

Artist: Ketil Strand

Album: *Axe Files*

Review by Matthew Warnock

I wonder how many of us would have gone further with our musical careers if we had only had a better, cooler and more exciting high school music teacher. Well, students over in a small Norwegian town will never have to ask themselves that question, as their music teacher, Ketil Strand, is a killer guitarist whose latest record *Axe Files* is a foot stompin', head bangin' rock n roll thrill ride that features some very impressive guitar work from the Norseman. Ranging from high energy '80s influenced metal, "Fuzz," to acoustic fingerstyle, "Gullslåtten," this album offers a little bit of everything for guitar fans the world over.

Strand kicks off the album with a groovin' track that is reminiscent of the classic Joe Satriani recordings of the '90s. "Nok Om Det" features a hard driving rhythm guitar part that maintains its funkiness throughout the track, adding variation, including some tasty double stops, when needed. The lead line takes us back to those great Satriani albums during the melody section of the song, but, once he gets to the solo Strand channels his inner Rush fan as he dives into a solo that brings to mind legendary Canadian guitarist Alex Lifeson. The only detraction on this track might be the guitarist's use of Formant Filter effect during the second half of the solo. Pairing the voice with guitar has worked for Peter Frampton and Ritchie Sambora, but it's not everyone's cup of tea. So some will like this section and others not, but at the heart of the song is strong musicianship that holds the piece together.

On "Fuzz," the talented guitarist reaches even further back in his arsenal to conjure up some great Van Halen and Randy Rhodes inspired guitar work at the beginning of the song. While the Neo-Classical thing can get a bit old after a while, Strand avoids this by stepping into a strong, rock based riff for the main section of the song, avoiding and monotony that might have occurred if he had kept the '80s metal vibe going throughout. The guitarist also shows off his Wah pedal and Whammy bar skills during the middle section of the song. Again, he never overdoes it with these effects. He uses them with taste and restraint as to achieve maximum effect from their tonal and textural qualities before moving on to a new idea. Fans of Neo-Classical and '80s metal will no doubt love this track and it is one of the strongest songs on a strong album.

To show that he's not a one-trick pony, Strand selects an acoustic model on an electric/digital guitar for "Gullslåtten," which sounds like a blend of Celtic and Wyndham Hill at the same time. The guitarist uses slurs very effectively to create forward motion in his lines, and the guitar is not full of effects, which is a trap that electric players often fall into when they grab a flattop guitar. Strand also plays the acoustic for the intro to "Canon Rock with a Twist" and on "Incubator," further proving that he has the musical dexterity to move between electric and acoustic guitars while still maintaining the highest level of musicianship.

*Axe Files* is a strong effort for Strand whose playing and writing is first rate throughout the album. Though he may not have the name recognition of a Satriani or Steve Vai, his playing on this album will no doubt help spread the word on this talented performer. His students probably grumble everyday on their way to class, as all teenagers do, but hopefully they know deep down

how lucky they are to have such a great performer teaching them music each week.

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Rating: 4 stars (out of 5)