounded to hear these songs with the orchestra and choir, and I imagine the members of 1970s Genesis would be very proud of what Mister Steve Hackett, Todmobile and the Icelandic orchestra and choir have done with their compositions.