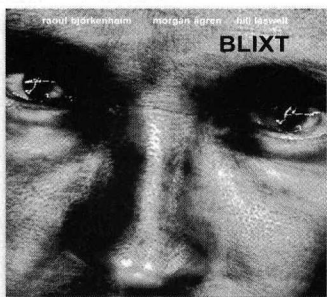


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RECORD REVIEWS

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RAOUL BJÖRKENHEIM, BILL LASWELL, MORGAN ÅGREN
Blixt

Raoul Björkenheim, guitar; Bill Laswell, bass;
Morgan Ågren, drums
Cuneiform RUNE335 (CD). 2011. Robert Musso,
prod., eng.; James Dellatacoma,
eng. DDD. TT: 47:58

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★

SONICS ★★★★★

Imagine a bass line so heavy and doom-laden it sounds like some kind of nightmare remix of Black Sabbath's *Paranoid* and Pink Floyd's *Ummagumma*. Add an absolutely manic Keith-Moon-lightning-meets-Jon-Bonham-thunder drum solo across the length of a track. Top it off with the most intense Robert-Fripp-as-Frank-Zappa guitar pyrotechnics. That might give you a tiny glimpse of what's in store for you on *Blixt*, one of the most revelatory albums ever dropped into the "Rock" section by your favorite purveyor of recorded music. Of course, it's ridiculous to call this rock. The sounds on *Blixt* range from Weather Report-effect jazz fusion to a kind of electric gamelan music. It's a veritable third rail of sound created by a trio of musicians—bassist Bill Laswell, guitarist Raoul Björkenheim, and drummer Morgan Ågren—working in uncharted territory.

Cuneiform Records has a long history of releasing genre-destroying artworks from some of the most iconoclastic musicians on the planet. *Blixt* unites three of these players in a group that offers a kind of synopsis of the Cuneiform philosophy: an open-eared approach to music that unleashes terror, sublime beauty, and deadpan humor, sometimes all three at once. Each member of this trio epitomizes Cuneiform's absolute disdain for categorization. Laswell has been a formidable presence in the popular music and electronic world since the 1980s. His production of Herbie Hancock's "Rockit" in 1983 was a piece of work every bit as revolutionary and influential as Hancock's *Head*

Hunters album: it became the first hit single to feature turntable scratching as an instrument. But Laswell is more mad scientist than hit-maker, as his absolutely historic work for Celluloid proved. He presided at the shotgun wedding of rock and rap when he put John Lydon and Afrika Bambaataa in the studio together. His work with reggae stars Lee "Scratch" Perry, Yellowman, and Sly & Robbie helped that music advance into the '80s. Laswell has cut with everyone from the Last Poets, Manu Dibango, George Clinton, and Daavid Allen to Mötörhead, Zakir Hussain, the Ramones, Iggy Pop, the Master Musicians of Jajouka, and Wayne Shorter.

Björkenheim has been well regarded since his 1980s work in drummer Edward Vesala's group but his recent releases have been particularly memorable—the solo *Apocalypse* (2001, Cuneiform), on which he plays 30 guitars, eight basses, and four drum kits; and another great trio record, with bassist William Parker and percussionist Hamid Drake, *dmg @ the stone, vol.2* (2008, DMG/Arc).

Ågren is a multidimensional drummer who plays in jazz-rock contexts as well as Swedish thrash-metal bands. His relentless, powerful style augments Björkenheim's guitar shredding and Laswell's thunderous bass.

Blixt is Swedish for *lightning*—an apt metaphor for this supercharged power trio. Jack Bruce is clearly a major influence on Laswell, which makes the Cream references used to describe this band understandable if a bit skewed; *Blixt* makes Cream sound tame and obvious. King Crimson's most avant moments might be a better comparison, though Crimson never rocked this hard. "Black Whole" and "Moon Tune" kick things off with paint-peeling intensity before "Tools" strikes a clanking, industrial groove; "Cinque Roulettes" continues the onslaught. As the session progresses, we're treated to the clever alternative marching music of "Drill Beats" and the moody atmospherics of "Shifting Sands Closing Hour," "Ghost Strokes," and "Invisible One."

Every moment on this recording sounds like a fresh step, making *Blixt* a fitting addition to one of the most challenging and rewarding catalogs of music ever assembled. —John Swenson