

AUDIOFILE

BY JONAS MOODY PHOTO BY LEÓ STEFÁNSSON

GO WEST, ROCK BAND!

Blonde Redhead seeks musical frontiers in the Wild West Fjords



"Oh! We should move to Iceland," Amedeo Pace, Blonde Redhead's guitarist and vocalist, tells me while shivering beneath his arctic anorak. "I've thought about it quite a bit. Buying a piece of land and building a house. I think it would be inspiring. Not everything has been bought by preppies like in New York now."

The New York trio, comprised of Italian twins Amedeo and drummer Simone Pace, and Japanese keyboardist and vocalist Kazu Makino, sits in the hectic makeshift mess hall for the performers at this year's *Aldrei fór ég sudur* (I never moved south) festival on a biting cold Easter weekend in Ísafjörður (pop. 4,098). The veteran indie rockers have made the treacherous journey north to the capital of the West Fjords to play the fourth annual, self-touted 'rock festival for the people.' Makino, the trio's songbird and Amedeo's girlfriend, appears with a plate of steaming boiled cod.

"Do you like the fish?" Amedeo asks attentively. She doesn't reply verbally, but pokes a finger into her cheek playfully and grins. "That means she likes it," he says, turning to me with a broad smile.

The band chose Iceland to debut their seventh album, *23*, which has already hit #4 on Billboard's Top Independent Albums. Now on their fourth trip here, the musicians have an obvious affinity for the country. "Icelandic audiences are good because they get emotional, really enthusiastic about us being here," Pace comments, "but still leave a lot of space for us."

The group also shares an intimate relationship with Icelandic musician Skúli Sverrisson, the bassist on all their albums. "We met in our 20s and when I saw him play, it was like 'Oh my God, he's so good!'" Pace recounts. "Then we became friends and played together." The band

has thought of bringing him into the lineup but only wants a full-time commitment, which Sverrisson can't give. "Playing with Skúli and then having no Skúli would be like having no drugs when you're completely addicted." But whenever in the country, the group doesn't perform without their favorite local on stage.

These close ties to Iceland and frustrations in New York have led Pace to conclude that it's time to make an exodus. "Brooklyn used to be so relaxed and nice, but now it's hard to live there or rent an apartment because everything has become so expensive," Pace explains. "I like to work in new places that are still a bit virgin in some ways."

Despite his enthusiasm, Pace admits that this is a foreign place for him, as is the Icelanders' approach to musicianship. "I'm just discovering guitar now, figuring out what I want to do with it. It takes a lifetime to learn an instrument. I see these people here and they play everything. It's funny," Pace says, pointing to a man playing a concertina for his table. "They're quite musical. For me, it takes so long just to learn something, to learn it well."

The *Aldrei fór ég sudur* festival is the brainchild of musician Mugison (alias Örn Elías Guðmundsson, 30) and his father, Papamug (alias Guðmundur Magnús Kristjánsson, 51), Ísafjörður's harbormaster and noted karaoke singer. "We imagined a festival in Ísafjörður where ordinary people were the stars and the stars took a complete back seat."

For the festival's first run in 2004, some friends and I made the seven-hour drive to Ísafjörður, more to see the West Fjords than the festival. We arrived on a blustery April evening and were ushered into an abandoned



fish processing plant teeming with so many people that steam literally rose off the roof.

It was clear we had stumbled upon more than scenic landscape. Inside the temperature soared, fueled by tightly packed bodies pulsating with goodwill for the myriad acts on stage: from glam rock pyrotechnics and outrageous hair metal to men's choirs and the local accordion brigade.

Since its explosive beginning, the festival has been making increasingly larger waves around the island as a domestic, grassroots counterpart to the ultra-produced, international appeal of the Iceland Airwaves festival. However, as *Aldrei fór ég sudur* receives more attention, outsiders have begun to make appearances, bringing us to the 2007 festival and the biggest name to date, Blonde Redhead, whose previous six albums have garnered enthusiastic reviews and a wide fanbase in the underground scene.

Now expanded into a two-day affair with attendance doubling since 2004 to roughly 3,000 people, this year's *Aldrei fór ég sudur* has the same homespun feel as earlier years – just moved to a larger abandoned fish processing plant.

Blonde Redhead is slated to close out the first night, with the crowd well-tempered after short plug-and-play performances from dozens of acts, one right on the heels of the next. Deejay Pres Bongó begins to spin offstage, giving the band ample time to set up. They run back and forth with wires and instruments, sipping bottled water and toweling off. This goes on for Bongó's entire half-hour set. Then there is silence, punctuated by Simone sound checking his drums one at a time.

The band's setup takes nearly an hour. The crowd has all but given

up when the stage bursts to life with "Bipolar", an older track booming with Blonde Redhead's dissonant sound. Hands shoot up in the air and the mob surges toward the stage. A couple songs into the set, Amedeo's mic causes some feedback. The band reacts as if tear gas has been sprayed on stage. They give each other knowing glances and shake their heads. Meanwhile, down on the ground, a world away, the crowd is completely engaged, swaying their bodies, bopping their heads.

Then it all comes to an abrupt stop. After only four songs.

"We don't have a proper system to play our songs." Makino apologizes and drops her head.

She rushes past with her hand over her face. The band exits the stage. The audience claps feverishly, chanting, "Meira! Meira!" (More! More!), but they're gone. People are confused. Icelanders are a patient audience, willing to endure neverending soundchecks and the most experimental of music. What they can't tolerate is the band that gives up.

The people of Ísafjörður are not bitter. They recognize that Blonde Redhead is still coming to terms with the slapdash impetus that propels music in Iceland. In fact, Pace expresses this effort in the group's work earlier in the mess hall. "We're trying to make music where there is less of... an emotional connection," he says, searching for words. "We want to have more of a physical reaction and count on the energy of the music."

But it's clear they have a long road ahead, which may or may not lead back to Iceland. After the fiasco a friend in the crowd turns to me. "They don't get it," he says earnestly. "This is a festival for the people. Music here is not about technicalities – it's about the energy."