

A life sign from Monument Alley

Per-Helge Berg, May 22 2020, Interview in Prognytt (Norway)

Translated to English by Monument Alley June 2020.



Photo: © Alexander Vestrum 2018. Photo modulation: Monument Alley.

About two years ago, we wrote about a new musician duo, Monument Alley. And we said that by and by, we'd have a chat with them. Over these years, the duo has been serving small hints about their work here and there, but they've kept their cards close to the chest and they've been quite cryptic. Wednesday (May 20th 2020) they even published a video on Facebook - without sound. Go figure. Whether you get any wiser by reading this interview with the two is uncertain, but at least they pique our curiosity...



Monogram: Stig A. Clason.

[The first time Prognytt wrote about Monument Alley was in July 2018.](#) It's been a while now. The duo consists of Erlend Engebretsen from the prog-band Fatal Fusion, and Astraea Antal from the prog collective Gentle Knife. **[Fatal Fusion release their 4th album in July 2020,](#)** while the 11-man band Gentle Knife disbanded in June 2019. So far, the duo hasn't released a single sound, but they have been running a kind of [photo blog](#) from the music room, where two apparently fictional characters Monument and Alley have some kind of conversation going. The duo recently contacted Prognytt to announce that they soon have something to announce!

What have you been up to for the past two years?

E: Drinking coffee, searching for sounds and getting acquainted. And jammed, and written music.

A: Nice trips. Exchanging ideas and transferring files. Whiteboards. And a new DAW this spring.

E: It's been two wonderful years. We've laughed a lot.

What is Monument Alley's plan from here?

E: We're building a ship set for a voyage.

A: He's the carpenter, I colour.

E: Then Astraea comes with new blueprints. And then we rebuild. She comes with a suggestion or an impulse that forces us to rebuild. "Do you have cimbalom?" Some times I just delete a piece and begin from scratch.

A: It's quite an endeavour...

E: I'm very proud of what we have achieved.

A: Guess we found out on the very first meeting what we wanted to do. Project and concept. And how to tell the story. At a very early stage, Stig A. Clason designed a logo package which suited us well. He understood what we needed. Then Alexander Vestrum took a fabulous serie of photos for us in June 2018, which set the mood and tells a story. There will be more. Then we have a photo blog from the music room. And we write.

E: Hashtag currentlywriting.



Erlend Engebretsen at Progtober 2017. Photo: Alexander Vestrum. ©2017

The seed to collaboration between these two was sown when Gentle Knife invited Fatal Fusion to a split gig at Gamla in Oslo in October 2017. At that time, Erlend had already begun writing his own materiel, something he'd been doing in 2012 and has done sporadically during the time with Fatal Fusion. When Gentle Knife played live, Erlend noticed Astraea.

-She made an impression. There was so much life on stage. I felt an urge to try something new. And I got the feeling I wanted to involve Astraea in my idea. I too become a different person on stage. Thought she must be interesting to work with. It struck me then, that I wanted to do something completely different. And I wrote some new pieces. I envisioned that I wanted to write more music for transverse flute, which I'm fond of. And I wanted to collaborate with Astraea. So I contacted her, and we were a match, says Erlend.

-Actually, it was Erlend's own fault that we got acquainted. His keys rig takes up some space..., says Astraea.

E: Some?

A: My band piled up as best we could on the remaining space on stage that time. I have a sideways hook live and I play wireless flute, so I took the only available spot, in front of the rig.

E: That was just right.

A: That's when Erlend caught my attention. And he does make a grand impression live. A week later, we had a new gig in Haugesund, and there was that rig again.

E: I guess we went around in circles back then. But everything was so hectic. My band had to leave for Stavanger the same evening. So we didn't get that chat.

A: Then another half a year passed, until we got in touch over borrowing some keyboards for Francis Decamps (Gens de la Lune) in April 2018.

E: Which is when I paged her and suggested we collaborate.

A: There was nothing to consider.

E: She said yes immediately. A week later we had the first meeting.

A: And Gentle Knife became a side project for me.

Perhaps it's easier to work with just one...

-I never thought eleven in Gentle Knife were too many. It all depends on things. But you can't compare a band to a duo. That's two totally different way of working, says Astraea.



Photo: © Alexander Vestrum 2018. Photo modulation: Monument Alley.

Both have long experience with music. Erlend says he has been working on music since he was 10-12 years old.

