Bending Sound Across Time

Hekla Magnúsdóttir has been championing theremin for years, and now she’s starting to make waves overseas.

Flatus Lifir Enn
Fart jokes are always funny

Halldór Ragarsson
The philosophy of art and language

Sigur Rós
Alexa, play "The Boys Are Back In Town"

Beer!
We drank all of it and it was great
It’s Festival Season

It’s that time of the year again; political mess, excessive tea drinking (yes, tea!), oppressive darkness and endless emails about lice in schools. And of course, festivals! Icelanders are enjoying the return of culture like nothing happened in the last two years. Iceland Airwaves is back like a mad king seeking to rule its empire again and even professional dancers are going ballistic—in an artistically synchronized way—at the Reykjavik Dance Festival.

And as if that’s not enough, Hekla Magnúsdóttir has harnessed electricity, playing incredibly complicated and beautiful compositions without ever touching her instrument, like a goddamn superhero with mind-bending powers. Read all about it on page 09.

Icelanders are sitting at every other coffee house playing Fischer Random after the chess tournament in memory of the Fischer vs Spassky game, which took place at the end of October. Perhaps it was the anal beads, but people were unusually excited about the (whole) affair. Sorry, we have no shame.

The book flood has started and although little is in English, you still can find new translations, like the pyroclastic novel ‘The Fires’ by Sigríður Hagalín Björnsdóttir, who has enchanted the whole nation with her dark and witty takes on literature. Can’t really have too much darkness and Wittiness, in my opinion. You can find an interview with Sigríður on page 26.

Winter just isn’t the same without a little mystery, and we have a decades-old artistic conundrum to present to you in this issue. Unfortunately, it’s not about a long-lost painting by some old master—instead, it’s about farts. Or is it?? Who’s to know? You can read all about it on page 26 and make your own mind up.

Enjoy our cold November, light a candle, drink that tea and stop sending us emails about lice. It’s always too late anyway.

Valur Grettisson
Editor-In-Chief

Cover Photo
Photo: Hilmar Smáriason
Make up: Kristjana Dóra Kristjánardóttir
Assistant: Vigða Dóttir Harðardóttir Ónnudóttir
The photo was taken in a studio in Skeifan in Harðardóttir Önnudóttir
Photo: Art Bicnick
A local favourite for over 20 years

Our Kitchen is open for late night dining

Book your table

TAPASBARINN | Vesturgata 3B | Tel: 551 2344 | tapas.is
Keeping Iceland warm since 1926
What Are Icelanders Talking About?

Proving no news is good news

Words: Andie Sophia Fontaine

NEWS

Iceland is a country divided. Not just along political lines, class lines, or ethnic lines, but also by its relationship with cats. Outdoors cats, to be specific. Cats being allowed outdoors is either a very natural and right thing to do (as the country’s leading veterinary experts agree) or completely irresponsible and a threat to bird life that must be stopped at all costs. And by “at all costs” that can unfortunately mean killing cats. Most recently, mink traps were found around Reykjavík harbour that are confirmed to have killed at least one cat. “Hang on, are minks a problem in the city?” you ask? No, they are absolutely not. These traps are clearly being left for outdoor cats, such as the poisoned fish cat killer of Hveragerði. For those little buggers live on cliffs—not an area cats can reach easily.

You thought you were done hearing about coronavirus news from us? Think again! The latest data shows that 174 people in Iceland have died of COVID in the first seven months of this year. In comparison, 31 died in the first year of the pandemic and only eight died last year. What gives? Well, despite how often you’ve heard or seen the phrase “post-pandemic,” the coronavirus is still on its world tour, mutating faster than vaccines can catch up, and yes, it is killing people. At the same time, all pandemic restrictions have been lifted in Iceland since last February—which, by the by, coincides with a tremendous spike in coronavirus cases in the country. But what are we supposed to do, wear masks? Wash our hands?? Iceland’s adult population has had to confront the ugly fact that not an area cats can reach easily.

You thought you were done hearing about coronavirus news from us? Think again! The latest data shows that 174 people in Iceland have died of COVID in the first seven months of this year. In comparison, 31 died in the first year of the pandemic and only eight died last year. What gives? Well, despite how often you’ve heard or seen the phrase “post-pandemic,” the coronavirus is still on its world tour, mutating faster than vaccines can catch up, and yes, it is killing people. At the same time, all pandemic restrictions have been lifted in Iceland since last February—which, by the by, coincides with a tremendous spike in coronavirus cases in the country. But what are we supposed to do, wear masks? Wash our hands?? Iceland’s adult population has had to confront the ugly fact that not an area cats can reach easily.

You thought you were done hearing about coronavirus news from us? Think again! The latest data shows that 174 people in Iceland have died of COVID in the first seven months of this year. In comparison, 31 died in the first year of the pandemic and only eight died last year. What gives? Well, despite how often you’ve heard or seen the phrase “post-pandemic,” the coronavirus is still on its world tour, mutating faster than vaccines can catch up, and yes, it is killing people. At the same time, all pandemic restrictions have been lifted in Iceland since last February—which, by the by, coincides with a tremendous spike in coronavirus cases in the country. But what are we supposed to do, wear masks? Wash our hands?? Iceland’s adult population has had to confront the ugly fact that not an area cats can reach easily.

You thought you were done hearing about coronavirus news from us? Think again! The latest data shows that 174 people in Iceland have died of COVID in the first seven months of this year. In comparison, 31 died in the first year of the pandemic and only eight died last year. What gives? Well, despite how often you’ve heard or seen the phrase “post-pandemic,” the coronavirus is still on its world tour, mutating faster than vaccines can catch up, and yes, it is killing people. At the same time, all pandemic restrictions have been lifted in Iceland since last February—which, by the by, coincides with a tremendous spike in coronavirus cases in the country. But what are we supposed to do, wear masks? Wash our hands?? Iceland’s adult population has had to confront the ugly fact that not an area cats can reach easily.
The taste of Icelandic lamb is unrivaled. Our pure bred lambs graze free in the pristine wilderness of Iceland, eating luscious green grass, berries and wild herbs such as red clover, Arctic thyme, sedge, willow, thrift and angelica. The end result is a tender fine-textured meat that is both naturally rich in Omega-3 and iron and infused with the flavor of nature. Icelandic lamb is a taste experience beyond compare.

www.icelandiclamb.is
Controversial chairman

Bjarni has been controversial throughout his time as party chair. He has close personal and political ties with business life in Iceland, the extent of which was revealed by a data leak shortly after the banking crisis. His father, Benedikt Sveinsson, is also a powerful figure in the murky, intertwined world of big business and politics; he has been implicated in a number of political scandals, including the implosion of the government in 2011, as well as buying shares in a highly controversial sale of government-owned stock in Islandsbanki this year, which his son oversaw. Bjarni has since stated that he had no idea that his father was one of the buyers.

Votes dropped drastically

Bjarni became chair in 2009, after the complete failure of the banks in Iceland. However, during his 13-year tenure, the party has gone from receiving around 30-40% of the vote share in elections, to around 24-26%. Guðlaugur has criticised Bjarni for this reduction—but, in Bjarni’s defence, when he took up the position of party chair, there were only three other significant political parties to compete with. Now there are seven others. Perhaps the golden age of big ruling parties like the Independence Party is over.

Lean, mean, Campaign machine

The disastrous sale resulted in a report into the ministry’s handling of the fiasco, which though completed, has not yet been released. Commentators have suggested that Bjarni may be trying to delay its publication until after the party conference is over. If he is able to do so, he may just weather this storm.

However, Guðlaugur has serious potential here. He has strong ambition and a vicious campaign machine, as well as a lot of experience, both as a minister and as a member of Parliament. Whether that is enough to oust the top dog, Bjarni, remains to be seen.

It’s a long time that a candidate has been aware of it, “Terry says referring to the sacrificial feast of the Æsir. “It’s the same in Ireland with the festival of Samhain and we have a number of saga accounts which talk about this being one of the main festivals of the year…which his son oversaw. Bjarni has been controversial throughout his time as party chair. He has close personal and political ties with business life in Iceland, the extent of which was revealed by a data leak shortly after the banking crisis. His father, Benedikt Sveinsson, is also a powerful figure in the murky, intertwined world of big business and politics; he has been implicated in a number of political scandals, including the implosion of the government in 2011, as well as buying shares in a highly controversial sale of government-owned stock in Islandsbanki this year, which his son oversaw. Bjarni has since stated that he had no idea that his father was one of the buyers.

The disastrous sale resulted in a report into the ministry’s handling of the fiasco, which though completed, has not yet been released. Commentators have suggested that Bjarni may be trying to delay its publication until after the party conference is over. If he is able to do so, he may just weather this storm.

However, Guðlaugur has serious potential here. He has strong ambition and a vicious campaign machine, as well as a lot of experience, both as a minister and as a member of Parliament. Whether that is enough to oust the top dog, Bjarni, remains to be seen.
Flatus Lifir Enn

Probably the world's longest-running fart joke

Words: Josie Anne Gaftens
Photo: Art Bicnick

On the road between Reykjavík and the North stands a wall that should be entirely non-descript. The vertical expanse of concrete was erected in the 1970s to protect the nearby section of Route 1 from a small gravel mine situated at the foot of Esjan, on the windy shores of Kollafjörður. For the first part of its existence, nobody gave this wall a second glance.

