

Petri Ala-Maunus. There is a place in heaven for me and my kind

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Petri Ala-Maunus

*'If anyone born after 1950 tells you they don't dream of being a rock star, they're lying. Deep inside, everyone has this desire in them.'*¹

Written in 1986 in his bedroom in Finland, *Oh Baby, Baby, Baby, Baby* would be Petri Ala-Maunus' first and only song. Having penned the words within minutes and formed the melody from a few notes fitted around a basic two-chord 'progression', he recorded the song on a cassette tape, singing quietly into the microphone so that nobody would hear. The teenage Ala-Maunus dreamt of being a rock star and living a life filled with sex, drugs and endless touring. Unfortunately for him his only song, with its mistimed vocals, out of tune guitar playing and erratic chord changes, was pretty terrible. Ala-Maunus, confronted by the reality that he had little talent for music and even less desire to practice, became a visual artist instead. His song remained a secret that, as the years passed, would become a distant memory of an unrealised dream.

Twenty-five years later, and on the verge of forty, Ala-Maunus has revisited this moment of self-revelation, re-envisioning new possibilities for his teenage self. His once forgotten song — resurrected and re-imagined by a variety of invited bands in an eponymous titled *Tribute Album* — forms the centre piece of the exhibition *There is a place in heaven for me and my kind*, giving Ala-Maunus a "last chance to feel even a bit like a rock star".²

In *Oh Baby, Baby, Baby, Baby*, the teenage Ala-Maunus projects a gloomy future in which the potential object of his desire has already left him. The song is, in essence, a disastrous fantasy of what adult life might bring - of having a girlfriend, owning a car, dog and house "with machines" and then losing it all - a modern day re-invention perhaps of the formulaic unrequited love story found in a Gothic Romance, only in broken English. In *The Sorrow of Young Werther*, Goethe's melancholy hero shoots himself because he cannot face the reality that his love for the unattainable Lotte is unreturned. Werther's suicide is conceived as a selfless sacrificing of his own happiness for hers. In a similar act of self-sacrifice, Ala-Maunus willingly offers up all his future happiness and worldly possessions to the phantom woman he proposes to love, imploring her "don't leave anything for me", perhaps in vain attempt to keep her or just to deepen his own pain. Whichever, the song, awkward and riddled with a sense of self-worthlessness, paints a poignant picture of his younger self, whispering into a microphone and hiding his dreams.

While artists such as Cindy Sherman and Eleanor Antin have used the alter ego as a method of examining culturally defined ideas of identity, Ala-Maunus' investigations into this territory can be seen as a more

personal endeavour, exploring undeveloped aspects of his own self, the alter ego an extension of his deepest fears and desires. In previous works he has imagined himself as a black haired karaoke-singing Tango king, a pigtailed (and hairy legged) Heidi and a weeping woman by a waterfall, each character set against a meticulously painted landscape, the boundaries between the real, the illusory and the imagined blurred. In this exhibition, Ala-Maunus performs *Oh Baby, Baby, Baby, Baby* to camera adopting the persona of his teenage self in a darkly comic short film. The bedroom walls, devoid of the usual poster adornment commonly associated with adolescence, seem strangely austere, as if the passing years have left Ala-Maunus' older self with no rock star heroes left to worship, leaving only the disappointment of a broken dream and an attendant sense of failure. The fresh-faced teenager is replaced by an older surrogate, his face painted to resemble the living dead. Black shadows encircle his whitened face, faux blood drips from his mouth as if he has taken a bite out of something warm and living. The 'corpse mask' Ala-Maunus dons is a posture most associated with the Norwegian Black metal bands of the 1990's. Similarly the adoption of pseudonyms by band members, such as Zephyrous, Samoth and Infernus, inspired by Tolkien, Gothic and Norse mythology was common to this scene. At the height of its notoriety, Norwegian Black Metal became synonymous with devil worship, the burning of churches and infamously, the brutal murder of *Mayhem's* guitarist Euronymous by *Burzum's* Count Grishnackh (aka Varg Vikernes). Ala-Maunus' adoption of the mask not only references Black Metal's bloody history and the use of alter egos, but brings into play ideas of 'Otherness', and what Julia Kristeva terms 'the abject'. For Kristeva, the abject is a "jettisoned object", that which is "opposed to *I*", which simultaneously fascinates and repulses, but must be "radically excluded"³. The corpse is the ultimate embodiment of the abject and to confront it is to be reminded of that which we "thrust aside in order to live"⁴. Ala-Maunus' deathly appearance, more tragi-comic than zombie horror, signals a heightened awareness of his mortality, the transition to mid-life often being a time of psychological crisis when the big philosophical questions in life are asked. The air of dejection that Ala-Maunus adopts and the love song that he sings lets us know that, contrary to his outward appearance, this corpse has a soul.

