

Meet the dark spirits of Norwegian black metal



PUBLIC EYE: Peter Beste's book captures musicians such as Kvitrafn, right (ex-Gorgoroth, now of Wardruna), fans and even forests that inspire bands. (Peter Beste)

By CASEY DOLAN LOS ANGELES TIMES STAFF WRITER

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"True Norwegian Black Metal" by Peter Beste

Four naked men and women covered in cows' blood hang suspended from crosses while a rock band plays, bathed in red light. At the edge of the stage is a phalanx of sheep heads, impaled on stakes and frozen in death grins. The slate-colored eyes of the singer, Gaahl, peering through dark, tangled tresses, are upon us -- his corpse paint dried to the consistency of cracked concrete, mascara-black smudges over cadaver white.

STEVEN
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Such spectacles are not usually associated with Norway, but Peter Beste, a Houston photographer with a knack for penetrating popular music subcultures, shows a different side of the idyllic northern paradise in a new coffee-table book arriving Thursday, "True Norwegian Black Metal," featuring more than 130 photos.

In the concert photograph mentioned above, it is Gorgoroth on stage, the Norwegian black metal band being one of the prime examples of a sub-genre of heavy-metal music known for its assaultive power, Satanic or Odinic underpinnings -- and a history of violent, criminal activity.

Beste started this project more than seven years ago, making several trips to Norway, "feeling my way along . . . building these relationships. I had grown up on more mainstream heavy metal, but I was fascinated by the fantastical and insane [in Norwegian black metal]."

He was gradually accepted into the inner circles. "I saw Gorgoroth in Milwaukee in 2002, [shot the band] and Gaahl thought I captured his essence, so I went to Norway for five weeks with no agenda. . . . They were very suspicious people. Norwegians tend to be private. But there was never ever fear, once I realized that these guys are [more] educated and nicer than the everyday people in New York. It also helped that I wasn't a long-haired dude."

In the '90s, a series of church burnings, including that of a 12th-century wooden stave church, Fantoft, a national symbol; gruesome suicides and murders; and an increasing fascination with National Socialism created a flurry of media attention and outright banning of bands' performances.

Beste says, "Lots of the musicians are ashamed of that past and roll their eyes in interviews."

But the past is never far away. Varg Vikernes, convicted murderer, suspected arsonist of the Fantoft church and creator of the highly influential one-man band Burzum, was to have been up for parole this past month, but neither he nor Norwegian prison authorities are releasing any information.

His portrait does not appear in the book.

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True Norwegian Black Metal, *Vice Books, Thursday; 208 pps., \$60, hardcover. An exhibition featuring more than 30 of Peter Beste's Norwegian black metal photos runs until June 7 at Stephen Kasher Gallery, 521 W. 23 St., New York, NY, (212) 966-3978*