But at some point—and exactly when is just one of the many contested elements of this story—a curious phrase appeared, spray painted on the wall's surface. "Flatus Lifir!" declared the words on the wall, in garish, bright-red letters.

The original paint job was covered up, but it quickly reappeared—this time as "Flatus Lifir Enn." And just like that, a merry dance of public art, word play and mystery was born.

Farts or crabs?

But what does "Flatus Lifir Enn" mean? Well, it's not very clear. "Lifir Enn" translates to "still lives," but "Flatus" isn't a word in Icelandic. People have speculated that "Flatus" was actually intended to be the word "flatuis" (the Icelandic word for pubic lice), whilst others have argued that it is the Latin word for flatulence. The issue with both of these ideas is that neither "crabs still live," or "farts still live," make much sense to spray paint on a wall.

Perhaps the meaning can be better ascertained by looking into the identity of the author of the artwork—but once again this is the topic of furious debate. The issue has been the subject of discussions on every kind of platform, from TV shows aired by national broadcaster RÚV, to threads on internet forum Reddit.

Theories abound

Even serious art critics have weighed in on the argument. Guðmundur Óddur Magnússon, professor at the Iceland University of the Arts, posits that the original creator of the work was the artist, Róskja, and that the spelling of "Flatus" was intentional. In an interview with RÚV in 2017, he stated that the piece first appeared in the 1970s, at which time Róskja was the only person he was aware of engaging in grafitti. What's more, Guðmundur said that Róskja, "understands Latin, as she lived in Rome for decades."

But other people have conflicting views. One theory is that Flatus refers to a popular 80s band from Akureyri. Another associates the phrase to a local man from Akranes, and yet another to a group of teenagers on a camping trip in 1990 who stopped en route to scrawl the humorous words.

Art lives on

Whoever or whatever Flatus is or was, it seems as if both the words and the mystery are here to stay. What began as an enlaving scrawl has now inspired a series of different artists over the years, who have all least their particular style to pay homage to the great words of the wall.

Most recently, Edda Kariðla Einarðóttir, an artist from the FÚSK collective who trained in sign-painting in Scotland, adorned the wall with bright lettering and snaking pink tubes that cheekily hint to Flatus's potential intesti- nal meaning. So beloved is the grafitti to Icelanders that the project was even supported by the main hardware chain in the country, Hússalóman, which has provided Edda with the materials to paint the wall. And of course, once Edda's work has weathered and faded, another artist will take up the mantle and make sure that none of us dare forget: Flatus Lifir Enn.

NEW MUSIC PICKS

Daníel Hjálmtýsson - Labyrinthia
(Out November 11th)
Daníel Hjálmtýsson has started with children's choirs and garage bands, the rest is history. On November 11th, his multi-year long passion for melodic and melancholic sounds will finally emerge into an official release — Labyrinthia. If you’re into brutal and lyrical combos, this one is for you! This album might not be our favourite of the year, but if you’re about to go on a long car drive with your parents and want to avoid awkward silences, play ‘Labyrinthia’.

Pale Moon - Dopamine
(Out November 2nd)
Let’s just say that Icelanders are not particularly big fans of dopamine. I mean, who needs body function and memory? But Pale Moon seems to be working with the other functions of dopamine in this song. In particular, the one that controls pleasurable reward and motivation. And, Pale Moon are doing a pretty nice job of delivering some with this short but enjoyable song. This is a nice indie banger for your moonstruck brain activity and you just might put it on repeat until you lose all body functionality as well as memory.

Linus - Supine
(Out November 16th)
Linus offers us a really nice three minutes of serenity, beauty and a good noodle. His new song ‘Supine’, which sounds like a fancy way of saying soup, apparently it’s more compli- cated than that, but being a simple person I don’t really care. The song is a good indie track with an impresive soundscape. The structure is a bit predictable but it doesn’t bother me because, you know, I’m remaining supine.

Linus - Supine
(Out November 16th)

Pale Moon - Dopamine
(Out November 2nd)

Flatus Lifir Enn

Words: Josie Anne Gaftens
Photo: Art Bicnick

Probably the world's longest-running fart joke

On the road between Reykjavík and the North stands a wall that should be entirely non-descript. The vertical expanse of concrete was erected in the 1970s to protect the nearby section of Route 1 from a small gravel mine situated at the foot of Esjan, on the windy shores of Kollafjörður. For the first part of its existence, nobody gave this wall a second glance.

But at some point—and exactly when is just one of the many contested elements of this story—a curious phrase appeared, spray painted on the wall's surface. "Flatus Lifir!" declared the words on the wall, in garish, bright-red letters.

The original paint job was covered up, but it quickly reappeared—this time as "Flatus Lifir Enn." And just like that, a merry dance of public art, word play and mystery was born.

Farts or crabs?

But what does "Flatus Lifir Enn" mean? Well, it's not very clear. "Lifir Enn" translates to "still lives," but "Flatus" isn't a word in Icelandic. People have speculated that "Flatus" was actually intended to be the word "flatuis" (the Icelandic word for pubic lice), whilst others have argued that it is the Latin word for flatulence. The issue with both of these ideas is that neither "crabs still live," or "farts still live," make much sense to spray paint on a wall.

Perhaps the meaning can be better ascertained by looking into the identity of the author of the artwork—but once again this is the topic of furious debate. The issue has been the subject of discussions on every kind of platform, from TV shows aired by national broadcaster RÚV, to threads on internet forum Reddit.

Theories abound

Even serious art critics have weighed in on the argument. Guðmundur Óddur Magnússon, professor at the Iceland University of the Arts, posits that the original creator of the work was the artist, Róskja, and that the spelling of "Flatus" was intentional. In an interview with RÚV in 2017, he stated that the piece first appeared in the 1970s, at which time Róskja was the only person he was aware of engaging in grafitti. What's more, Guðmundur said that Róskja, "understands Latin, as she lived in Rome for decades."

But other people have conflicting views. One theory is that Flatus refers to a popular 80s band from Akureyri. Another associates the phrase to a local man from Akranes, and yet another to a group of teenagers on a camping trip in 1990 who stopped en route to scrawl the humorous words.

Art lives on

Whoever or whatever Flatus is or was, it seems as if both the words and the mystery are here to stay. What began as an enlaving scrawl has now inspired a series of different artists over the years, who have all least their particular style to pay homage to the great words of the wall.

Most recently, Edda Kariðla Einarðóttir, an artist from the FÚSK collective who trained in sign-painting in Scotland, adorned the wall with bright lettering and snaking pink tubes that cheekily hint to Flatus's potential intestinal meaning. So beloved is the grafitti to Icelanders that the project was even supported by the main hardware chain in the country, Hússalóman, which has provided Edda with the materials to paint the wall. And of course, once Edda's work has weathered and faded, another artist will take up the mantle and make sure that none of us dare forget: Flatus Lifir Enn.

NEW MUSIC PICKS

Daníel Hjálmtýsson - Labyrinthia
(Out November 11th)
Daníel Hjálmtýsson has started with children's choirs and garage bands, the rest is history. On November 11th, his multi-year long passion for melodic and melancholic sounds will finally emerge into an official release — Labyrinthia. If you’re into brutal and lyrical combos, this one is for you! This album might not be our favourite of the year, but if you’re about to go on a long car drive with your parents and want to avoid awkward silences, play ‘Labyrinthia’.

Pale Moon - Dopamine
(Out November 2nd)
Let’s just say that Icelanders are not particularly big fans of dopamine. I mean, who needs body function and memory? But Pale Moon seems to be working with the other functions of dopamine in this song. In particular, the one that controls pleasurable reward and motivation. And, Pale Moon are doing a pretty nice job of delivering some with this short but enjoyable song. This is a nice indie banger for your moonstruck brain activity and you just might put it on repeat until you lose all body functionality as well as memory.

Linus - Supine
(Out November 16th)
Linus offers us a really nice three minutes of serenity, beauty and a good noodle. His new song ‘Supine’, which sounds like a fancy way of saying soup, apparently it’s more complicated than that, but being a simple person I don’t really care. The song is a good indie track with an impressive soundscape. The structure is a bit predictive but it doesn’t bother me because, you know, I’m remaining supine.
Hekla Magnúsdóttir welcomes us into her charming home in Reykjavík, where we are immediately greeted by an adorable (albeit bitey) kitten named Vindur. She apologises for the kitten’s inappropriacy, but we hardly notice the dashing and lurching of the little beast, as it’s clear from the first few seconds of being in her home: an artist lives here.

For all her unique talent, it is difficult to find much coverage of her in the Icelandic press, but that may soon change with the advent of her new album Xuuxsejar (Catian for “whisperer”) which is already making waves in the press overseas.

How was this musician drawn to the theremin? What can it do that no other instrument can? And what magic will she have in store for us in the months to come?