-That's when I started to writing songs of my own. I grew up at the foot pedals of dad's organ. He played organs and sang in the Fobos band. My first instrument was a pump organ which dad got from Folkestad school. Then I played a bit of drums in a band before I bought my first keyboard, a Korg Poly-61. Then I got a Roland Alpha-Juno 2 for my confirmation. We still had the pump organ back then. I was on break from music work when founding a family in the early 90's. I wrote a few songs in that period of time, Then I joined a band again in 1996. At that time I only had the Juno. After that, I bought the 1938 Hammond organ. And the keys multiplied, and some synths. After that: band, band, band. Now I work in another fashion, he says.

Astraea also had an early start with music, but with a long break during that time.

-I learnt to play transverse flute by notes from the age of 11 to 17, both classic music, jazz and other. From then, I didn't play until the age of 38, more or less. During those years I listened, and surfed many genres. Then I was introduced to the prog community, simultaneously as I was invited into what later became Gentle Knife. Everything had to be learnt, from sound tech to the grand meeting with the audience. Two albums, ten concerts and Night of the Prog in 2018. That was a powerful experience. It changed everything. The last year with the band up to NOTP a lot of things also happened – sound tech, people and impulses – and I wanted more. The timing was good for going further when Erlend contacted me, she says.



Astraea Antal at a Gentle Knife concert, 2017 Photo Alexander Vestrum
(Photo diverts from the Norwegian version)

In their short career with two albums, Gentle Knife experienced to play their very first concert abroad at the very Loreley in Germany. Shortly after came the news that the band would not continue.

-Gentle Knife was the kind of journey one doesn't forget. From "nothing" to Night of the Prog. Something like that demands more than many are aware of. Many were friendly and helpful during that journey, and

the audience was incredibly positive. They said they're really proud of the two albums the band released. I also hope the music will some day be released on vinyl, says Astraea.

You also participated in Clive Nolan's 'Caamora Norway?'

-I played a small part during the 'Alchemy' shows. Nolan wrote a fabulous duet for Morten L. Clason and me. That was an honour. Hurum Progrock Society are a skilful crew. They make a lot of things happen. I have also learnt a lot from the international prog community. But with my own music to express, everything becomes a question of time, she says.

Which one of you two lead the process?

E: None. Or both. We match well.

A: It's clearly easier to develop ideas nad define a concert in a duo than in a band. We haven't had many discussions. Overall, we think quite alike. We very soon found out what we want to do and where we are headed. Though, we've been told a lot of strange things by people guessing at what this'll be. Some have already made up their mind.

E: We've been told quite a few things...

A: Some may become quite surprised.

E. Ehhh...Yep!

How do you collaborate?

E. We meet as often as we can. The time we have in the music room, when we're jamming, is the very best. We write a lot of music together, in addition to me writing my own pieces. We improvise a lot. Then we follow whatever ideas that come up. Astraea brings a lot of impulses and inspiring ideas.

A: Usually it starts with a few chords from Erlend. Then we see what happens. The rest of it just appears. Sometimes we just sit and tweak gir, searching for sounds. We use whiteboards a lot. It also happens that Erlend forgets I'm there, and improvises, or explores an idea. He can vanish into a world of his own at the keyboards. In that case, that's what goes down that day. That's when he's at his best. It's a treat to be present when that happens. Very often he doesn't even know, but that's when he writes the most beautiful pieces.

E: Very early after we started working together, Astraea began to record what happens. Now it's become a habit. I'm very glad she does that. She captures the magic so the ideas aren't lost. See, as far as I'm concerned, she might as well just record everything. I can play a piece, and then I've forgotten it. Then it's a piece out there in eternity and there's no chance whatsoever of recreating it.

A: We may well have a plan for the meeting, but we never know what happens. It depends entirely on the mood that day. We could perhaps have a little more structure. It often helps to give the idea a working title. A word can trigger a melody. The next time we meet, Erlend has often written a demo since last time. But it also happens that he follows another trail or a new idea, so we are always juggling ideas. When he vanishes into his writer's bubble, he can stay there for a while until the demo's ready. When that happens, he's quite single minded and I work on other things. And when I do get a demo and set off to get to know the piece, he's already someplace else. In the mean time, we've been jamming.... And so on.

It's not easy to describe the music Monument Alley are working on, according to the two, who prefer not to to categorize it.

-Genre is overrated. We have stories to tell, and we write what we wish to express, in whatever style comes to mind, says Astraea.

-To me, music is emotions. Music has to give me something. The rough, sorrow, drama, happiness, something delicate or massive – anything. There's no formula for what strikes me when I write or play – as long as it comes from the heart, adds Erlend.



Photo: © Alexander Vestrum 2018. Photo modulation: Monument Alley.

A: Music isn't music. I guess we write by the ear, or according to mood.