In his previous show at Mother's Tankstation⁵ Ala-Maunus exhibited an expansive series of paintings of sunsets, each carefully rendered on an eclectic mix of supports; from the dull flea market painting to ephemeral objects such as napkins and tea bags, their original function was overwritten and their meaning elevated by the addition of his romantically beautiful sunsets. Similarly with his self-titled *Tribute Album*, Ala-Maunus takes something that was once discarded and forgotten and gives it new meaning. A series of cover versions transform *Oh Baby, Baby, Baby, Baby* from a forgettable amateur song into a punk rock 'classic', lo-fi indie 'hit' and sleazy jazz joint blues 'standard', to name but a few. The album, which includes covers by established Finnish bands, singers and artists as well as a range of international musicians, could be seen as a collection of multifarious alter egos, each of whom, through a variety of musical styles, fulfil Ala-Maunus' rock star dream. In some versions the original meaning of the song is changed completely. Bird Guano's cover, for example, twists the lyrics into a darkly humorous story about mutual loathing, recasting the woman as evil temptress. DJ Slow's version remixes the original recording of the song, the once inept vocals and guitar playing remastered and incorporated into a pounding club anthem. Ala-Maunus' rock star aspirations bring to mind the work of Rodney Graham⁶, both artists sharing a preoccupation with the nature of inherent failure as well as tendency for self deprecation. Ala-Maunus' original recording, the first track on the album, acts as a reminder of the distance between the self conscious, unconfident teenager and the older self who recognises his shortcomings but still has not given up on his dream. The album is not only a moving tribute

to the dreams of his younger self, but an exploration of universal aspirations and unrealised dreams that make us pause to wonder - what would life have been if I had made different choices?

A propensity for the transformation of the discarded and outmoded is explored further through Ala-Maunus' *Popular Music Postmortem*. The series could be seen as a literal post-mortem, a dissection of the failed, thrown out and forgotten gathered from flea-markets, second-hand record shops and the trash — from the classic Beatles album that cost Ala-Maunus €30 but that was too scratched and warped to be played, to the long forgotten roller-skate clad Dolly Dots. The LP covers are essentially vandalised by Ala-Maunus with sections literally ripped away to reveal intricately painted imagery below. In the resulting images, some satirical, others laced with puerile humour, the original meaning of the covers are completely overwritten and re-imagined. Included in the mix is the briefly celebrated Eurovision winner Nicole, whose album is now more likely to be found in the charity shop bargain bin than on iTunes. Ala-Maunus re-envisages her as a glam metal queen, her acoustic guitar replaced by Gene Simmons's famous Axe Bass Guitar. In another image Burzum's Count Grishnackh is transformed into Elvis, suggestive perhaps of the myth-like status that has surrounded the controversial singer since his imprisonment in 1993. A distinctly Gothic world emerges, replete with turreted castles, zombies and horned monsters. Chaos reigns in Ala-Maunus' alternate reality – a lightning bolt strikes an idyllic country cottage and a mountain rips through Pink Floyd's Wall. Taken in the context of the entire show, the series begins to resemble a rejection of conformity and of all things that conventional society determines as success, such as owning a house or adopting the role of father and provider. Again a heightened sense of mortality permeates the work, underscoring the complexities and contradictions associated with ageing.

Throughout this exhibition, Ala-Maunus emphasises that there is always hope for the socially excluded even the untalented - those who have, in some way, not lived up to their own or society's notions of success. From the discarded LPs that no longer have a relevance, to his own inability to fulfil his teenager rock star aspirations, Ala-Maunus' stance is almost Beckettian, acknowledging and embracing the inevitability of failure in all endeavour. The fulfilment of any dream comes with the realisation that reality cannot live up to the potential of fantasy - life is never of what we imagine it to be. With his album cover of Mantovani, doctored so that he's now 'giving us the finger', Ala-Maunus seems to be saying (in true rock-n-roll fashion) – So what? Keep dreaming anyway.

¹ David Fishof, founder of Rock 'n' Roll Fantasy Camp

² Petri Ala-Maunus, sleeve notes to *A Tribute to Petri Ala-Maunus*, 2009

³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 1982, p2

⁴ *ibid*, p3

⁵ Petri Ala-Maunus, *Nine Years of sunsets*, Mothers tankstation, 15th February – 25th March, 2006

⁶ A conscious curatorial comparison by Mother's Tankstation, underscored by the installation of Rodney Graham's *A Little Thought* and Ala Maunus' *Oh Baby, Baby, Baby, Baby* two singer and guitar video pieces, installed in the same exhibition space in subsequent exhibitions.