Breaking the waves

The inspiration to even begin playing theremin came from her hearing the works of Clara Rockmore, a Lithuanian violonist and one of the first performers of the instrument.

“The sounds are just so unique,” Hekla says. “You both the ancient and futuristic at the same time. It’s like such a magical voice, and I was just very drawn to this sound.”

When most folks hear theremin, it is usually within the context of 80s sci-fi or horror. Hekla recognises this, but saw the instrument’s potential almost immediately.

“I feel like for being such an exciting instrument, it has been box in a lot in kind of gimmicky sounds,” she says. “A lot of spooking spooky, joky stuff. But there’s just so many more ways to use it than that, especially with plugins and pedals and changing the sounds in other ways. There are just endless possibilities. It’s not something that you haven’t heard before.”

Nothing compares to Moog

Hekla also points out that both cello and theremin are two instruments often compared to the human voice. She isn’t content to accept the waveforms that come out of the instrument alone—not all of the time, anyway.

In addition to the pedals—the bass distortion pedal, which “makes your atomic numples,” is one of the clear favourites—Hekla will also manipulate the sound at the source.

“You can connect it to an iPad and create your own sounds,” she says. “You can also change the filters and the signal, the waveform—so it sounds more soft or less soft.”

This brings to mind the early days of synthesizers, when pioneers such as Wendy Carlos were creating entire symphonies playing pre-set patterns on their waveforms with machines the size of Dodge Caravans. Yet here, Hekla is capable of corrugated iron, a common material for older Icelandic homes, and literally means “wave iron.”

That was the first time I really felt like this could be fun,” she says. “It’s not like practising alone at home or something. But I don’t recall a moment thinking ‘I want to make music!’ Just never thought of not doing it.”

When Bárður is no more (or as husky, depending on who you ask), Hekla’s experience with the band would prove to be the impetus for striking out on her own.

How do you write sound?

She dove further into the theremin at the Icelandic Academy of the Arts, where she also studied contemporary music composition. On that note, I cannot help but ask: how does one write compositions for the theremin? Is there even sheet music for it?

“How does one noodle on theremin?”

She consequences to Moog the instruments the player almost seems to be drawing the music in the air, or performing a dance from an ancient, long-forgotten and possibly extraterrestrial culture.

Hekla got her musical start with cello, so it’s no surprise if she found these instruments comparable in the sense that neither of them show the musician “press here for major C.”

“The muscle memory of it is similar,” she says. “It definitely helps to know how to play an instrument like that before. It’s also just built so much on hearing because you’re not touching anything. So it’s just about listening very carefully.”

The horror

Hekla continued working in her own under-stated fashion, releasing her second album, in 2018. It’s on this album where one can truly hear Hekla beginning to expand the limits of what the theremin is capable of, but perhaps most surprisingly with the 2020 EP Sprungur that really caught our attention.

“I was thinking more of entering some kind of alternate horror dimension or something,” she told the Grapevine at the time about this EP. “I wanted it to be...like an imaginary horror movie soundtracks.”

Xuuxsejar by contrast, the characterises as having “a January sound. Really, really dark and cold and windy. But there’s still some warmth in the sounds, enveloping you in a good way because the sunlight is increasing. It’s just still very dark.”

Evolution

Hekla released her self-titled debut in 2014, which was shortlisted by the Graumur Music Awards as one of the best albums of that year. It’s the album where Hekla first made her mark as a solo artist promising bigger and better things to offer the Icelandic music scene. Even so, it’s an album she has difficulty listening to:

“I listened to it today, and I have a hard time because it’s so different,” Hekla says. “I’m really just attemping new things and trying out lots of different sounds of what I can do with the theremin. So it was more of an exploration.”

This exploration was not an easy time for Hekla, but in the end, it led to more satisfying results.

“Was so stressed out trying all these different things, just trying to find my voice,” she says. “And then all of a sudden I was so relieved. And now I can use my voice.”

This brings to mind a conflict I have often noticed between experimental musicians and their fans: the fans enjoy the earlier, more free-wheeling works more, while the musicians are just happy to have finally found their sound. Has Hekla encountered this as well?

“We’ve gotten lots of good feedback from the new stuff,” she says, after a moment’s consideration, “I’m just also my own worst critic. I have a hard time listening to my stuff.”

The collection

We are invited upstairs to see this instrument in action and count four different versions of the theremin in the cozy loft-like space: one of rich varnished wood with brass rods; another of white plastic in the shape of a UFO, and another very simple black box, but the one Hekla demonstrates for us is a large, modern theremin with a much larger body than the others. It also has more knobs. That’s about all the difference I can discern as an uninhibited person.

On the floor are numerous effects pedals, which help create some of the otherworldly doing the same with a few more reasonably sized devices in a West Reykjavik home. That these theremins are made by synth pioneer company Moog only undercuts this comparison.

Surf’s up

Like a lot of trained musicians, for Hekla two was a moment when music went from something she was studying to something that became fun. That was her time in the psychodelic surf rock band Bárður the Icelandic word for how these drawings translate into hand positions for the theremin player, you can at least feel the mood of the composition they are meant to represent. It brings to mind the anecdote that Paul McCartney cannot read or write music, but does draw compositions. For all intents and purposes, musical nota- tion is effectively “drawing music” anyway, so Hekla employing her own dots, lines, swirls and squiggles is not as unorthodox as one might at first think.

“I’m really just attempting new things and trying out lots of different sounds of what I can do with the theremin.”
layers of notes. You can then make chords if you’re looping like that. And if you use more than one looper, you can also change it into a different loop. It’s really clever. So you end up like playing whole chords. It’s a lot of fun to just turn on the theremin and the loopers and just start noodling around in the air. I usually start just playing really long notes, looping them on top of each other until there’s the base layer, and then I just progress on top of that. Sometimes, I really get lost in the sounds.”

Some musicians will agonise over a single track for months or years trying to get the sound just right, to have it match exactly what they hear in their heads. Bruce Springsteen’s “Born To Run,” for example, took eight months to complete, in large part because of his own exacting standards. This is not Hekla’s approach, because she believes the “imperfections” are part and parcel of making a song or an album great. "I don’t want it to sound perfect,” she says. “There’s lots of noise in the background and clicks and word sounds that I felt were fine. It doesn’t need to sound super polished and produced. I think that would just kind of kill the atmosphere of it.”

In terms of the future of the theremin, Hekla now teaches the instrument to children (she is doing her masters in music teaching), and has found many kids are eager to learn this fascinating instrument. So perhaps Iceland can expect a new generation of theremin virtuosi coming up.

For her own part, Hekla says she’d like to incorporate flutes into more of her works, saying that their sounds complement the theremin well, but also: “More doom,” again with a wicked smile. “Make the sound heavier. It’s just so much fun to play concerts like that.”

Xiuxiejar is available to purchase for worldwide delivery at shop.grapevine.is
The Sigur Rós Machine

Kjartan Sveinsson on rejoining the band, new music, tour, and adulting

Busy between soundchecking and the upcoming gig in Helsinki, Kjartan Sveinsson finds time for a brief chat. These days, he’s really into pottery and renovating his summer house—one might say he lives a rather relaxed life. In fact, after a ten-year hiatus, Kjartan is currently vagabonding around the world and playing sold-out arenas with the band that brought him fame, Sigur Rós.

Back in the business

In February, Sigur Rós announced multi-instrumentalist Kjartan had returned to the band after stepping out in 2012 to focus on personal projects. I wonder if rejoining Sigur Rós was like getting back together with a long-lost partner. According to Kjartan, it was much simpler than that.

“Me and [lead singer] Jónsi decided to work on some music together,” he shares. “In a certain place in the process, we found that it would be best to make a Sigur Rós album out of what we were doing. That’s the reason I came back—just started writing music.”

Throughout the year, Sigur Rós dropped hints that a new album was in the making. Initially planned to be finished last spring, the release has been put off until at least early next year. “These tours take up so much energy,” shares Kjartan. “We were imagining we could maybe work on tour, but it doesn’t really work like that.”

What can we expect from the band’s first studio album in a decade? “Our last album ‘Kveikur’ was kind of a rock and roll album,” Kjartan says. “This one is very mellow and slow. We’ve got loads of string arrangements, we’re kind of playing with an orchestra. It’s not very percussive either. It’s kind of slow and moody in a way.”

Magic making

If you’ve ever listened to a Sigur Rós song, admit that you have thought at least once: “How do they even make this music?” Kjartan guides us through the band’s creative process: “There’s never anyone bringing in an idea, ‘Let’s try this.’ It’s always a jam.” But when it comes to lyrics, things are a little bit more complex.

“Very often we use the method of just listening to the music and then trying to come up with something that either resembles what Jónsi is singing in Hopelandic [the name for his haunting, non-lyrical vocalisations] or trying to depict what the song is about emotionally,” Kjartan shares. “Ultimately, it’s always Jónsi who decides what he is going to sing. Which is fair and just. But when it comes to lyrics, things are a little bit more complex.”