E: None of us like to be categorized. Note and music theory isn't the formula for what I write. Music is art, a way of expressing yourself, based on emotions. I write what my heart says, and what comes to mind. I don't sit down with a plan for today's work: "Today I will write prog..." No, I don't have any plan for what I compose. It may well become symphonic, something rough, something heartbreaking, or delicate or esoteric, something strange. To me, music is emotion. Then Astraea sorts the pieces in an order. She very quickly figures out what this can be, and draws the image to tell the tale.

What do you mean by "stories?"

A: We write from personal experience, and we write about people.

E: True stories.

Do you have plans of playing live?

E: I feel alive on stage. I have an alter ego who appears when I meet the audience. I space out. I get that a lot. But I have to feel certain of what I'm doing. If I do that, I give it all live.

A: I guess we don't work with music for our own sake. We do this for the audience. What happens live is unique.

E: You space out...

A: Yes, I guess I do. What happens there and then, is completely honest. It's all about people. What I get from the people on stage and in the audience, is what I play. Moods shape everything. To me, music is will, emotions and expression. The audience is half the concert. If there is not trust or contact, it's no good. A wall of cell phones, for instance, that's no good. But the concert photographers are an important instrument. They capture the moments and tell the story in afterward. What happened that moment? Or the moment before.

But let's return to that comment on 'side project...'

A: This collaboration gives me the opportunity to tell my own stories. And Erlend gets to publish the music he's been brooding on for too long. It was about time now.

You haven't published a sound in two years. What's taking so long?

E: We're still making demos. It takes a lot of time to write these pieces. And everything else we're also working on at the same time.

A: Strange how hungry an audience can be.

E: The minute we announced a duo, people wanted music...

A: The predator effect.

E: Time has passed so quickly. We have some magical pieces that I look incredibly forward to finish. The magic happens in the music room and live. In between, we shall recreate the same in studio.

So there's no album coming up soon?

E: Hashtag currentlywriting. The story of the process is on Facebook.

A: Bits and pieces of it. The photo series tells the tale of impatience, curiosity, dialogue and ideas.

E: And pride, curiosity, discussions – and plenty of time.

So you're not rushing it?

E: We haven't signed with a label yet. So we're not bound yet. We have no deadlines, we let ideas settle, and we don't rush to conclusions. We let things develop. It's been really good to have ample time.

A: It's important that the collaboration is free from criticism. It's important to listen. And a sense of humour.

E: And respect, and feeling safe. I've also taken my time to explore new and old equipment. With this collaboration, new sounds have emerged. I now work in a new landscape. Even I am surprised. Astraea has made me think way outside the box. I now use sounds and effects I never thought I'd use. It's great fun. I've also bought a new work station, as well as rediscovering one of my oldest synths, dad's ARP, or, Solina String Ensemble, which I'm really looking forward to use.



And the transverse flute?

E: Astraea will have lots of work in studio. She gets more room now than before. And she now writes her own melodies. Some of our jams give me goose bumps. The music just flows. There will be some powerful pieces. I am happy we write music together. We have both gained a good sparring partner, and get new impulses. Plus all the other things she does – visual ideas, language, design, working on art, photos and a web site.

A: There's ample room for creativity. Erlend hasn't said 'no' too often.

E: It's all about trust. We have a different background, but it has only opened new doors. It's wonderful to think outside the box.

Who is Monument Alley's core audience?

E: I'm just as curious as they about who they are and what this will be.

A: And what they will think of it, some day. But so far, we've only received positive feed. There's a lot of good-will and many good forces in the music community. Many have backed us up, listened, and given good advice. We've sold some Monument Alley logo tees. The income went to coffee on music sessions. You can't finance a music production by tees. But the moving part is that people actually wear the merchandise, and they ask and follow our work.

E: It does put some demands on us that people are so curious. They don't know what they get, but they back us anyway. It's moving. It means a lot. Actually, it means everything that someone believes in you and shows it.

When do you set sail?

A: It's too soon to say.

E: We're off on a big journey we're perhaps not ready for yet. I guess we've made ourselves a huge piece of work. But I'm looking forward to it. It's going to be wild. Frail and massive. It's a grand dream of music come true. We'll beginning to tell a little more soon. What was the last thing we should remember to say?

A: Hashtag currently...

E: Hashtag proud.

The interview was delivered to Prognytt by Monument Alley, and was revised and altered some by Prognytt. [Here is the video the duo published last Wednesday!](#) One photo from the original article has been exchanged for this English version. This English version is also available in pdf upon request. Original interview: <https://prognytt.no/2020/05/22/et-livstegn-fra-monument-alley>