“Try to wake up early, go somewhere. Have a healthy approach to the tour and the people you work with,” he says.

Homecoming

Sigur Rós certainly needs no introduction in Iceland, but is their audience here? I point out to Kjartan that I have encountered Icelandic peers referring to the band as “something our parents used to listen to” or “even ‘a musical export.’” He laughs: “It’s quite funny actually. We haven’t released any music for such a long time and haven’t been doing anything to promote ourselves. I think it’s perfectly normal that the younger generation views us with a different attitude.”

On November 25, Sigur Rós will end their tour in Reykjavik. “It’s always good to feel we need to do an extra good job in Iceland,” Kjartan says. “There’s kind of more pressure. Maybe we’re just imagining it, but we always feel like we need to do an extra good job in Iceland.”

What’s next for Sigur Rós after the world tour and the upcoming album? Kjartan says he and the boys—Jónsi, Goggi and new drummer Öbo—just go with the flow, focusing on one project at a time and making music they like. “We’re not really in it for the career,” he smiles.
In The Beginning Was The Word

Halldór Ragnarsson searches for meaning through repetition

"Do you see a paintbrush here?" artist Halldór Ragnarsson asks. He is buzzing around his studio in Sketfan, seemingly fuelled in equal parts by creativity, caffeine and ADHD. We hunt for the missing object, which I swear was in his hand just seconds ago, before he locates it beside the coffee maker. "Here!" he proclaims victoriously, holding the painbrush aloft before shooting a side-long glance. "This is my life," he says, with feigned resignation.

Halldór is in the studio putting the finishing touches on his newest collection of works in preparation for an exhibition at Listval Grandi. His pieces—in mostly neutral tones of grey, beige black and white, with occasional pops of ochre and red—hang around the room. He leans over one with great concentration, holding the newly-discovered paintbrush loaded with yellow enamel paint. He places one drop on the canvas and steps back, satisfied. "That's it," he says.

A brand new space

Halldór explains that he has not long moved into this new studio. "It's so funny how space decides the size of your paintings," he says. "I'm doing more landscape stuff, just because of what the shape of this space is."

Halldór's pieces are varied but complementary, incorporating different textural elements, from layered wood to thickly applied paint. Significantly, they all incorporate text in some form. The new exhibition, 'Here, Now & Maybe Later' covers pieces made over the last 12 months. "But in a way this has been a continuous theme in my works since maybe 2010," Halldór says. "This period where I have been working with the meaning of language."

Combine and conquer

Halldór arrived at visual arts in a round-about way. "I'm kind of a late bloomer," he admits. "I started as a teenager doing weird, abstract work. But I didn't even know if it was art, I was just scribbling. I didn't have any formal art education."

Later, as an adult, Halldór decided to go to university to study philosophy. "It was through philosophy that I started to maybe understand what is it that I do," Halldór adds. "But I'm still figuring it out. It's of course about time and space...but I'm still wondering why it is I do have to do art." He waves his arms onerimitely: "I have to do it, but I'm still wondering why!"

It was while he was undertaking his BA that a teacher suggested that he try connecting his written and visual works.

"It was so easy just to hear it," Halldór says of this advice. "Like, 'why aren't you doing this?' And I was just like, 'yeah, why not?'" He laughs: "It was so obvious, you know?"

Over and over

"I've been stuck in this meaning of language ever since," Halldór explains. "A lot of it is repetition to understand why a word is a word."

"You say, dog, dog, dog, dog, dog, until it is a dog," he says, gesturing towards his housemate's mini pincsher, Zoo, who is bouncing around the room with a stuffed toy, matching her companion's boundless energy. "You have to name things," Halldór continues. "That's how language starts, and because of the repetition, you will eventually understand. It's like a common, shared thought."

Halldór's search for meaning is very personal, with many of the words and phrases he uses lifted directly from his diary. The expressions he chooses are relatively mundane—"I'm not saying things like, 'I'm in love' or 'I miss you,'" he clarifies. Instead his work is adorned with many iterations of hand-stamped, written or spray-painted words that say things like, "in a moment there will be a pause."

In this way, Halldór takes his specific personal experiences and processes them to become more abstract: "I'm looking at different feelings and moments and I'm maybe reflecting on them because I repeat many sentences in my work. It's kind of like a mantra. I'm playing with time within the context of using language."

A cleansing fire

Alongside his philosophy studies, Halldór's Zen outlook on life can perhaps be attributed to an unlikely source. In 2016, the artist's home and studio on Grettisgata burned down, destroying everything he owned—including his materials, equipment and artworks.

"The day after you don't even have a wallet, you don't have anything that says that you are you, you don't have any money because it burned. And you're in Kringlan with money you borrowed, wearing clothes that your friends gave you, buying your first pair of underwear. It's surreal," Halldór says of the aftermath of the fire.

And yet, despite the tragic nature of this event, six years on Halldór can see some kind of silver lining: "I lost everything in the fire, including loads of paintings and artworks of course. It was a horrible thing to go through, but it was also a very good thing," he says.

"When this happened I had a show 100% ready, and it was supposed to be in a month. To get out of this trauma, I did all the work for the exhibition again. I re-did the repetitions, I did all the works again by memory," Halldór continues. "So the show in the end was probably better quality, because I had already done all this work. But I lost my mind a bit by doing it, I was a little bit weird for a while."

Another outcome of the fire for Halldór is that he now finds it easier to part with his works when they are completed, and that his relationship with his finished artworks has changed and developed as a result. "The beauty of art is that you make it and then it leaves you—it isn't in your control anymore," he says. "I think that's what I learned through this process. Of course they're like your little babies, your art, I work very slowly, and then— it's just done." He smiles, adding: "It's a little bit like the fire, every time."

Always looking, never finding

With the collection nearly finished and the exhibition drawing close, I'm interested in what's next on the agenda for Halldór. "An exhibition is like finishing a book for me," he explains. "You've finished a period, you just want to leave it behind and start something new. It's from the exhibition where I take that next step."

Whatever that next step is, Halldór is sure that it will still fall within the realm of constructing and deconstructing language, trying to use words to understand life and meaning. "I think I haven't finished these exercises—or it's more like research," he says.

Despite all of our discussion about looking for meaning, Halldór doesn't strike me as being particularly distressed by the fact that he hasn't yet found the answer.

"If I would have found it I would probably not be doing the art," he says quickly. "I admit it every day, honestly. I will be brushing my teeth and looking into the mirror and I will just think, 'I don't know anything.' I'm a proud owner of knowing that fact. Through that you listen, you seek information."

He cracks a wide smile. "They're so boring, people who know the facts. There are no facts, in a way."

The most special coffee from specialists in speciality coffee.
Decadent, indulgent, topped with marshmallows or whipped cream... There's nothing like a cup of steaming hot chocolate on a cold night. Luckily, Reykjavík has some great spots where you can cosy up with this warm seasonal drink.

With the help of 101 resident and author of the @outandaboutreykjavik Instagram page, Áki Lind Árnason, we selected the best places in Reykjavík to get what Icelanders call a “heitt súkkulaði.”

Mokka Kaffi
Skólabæjarbústígur 3a, 101 Reykjavík

Mokka is one of the oldest cafes in Reykjavík, and apparently the first one in town to get an espresso machine. It has been locals' favourite since 1958. Here, you can get the best combo—a cup of hot chocolate paired with their famous waffles. With or without whipped cream? The choice is yours. Be cautious: by trying it once, you might get hooked. Mokka also often hosts art exhibitions—overall, it’s a great spot to taste the vibe of old Reykjavík and avoid looking like a tourist.

Plantan Kaffihús
Njálsgata 64, 101 Reykjavík

Plantan just opened its doors this summer, but it’s steadily gaining popularity. This tiny coffee house is 100% vegan and offers weekly changing menus, including a different soup every day. The place is located right next to the oldest swimming pool in town, Sundhöllin. Imagine this: soaking in one of many Sundhöllin’s hot pots and then getting a cup of hot chocolate paired with Plantan’s baked goods on the way home? That’s definitely on our autumn to-do list!

Pallett
Strandgata 75, 220 Hafnarfjörður

This one lies a bit further from downtown, but it’s definitely worth the journey. Described on Instagram as a “quirky little coffee house run by two guys who like to bake and make coffee,” Pallett has everything a good cafe should have: homemade baked goods, curated vintage pieces and three types of hot chocolate, depending on how dark you like yours. Perfect for weekends when you just want to curl up with a book, a cup of hot chocolate and forget about all the worries in the world.

Kaffihús Vesturbæjar
Melhagi 20, 107 Reykjavík

One more good coffee house right next to a swimming pool. Well, you just can’t go wrong with a cup of hot chocolate after a few laps in Vesturbæjarlaug. A few years ago, Kaffihús Vesturbæjar won a Grapevine Best Of Award as Best People-Watching Spot, and this remains true today. Treat yourself to their delicious hot chocolate and carrot cake while watching beautiful people pop in after a splash in the nearby pool. Avoid rush hours (breakfast) as it gets very crowded over the weekend.

Systrasamlagið
Óðinsgata 1, 101 Reykjavík

If you’re craving a hot beverage, but would love to try a healthier take on hot chocolate, our advice would be to check out Systrasamlagið. This organic cafe, run by two sisters, wants to bring sugar and additive-free nutrition to the general public. Here you can get a cup of cocoa with perhaps the largest selection of plant-based milks in Reykjavík. And, if you are in need of a serious spiritual boost, why not try a cacao ceremony? Systrasamlagið offers two types of ceremonial cacao from Guatemala. It’s tasty and apparently good for your health!
Vaka Agnarsdóttir

Vaka Agnarsdóttir is a member of Inspector Spacetime, the band that has quickly become a dance music phenomenon in Iceland. Their track ‘Dansa og Bánsa’ is so catchy, it gets even the most reluctant movers on the dancefloor. What does Vaka do when she’s not making music? Today, she guides us through her perfect day in Reykjavík...

**Breakfast pancakes**

My perfect morning in Reykjavík would start with waking up, getting dressed and getting going. I like to begin my day by having some coffee and breakfast at Grái Kötturinn. They serve American style breakfasts. I am a huge fan of their pancakes, and they have certainly mastered their recipe.

**Swimming pool relax**

Going swimming at Sundhóllin sounds like a perfect way to spend the morning after a good breakfast. Relaxing in the hot tub or sauna, or taking a few laps in the swimming pool. I love going to Sundhóllin not only because it’s a short walk from my house but also because of its nostalgic feel. I’ve been going to this pool since I was little, and it is nice to see that it still has its old spirit.

**Hotdogs!**

After spending some quality time at the swimming pool, having a hotdog at Pylsuvagninn is classic. After refuelling with some delicious hotdogs, it would be nice to have a stroll around Reykjavík and maybe end at an exhibition. I recommend going to Kjarvalsstaðir to see Jæja by Súdýón Ketilsson. As well as a great art museum, Klambratún also has a frisbee golf field. If the weather is nice, playing frisbee golf with a couple of friends is always a blast.

**Movies and yummy food**

Next comes a delicious dinner at Tapas barinn. I really enjoy their seafood dishes—the lobster is a must. After dinner, I would love to wind down with a beer and a movie at Bíó Paradís. I recently went to see Triangle of Sadness. I would highly recommend it!

**Cold beer to end the night**

After a whole day of only doing pleasant things and eating good food, there’s no other way to end a perfect day than with a cold beer or a cocktail at Spánski bar.

---

**Perfect Day**

*Reykjavík Map*  *Places We Like*  *Best of Reykjavík*

---

*Vaka Agnarsdóttir*

Vaka Agnarsdóttir is a member of Inspector Spacetime, the band that has quickly become a dance music phenomenon in Iceland. Their track ‘Dansa og Bánsa’ is so catchy, it gets even the most reluctant movers on the dancefloor. What does Vaka do when she’s not making music? Today, she guides us through her perfect day in Reykjavík.

**Breakfast pancakes**

My perfect morning in Reykjavík would start with waking up, getting dressed and getting going. I like to begin my day by having some coffee and breakfast at Grái Kötturinn. They serve American style breakfasts. I am a huge fan of their pancakes, and they have certainly mastered their recipe.

**Swimming pool relax**

Going swimming at Sundhóllin sounds like a perfect way to spend the morning after a good breakfast. Relaxing in the hot tub or sauna, or taking a few laps in the swimming pool. I love going to Sundhóllin not only because it’s a short walk from my house but also because of its nostalgic feel. I’ve been going to this pool since I was little, and it is nice to see that it still has its old spirit.

**Hotdogs!**

After spending some quality time at the swimming pool, having a hotdog at Pylsuvagninn is classic. After refuelling with some delicious hotdogs, it would be nice to have a stroll around Reykjavík and maybe end at an exhibition. I recommend going to Kjarvalsstaðir to see Jæja by Súdýón Ketilsson. As well as a great art museum, Klambratún also has a frisbee golf field. If the weather is nice, playing frisbee golf with a couple of friends is always a blast.

**Movies and yummy food**

Next comes a delicious dinner at Tapas barinn. I really enjoy their seafood dishes—the lobster is a must. After dinner, I would love to wind down with a beer and a movie at Bíó Paradís. I recently went to see Triangle of Sadness. I would highly recommend it!

**Cold beer to end the night**

After a whole day of only doing pleasant things and eating good food, there’s no other way to end a perfect day than with a cold beer or a cocktail at Spánski bar.
Dining

1. Le Kook
Tryggvagata 14
The craft burger bar has never been better. No one toasts potato buns to crisp perfection like they do, or cooks patties to such medium rare goodness. Everything is made from scratch, including the condiments! This is gourmet fast food, with all of the attention to detail and none of the sacrifice on fun and flavour.

2. Flately
Grandagarður 11
Educating a country beyond their diet of pizza-chain pies is no small feat, but that’s exactly what Flately sought to do when they burst onto the scene and for that we applaud them. The Margherita continues to be a panel favourite, who can argue with milky mozzarella and tomatoes?

3. Fine
Rúaðræktígarstíg 33
A panel favourite. Fine is a no nonsense, no frills, Sichuanese Chinese restaurant that steadily opens Reykjavík’s mind’s eye and palate to the regional cuisine. The Mala Chicken is a tingling explosion of flavour, literally thanks to the sichuan peppercorn. For something simple yet exciting, we recommend the Hot and Sour Cauliflower.

4. SÓNO matselijur
Samundargata 11
Sóno overlooks a wild-flower meadow and a spectacular view of the Reykjavík skyline. Languorous and stately, the menu too is shaped to suit slow savouring. The chefs look beyond Iceland for inspiration, while still showcasing seasonal, local produce in all its colourful glory. Foraged herbs, berries, fruits, stems, and flowers all feature on the menu, resulting in a fun affair that serves as a reminder that good vegan food goes beyond better fried cauliflower.

5. Laundromat
Austurstraeti 9
Laundromat offers a cool ’50s diner-meets-maximalist library vibe, decorated with bright furnishings, maps and colour-coded books. It’s great for families in general, but teens in particular like the fun decor, burgers and milkshakes. We especially love their vocal support for breastfeeding, as well as the fact that you can actually do laundry here!

6. Deig Workshop
Tryggvagata 14
Deig’s poor man’s offer is as good as it gets on this alarmingly expensive island. For 1100 ISK, you can choose from a handmade bagel with a filling of your choice, any doughnut or pastry from their selection, and a simple drink (coffee, juice or kokomjölk, basically). Even better, they open at 7 a.m. and the offer is valid every weekday, for as long as the bakery is open.

7. Sushi Social
Pingholtstraeti 5
If you are a group of friends looking for a fun night about town, Sushi Social is the place to be. The menu is ideal for sharing—although, who’d want to share something as delectable as linguine tempura. Order one—or several—of those colourful drinks with names that recall a tropical holiday to make a fun night even more festive.

8. Sumac Grill + Drinks
Laugavegur 28
Sumac is one of the few places that cooks lamb with none of that sous-vide nonsense. An unpretentious cooks lamb with none of that sous-vide nonsense. An unpretentious

9. Borgtúnin 29
Borgtúnin 29
This is one of the more comfortable food halls to be at, with a wide variety of choices to please most anyone. “Almost every place makes small plates, which is excellent for sharing,” observed one panelist. She’s right, one can choose from a spicy lamb curry in a curry, grilled meats at Bisli, to healthy skyr bowls at Scala.

10. Fish Company
Vesturgata 2A
For the definitive seafood experience in Reykjavík, you’d be hard pressed to find a better spot than Fiskiðlagið. Their tasting menus are a great way to try the best Iceland’s finest waters have to offer, from Atlantic cod served Japanese style, to harissa wolf-fish. The sushi platter makes for a unique lunch while their fish of the day is usually a generous pan-fried dish with a luscious sauce.

Drinking

11. Priir Frakkar
Baldursgata 14
This cozy, tucked-away-restaurant has not let anything sway them from tradition—you’ll spot everything from fake tablecloths to cool threads to plokkfiskur on their menu. Opened in 1989, the restaurant has run by chefÓlafur Eyjómsin and his family ever since. A visit to this place underlines that good- fashioned Icelandic cooking can be all kinds of memorable.

12. Röntgen
Hverfisgata 12
This place has it all. “It’s crazy how it’s continued to dominate the bar scene in Reykjavík,” one panelist raved. “But it’s just got so many elements it works for every vibe, which is rare for a bar.” Despite only opening on the downtown scene a few years ago, the place has already cemented itself among the nightlife legends.

13. Jungle Cocktail Bar
Austurstraeti 9
“Jungle’s vibe naturally caters to an early-night crowd. It’s stylish and airy, and of course, they have the most innovative and delicious cocktails in the city,” enthused one panel member. The panel also praised the bar’s diversity-noting how attendees spanned all ages and demographics.

14. Kaffibarinn
Bergstaðastræti 1
“Almost every place makes free tampons, this bar/venue is dedicated regulars. At night, you’ll find the crowd gets rowdy, the convos get sweaty in the most wonderful way. “It’s the obvious choice,” said a panelist. “Who doesn’t have some crazy story from closing time in the smoking area at Kaffibarinn?”

15. Gaukurinn
Tryggvagata 22
“Almost every place makes free tampons, this bar/venue is dedicated regulars. At night, you’ll find the crowd gets rowdy, the convos get sweaty in the most wonderful way. “It’s the obvious choice,” said a panelist. “Who doesn’t have some crazy story from closing time in the smoking area at Kaffibarinn?”

16. Róntgen
Laugavegur 22
Róntgen is a dark room with amber- hued exposed brick, bubble wrap furniture and cozy bohemian pillows. Their happy hour—perhaps the most prolific in the city—starts at 12:00 everyday and lasts until 20:00. Located in the heart of Laugavegur, it’s also a prime people-watching spot.

17. Óðinborg
Óðinborg
It’s decided: Óðinborg is the best outdoor drinking spot in Reykjavík. This new square was previously a parking area, but is now an open, airy, designed-for-those-lazy-summer-days paradise. You have good sun, good seating, Snaps, and Bodega, and serious mainland European vibes.

18. Session Craft Bar
Bankastræti 14
With its minimal appearance, stainless steel bar backed with dozens of taps and fridges full of beers canned and
bottled, Session is a place that, while cozy enough, is made for serious craft heads. Whether you’re hankering for a lip-puckering gose, or an IPA packed with more flowers than a funeral, Session has got your back.

19. Skuggabaldur
Pósthússtræti 9
A weekday bar is all about atmosphere. You want something lively but cozy, bustling without being jam-packed, and above all else, full of good vibes. Skuggabaldur has perfected this delicate combo, with the best of Reykjavík’s jazz scene showing up nightly to entertain patrons and make even a Wednesday memorable. Despite only opening last year, the bar has quickly become a favourite with everyone from downtown artists to suburban folk.

Shopping
20. Yeoman
Laugavegur 7
2021 saw Yeoman being donned by international celebrities while also continuing her reign as the primary fashion tastemaker for Reykjavík women. “To talk about modern Icelandic style is to talk about Yeoman,” one panel member said.

21. Lucky Records
Bauðhústæðigur 10
Lucky Records is the one-stop-shop for anything Icelandic music. They’ve got it all: new titles, CDs, rarities, vinyl, cassettes, second hand 12” and 7” sections, you name it! Notably, the store is very in touch with the local underground. Basically any Icelandic release—no matter how big or small—will be sold there, and trust and believe, their shopkeepers will know them inside and out.

Plantan
Njálsgata 64, 101 Reykjavík
Plantan has been open for a few months now, but we couldn’t just pass by without telling you about it. A new 100% vegan coffee house is always a good idea, and if it also serves food, that’s just a win win for everyone. Plantan offers dishes of the day and soups served with freshly baked focaccia and hummus. We tried the butternut squash soup, but are definitely coming back for the asparagus one as well. Be aware: lots of people with laptops (yes included), and it’s closed on Mondays.

22. Hringejékjan
Pirunnartún 2
Similar to a consignment shop, Hringejékjan is a space where people can rent out spaces to sell their own clothes and accessories. It’s the most eco-friendly way to keep your closet fresh, which, in light of our current world, is something we should all be thinking about. “I don’t know how they get such chic people to sell their clothes there,” laughed one panel member. If you want something groovy this is the place to go.”

23. Apótek Atelier
Laugavegur 16
Apótek Atelier is quite new on the scene, but this small boutique has already made quite a splash. Created by designers Fríða Ragnildís, Hafldóra Sýn Suðlaugadóttir and Sævar Markús Óskarsson, Apótek Atelier blurs the line between studio and store, functioning as both the designers’ workspace, as well as the place where one can purchase their wares.
Brynhildur Karlsdóttir promises fun

Words: Andie Sophia Fontaine  Photo: Art Bicnick

Brynhildur Karlsdóttir has had a lot going on in the Icelandic music scene. She has been a founding member and the lead singer of the punk band Hórmónar since 2016, who quickly became legends of the genre.

A 2019 graduate of the Icelandic Academy of the Arts, that same year she also teamed up with classical composer Friðrik Margrétar-Gúmundsson to form Kvikindi, a band that has defied any permanent definition—and they’ve certainly been making a name for themselves in Iceland. Their debut album ‘Ungfrú Ísland’ dropped in early October, and they will be playing Airwaves this Saturday at KEX Hostel.

But first things first: what is Kvikindi?

Real stuff

“We’ve been juggling many sentences,” Brynhildur says of trying to define the act, “Dance, dance pop, cyber pop. Dance pop phenomenon is one of my favorites. We want to have a world around the band, if that makes sense. It’s kind of like girly glitter. Also honest, talking about real stuff, but humorous.”

A great example of this is the song Ókei, a single that made a real splash in the Icelandic media last year, and not just because of the catchy dance beat or the charmingly disturbing music video, but also because she dedicated the song to a friend of hers who had taken her life in the wake of a horrifying sexual assault case.

Putting that much of one’s heart on the line is very much in keeping with what Brynhildur is all about, and the album itself managed the rare achievement of being a creation she has been mostly happy with.

“I often feel when I release something and I look at it, I’m like, I would have done this or that differently,” she says. “But I was actually really happy with this album. I mean, of course, I hear everything, and there are maybe like two details I would like to change.”

Brynhildur explains however, that the process of making the album “took way longer than we anticipated.”

“We wanted to release it last year,” she says. “But then, when I was listening to it I was like, ‘Okay, this was just the amount of time it needed.’”

Endless possibilities

The differing backgrounds of Brynhildur and Friðrik have been a complimentary combination, and made Ungfrú Island what it is.

“We thought about it as a whole, and how we wanted the songs to feed into each other,” Brynhildur explains. “Like in how some songs end on the same note that the next one starts on. We really thought about it as a whole, but also song by song.”

This included experimentation with vocal effects, trying out what the studio is capable of, and drawing from their different musical origins.

“I am coming from a punk background, and he is coming from a classical background,” she says. “So being in a studio where the possibilities are endless, this was very exciting for the both of us.”

Taking stock

“It’s like me trying to make some things make sense,” Brynhildur says of the lyrical content. “To work through the past year of my life: love and also loss, working on yourself, going to a psychiatrist. All this stuff I was going through and maybe many people go through before you have kids when you’re like 20 something. Figuring out life.”

I remark that this seems like pretty heavy stuff, but she offers an assessment of her lyrics that could easily be applied to life itself:

“It’s also just very humorous, and fun. I think there are some heavy songs. And yeah, we were trying to say something, but it’s still silly and fun.”

Ungfrú Island is out on Spotify, and Kvikindi will be performing at KEX Hostel at 22:00 on November 5th.

Brynhildur writes lyrics “to make some things make sense”
Upcoming Events

Send details of your event to: events@grapevine.is

This month is packed with so many great events that we can’t possibly fit them all! Check them out on events.grapevine.is and don’t hesitate to add yours!

Friday November 4th

Daniel Hjílmjóson
18:00 Lucky Records
Party Screening: Mad Max Fury Road
21:00 Bio Paradis

Saturday November 5th

Let’s Play Art
13:00 Kjarvalstaður
November Plant Swap
14:00 Ásmundarsafn
Látún
17:00 Smáklúvya
Sheaðod.is Iceland launch party
18:00 LDT Hostel
Røunavégi of Galsalón (UK)
21:00 Bío Paradís

Sunday November 6th

Many Languages of Art
13:00 Háfranes
Curator’s Guide: After The Big Storm
14:00 Ásmundarsafn
Screening: Sigur Rós - Neið
15:00 Kjarvalstaður
Cécile Lacharme live
20:00 Fríkirkjan
Míma
20:30 Tjarnabíó

Wednesday November 9th

Glym¬ér¬é¬¬i: Lunchtime concert
12:15 Kjarvalstaður
Music Bingo
17:30 Tjarnabíó
Latin American Film Festival
19:00 Bio Paradis

Thursday November 10th

Pub Quiz with Daði & Gísli
20:00 KEX Hostel
Marina Ösk
20:00 Petersen Svatn
Flói Pogyeinsson
21:00 Húra
Johanna Sjúnnesson & Mikael Lind

Glym¬ér¬é¬¬i: Lunchtime concert
21:00 Míma

Friday November 11th

Kjartan Ólafsson
17:00 Tjarnabíó

Friday November 18th

Jóhann Sólmann
20:00 KEX Hostel

Saturday November 19th

Adventures of the Dog - Family Workshop
12:00 Diski House
Dead Herring (with Grafnár, Hjalti, TVíhöfði)
20:00 Gaukurinn

Saturday November 26th

Latin American Film Festival
19:00 Bio Paradis

Sunday November 27th

Latin American Film Festival
19:00 Bio Paradis

Monday November 28th

Music Bingo
17:30 Tjarnabíó
Party Karaoke
21:00 Sæta Súlvíð

Wednesday November 23rd

Glym¬ér¬é¬¬i: Lunchtime concert
12:15 Kjarvalstaður

Music Bingo
17:30 Tjarnabíó
Latin American Film Festival
19:00 Bio Paradis

Thursday November 24th

Good Thursday
Extended opening hours at various museums
Latin American Film Festival
19:00 Bio Paradis
Pub Quiz with Daði & Gísli Roach
20:00 KEX Hostel
Sýnarama Tree live
21:00 Húra

Friday November 25th

Party Screening: Robocop
21:00 Bio Paradis
Drag On A Dime
21:00 Sæta Súlvíð
Babies live
20:00 KEX Hostel

Saturday November 26th

Latin American Film Festival
19:00 Bio Paradis

Sunday November 27th

Latin American Film Festival
19:00 Bio Paradis

And talking about fireworks, it’s happening right now. Why are you even reading this? Go out, do something with your life, buy a ticket to the festival, enjoy the music, and new people. There are wonderful new bands to discover and a lot of drinks to drink, not to mention the progress being made in both the live and digital fronts. You can find all of the visual platforms, as well as our website, grapevine.is.
Finding English-language theatre performances in Iceland has always presented a challenge, but a new production at Tjarnarbíó seeks to bypass the issue of language altogether—by not including any. In addition to its lack of dialogue, ‘Umbrá’ (‘Hríma’ in Icelandic) is notable for the fact that the characters onstage are portrayed by detailed, hand-made masks. “This is a great medium to tackle something so fragile,” says ‘Umbrá’s creator, Aldís Davíðsdóttir. “Because there are no words you don’t have to be very intellectual about it. You can just sit there with an open heart.”

Another side to MeToo

The fragility Aldís references is in relation to the show’s themes and subject matter, which explore difficult topics like sexual violence, isolation and aging. But Aldís wants to reassure audiences that the outcome is not all doom and gloom. “It’s also very humorous, the main character is a funny little lady,” Aldís says. However, she is clear about the significance of the story, and the reasons behind her desire to bring it to the stage. “When the MeToo movement went global, we mostly got stories from women under 50,” Aldís explains. “We know the violence did not start with us. So what about the older ones? What about the women who fought for our rights the first time round?”

Music to lead the way

Without a script to lean on, other elements of the performance—costumes and lighting to the soundscape—take on greater importance. But musical director Savar Helgi Jóhannsson feels that not focussing too heavily on the responsibility of his role was crucial to his creative process. “I tried not to worry too much about it,” he laughs. “But the music is definitely such an important part of the project. It leads you through (the story) and tells you what to feel.”

However, Savar believes the success of ‘Umbrá’ boils down to the symbiotic relationship between the different parts of the play. “I think it’s really an amalgamation of all things,” he says. “All of the elements of this project came together so beautifully. So the music was also inspired by the actors, the stage design and everything else.”

Despite this, ‘Umbrá’s unique constraints did throw up some challenges for Savar and his colleagues. “The tough thing about this project is that, because there are no words and everything was so abstract, it was hard to make everything clear,” he says. “I think it worked out—I hope! But I also think it’s nice that this way of doing things leaves room for interpretation, because then people can relate to the story on their terms.”

Returning the shame

Aldís also recognises the importance of opening up stories for an audience, and feels that theatre is the perfect way to share that experience. “It’s a very old way of being together,” she says. “What I think is most important about it is when people walk out of the theatre, they have the opportunity to say, ‘Oh wow, that was a difficult story. You know actually, when I was a child…”

“It creates a platform,” she continues. “You can go somewhere. You can start your story after this story.”

This goal is the driving force behind ‘Umbrá’s storyline, and while Aldís recognises that some elements of the play might be challenging for viewers, she hopes to deliver a sense of catharsis by exhuming her characters’ experiences. “I want people to walk away with a feeling of release,” she explains. “We have a saying in Iceland, ‘to return the shame’. We hand back the shame of an experience to the person who gave it to us.”
Art Picks

Zanola Muholi
Until February 12th - National Gallery of Iceland

Zanola Muholi is an internationally recognised visual activist and photographer from South Africa. Muholi has been capturing the daily rights of South Africa’s LGBTI+ photographic community for over a decade. This exhibition shows a hundred powerful photographs that, along with video works, provide insight into the life and struggle of these marginalised communities. Themes explored are identity politics, hate, racism, but also love, pride, resistance and allies—leading to the negative stigma of the photographic image. In the series ‘Tommyana’ Nyongoma-Makwinja’s self portraits address race, representation, and history through referencing historical South African events. The works represent Zanola Muholi’s mission: “to re-write a black queer and trans visual history of South Africa for you to see your own history in our testimonies. You can see how she experiments with fabrics, colours, textures, and fabrics, to the height of her works, exploring the different aesthetics the textiles offer.”

On Display: Queer Above Others

Until November 26th - Living Art Museum

Curated by historian Ynda Eldborg and artist Viktoria Buuladottir, this exhibition highlights the growth of queer art and its presence within the museums current collection. It also shows new works created within the light of LGBTQI+ artists who identify as part of the LGBTI+ community.

On Display: Quer Above Others

Bergur Anderson - Collected Ear-worms

Artist and composer Bergur Anderson explores the results the imaginary qualities of sound can find in interdisciplanry and spatial works, some of which are time-based, fabricating sound into material. His works have previously been shown abroad as well as in Iceland.

Bergur Anderson - Collected Earworms

Until November 13th

International

On Display: Quer Above Others

Until November 13th

Hónunnarsafni sem heimili at home in the design museum opens 2021.

The Platform

Dieter Roth: Grafisk Honnun
 diabetic
Graphic Design Until 30.12.

Lina Lohmann - Paing

Until November 27th - Æmundsarsalur

Using handmade mechanical tools and ink, Lina creates large, layered dot drawings. Inspired by pointillism and fascinated by nature, optical perception, and contemporary 2D obsolece printing techniques, Lohnmann produces intuitive landscapes and dissolved imagery, sometimes disguised, of the non-existing and newly invented.

Hónunnarsafni sem heimili at home in the design museum opens 2021.

The Platform

Dieter Roth: Grafisk Honnun
 diabetic
Graphic Design Until 30.12.

Lina Lohmann - Paing

Until November 27th - Æmundsarsalur

Using handmade mechanical tools and ink, Lina creates large, layered dot drawings. Inspired by pointillism and fascinated by nature, optical perception, and contemporary 2D obsolece printing techniques, Lohnmann produces intuitive landscapes and dissolved imagery, sometimes disguised, of the non-existing and newly invented.

November 4th—December 1st

Art Exhibitions

Gallery openings, happenings, showings and pop-up exhibitions all around the capital region.

Send details of yours to: events@grapevine.is

Ongoing

REYKJAVIK ART MUSEUM - HAVNARHOFN

Down North: North Atlantic Triennial

This travelling exhibition is made in collaboration with the Portland Museum of Art (USA), Bilundmuseet (Sweden), and the Reykjavík Art Museum. Around 30 artists from all over the world show new works that are inspired by the changes society has been going through; covering topics such as climate change and the ecosystem in the arctic.

Run until February 14th

Galleri Listalíst

Hallgrim Ragnarsson - Here, Now, & Maybe Later

Hallgrim Ragnarsson is mostly known for his text-based works that are inspired by the approach of the philosopher and linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. He creates text based situations on canvas, wood, and paper that explore how different uses of space and language can alter experiences, moods, emotions, art, and how art in turn can alter language.

Run until November 26th

LA ART MUSEUM (HVERAGERÐI)

Gary Hill - Sums & Differences

Works of Gary Hill, Stanza and Woody Vasulka are brought together for this exhibition. It aims to present the commonalities and divergence between their earliest works, and the way in which they differently interpret the imaterial and the physical. While highlighting their mutual exploration between sound and image, this collaborative exhibition also contains additional new pieces that reflects each of their artistic development, with work spanning several decades.

Run until December 18th

GLÆRUSÓG

Haraldur Jónsson - Bráð

The work of Haraldur Jónsson, City Photographer spanning several decades.

Run until November 13th

Musée de Design & Applied Art

Master Milliners in residency

During their residency at the museum, Anna Sulla and Harper—both master milliners—are working with materials tied to the hatmaking trade, fabrics, leather, felt, cording... Combining steam and straw. Combining steam and wool with locally sourced materials, natural fur, fibres, and leather... they explore with traditional methods in the creation and design of hats and outerwear.

Run until November 30th

Reykjanésbær Art Museum

Orbit/Elipsen

Gabriela Fridriksdóttir and Björn Þorsteinsson approach the world of colouring books from a philosophical and creative perspective, musing on whether having to draw within the lines influences a child’s creativity negatively. The artists created their own colouring book that doubles as the exhibition catalogue and is available as a numbered art work. Breaking free from having to draw within the lines, they present their own interpretation of colour boundaries by crossing them.

Run until November 13th

In Relation To The Sun

Brándi is a new exhibition space, the unique concept of which is to focus on year-long shows by single artists. The exhibitions will evolve while on view, allowing their creators to reflect how the passage of time affects their work and encourage repeat views to observe these changes. This inaugural exhibition by Áloja Kéadvé encompasses installation, sculpture and performative aspects, and explores the three artists’ own work on paper. It’s title—initially “In Relation To The Sun”—will change as the nature of the pieces on display evolves.

Run until December 22nd

Café Pysja

In The Name of Hallstein

Modern master-sculptor Hallstein Sigurđsson is known for his almost seven decades. His work has found its way into many public spaces and museums in Iceland. This exhibition and multimedia projects aims to give viewers an overview of his career by taking works from across decades and presenting them in different dimensions.

Run until November 27th

National Library

Sir Joseph Banks - Island Expedition

Joseph Banks joined Captain James Cook on his first voyage around the world barely a year after they returned, he led the first British scientific expedition to Iceland in 1772, exactly 250 years ago. The National Library opens up an exhibition to celebrate the anniversary of his voyage.

Run until November 20th

KLÍNU ÓS BANS

Elsíbet Bárta Sveinsdóttir - Myth-bust

Elsíbet Bárta Sveinsdóttir explores the complex world of visual culture and filmmaking and places it in a historical and contemporary context. She challenges ideas of femininity and human nature, she utilises her own body as the medium of expression as method and material.

Run until November 13th

Museum of Design & Applied Art

Gardatorg 1

210 Garðabæ

Honnunarsafni sem heimili at home in the design museum opens 2021.

The Platform

Dieter Roth: Grafisk Honnun
 diabetic
Graphic Design Until 30.12.

Residency


Open Tue–Sun 12–17
WWW.HONNUNARSAFNIS.IS
**A great selection of design and local craft**

**Post cards — Signý Pórhrallsdóttir**

**Ceramic — Álta Bara Elíbasevit**

**Tarot cards — Dóraunn Arnadóttir**

**Pillow case — Signý Pórhrallsdóttir**

---

**The Reykjavík Grapevine**

WWW.RAMMAGERÐIN.IS RAMMAGERÐIN, ÍSLAND 1940

**Issue 11— 2022**

---

**Film**

In the deep end

**Pool Stories**

Director Jón Karl Helgason explores Icelandic bathing culture in a new documentary

**Words: Iryna Zubenko Photo: Spessi**

"The Finns have their saunas, the British have their pubs, the French have their cafes. We Icelanders have our swimming pools," reads the description of 'Sundlaugasögur' ('Swimming Pool Stories'). Above is a blue poster, an aerial shot of a person taking a dip. Everybody knows Icelanders love their swimming pools. But is there more to this story?

**The big pool adventure**

Swimming pools have a defining social significance for Icelanders. In an attempt to research the topic deeper, director Jón Karl Helgason took an adventure around the country, visiting swimming pools from Reykjavík to Patreksfjörður. "I think I went four or five times around the country," Jón says. The work on the documentary began in the winter of 2013-2014.

"First, I would go to the swimming pool as a normal guest," he says. "It's so easy to get acquainted with new people in the swimming pool. You just tell them stories, and they tell you a story." Once the initial trust was built, Jón started to bring a small camera to the pool. Often-times, he would have to come back a few times to get the shot he needed. Finding the people and stories for the film was the most challenging part, he shares. 

**Meeting place for old and young**

"When I was six years old, I went to the swimming pool every day. It was like my playground," says Jón. He recalls his go-to swimming pool, Vesturbæjarlaug, having just one hot pot. Over time, more hot pots were added, and more activities started to be introduced at the facilities. "People found out that they could do a rehearsal in a swimming pool, they could do gymnastics, yoga, etc.," says Jón. "Since I started the film, there have been more and more possibilities. That has been the change since I was young." Regardless of age, gender, or where they live, Icelanders in the movie are drawn to their swimming pool, they could do a rehearsal in a swimming pool of choice. They could be commuting from afar for their kid to go to swimming classes for infants or going to a nearby pool just to catch up with old friends. For some, it is just an old but healthy habit—for others, one of the only available means of socialisation.

"The people and their stories, especially the bonds they're made at the swimming pools, inspired the movie. 'In Ingeyri, there was a group of about 20-30 people that meet every day—they swim, they read stories, they look after each other,' shares Jón. "If somebody is not at the swimming pool, they immediately phone them and ask if they are ok.'

**A man of many hats**

After having been to almost every pool in the country, I wonder whether Jón has a favourite one. "Krossnes is beautiful. When you're in there, you can see the horizon, the ocean and feel like you're alone in the world," he answers.

Surprisingly, while the documentary doesn't feature stunning music by Ragnar Zolberg and beautiful aerial shots by Egill Aðalsteinsson and additional drone operators, Jón made most of the movie himself. "I have been in this business since 1980 as a makeup artist, stuntman, camera assistant, cameraman, editor, director and producer. I'm still going strong," Jón laughs. "By filming, I found out that it's best to do it alone because these are such personal stories that people are telling."

"You can't visit all the swimming pools as an Icelandic person. But a lot of people go to swimming pools," shares Jón. "I thought maybe they would like to see what's happening in other pools around the country."

"Sundlaugasögur" is currently screening in Icelandic cinemas, allowing viewers to dip into life beyond their regular pool. For Jón, work continues—there are too many stories yet untold. "I am doing five other documentaries," he says.
Icelandair - founder and main sponsor of Iceland Airwaves

Move to the music
Icelandair - founder and main sponsor of Iceland Airwaves

Scan the QR code to make the poster move.
The Reykjavík Grapevine
Issue 11—2022

‘Ekki Treysta Fiskunum’

By Ólafur Kram

Words: Iryna Zubenko Photo: Hugi Ólafsson

Info
Ólafur Kram consider their latest album release ‘Ekki treysta fiskunum’ to be a culmination of everything that followed their win at the 2021 Músíktilraunir (“Icelandic Music Experiments”). After many hours of work recording at Sundlaugin studio, the result is a fresh, yet weird sound. We asked Ólafur Kram to guide us through the album, whose name implores us to ‘never trust the fish.’ Fun fact: try reading the band’s name backwards!

Hótun
This song was written for mans-plainers. It’s a short song with upbeat rhythms and a fun melody, but the lyrics are meant to make you feel uncomfortable. Starting the album with the line: “What bug bit you in the head?” is a great way to emphasise our surreal, tongue-in-cheek writing style. The song is inspired by bossanova, perhaps a little akin to elevator music—but with an Ólafur Kram twist.

Aumingja Þuríður
A song about partying too much, being too hungover, and then doing it all again the next weekend. We allow ourselves to make fun of poor Þuríður, because we have all been her at some point.

Blúndustelpa
This is a weird but good one. The lyrics are about clothes—how clothes act as a sort of armour for us and how we use fashion to divert attention from our weaknesses to our strengths. Gothic, but in 5/4—how could you not love this song?

Gullinsnið
Quintessential Ólafur Kram. We let ourselves go wild, and it ended in a baroque-rap-rock song about a guy who has daddy issues and very low self-esteem but pretends to be really cool and confident. Make sure to listen until the end—you’re in for a treat.

Kóngur á þurru landi
A surreal song about the city sinking into the sea, the fish taking over, and dreaming. The title of the album (‘Don’t trust the fish’) comes from this song.

Silkþráðir
Silkþráðir is one of our cooler songs. The ambiguity of the lyrics, which portray communication issues and mind-reading troubles, contrasts the constant rhythm of the song, constant but building.

Listasaga
Am I in love, or just horny? The eternal question.

Höllin
An instrumental ode to the one and only höll—Sundhöll Reykjavíkur.

Drottingin
This song is an homage to all the queens in our lives, to the women artists and musicians that have influenced us through the years, Barbra Streisand especially.

Prinsessaaa
A song dedicated to Íðunn Gígja’s little dog, Rjómi. And also to our first drummer, Alda—whose name is embedded in the lyrics for the second part of the song. We wanted to do a song that was almost like two songs together—and we think we did very well on that.

Eftirsöngur
A song about finding the people we miss in all the little things, the flowers, the sun, everything. You are everywhere, though you are nowhere, and I’m missing you.

‘Ekki treysta fiskunum’ was released on October 21st and is available on Spotify and other streaming platforms.

NEXT STOP: COOL TOWN
Cheap Food

Here are some deals that’ll keep your wallet feeling happy and full.

1,000 ISK And Under

Hard Rock Cafe
Every day
15:00 - 18:00
Butcher, wings & onion rings - 990 ISK

Dominos
All day Tuesday
Medium sized pizza with three toppings
1,500 ISK And Under

Bastiard Brew
Every day from 16:00 to 19:00.
Bor 900 ISK.
Wine 750 ISK.

800 Paradise
Every day from 17:00 to 19:00.
Bor 950 ISK.
Wine 850 ISK.

Brewdog
Wed-Sun
14:00 to 17:00.
Bor 950 ISK.
Wine 990 ISK.

Brut Bar
Every day from 16:00 to 19:00.
Bor 700 ISK.
Wine 600 ISK.

Cocochi’s Nest
Tue-Sat from 15:00 to 18:00.
Bor 1000 ISK.
Wine 1000 ISK.

Dilron
Every day from 14:00 to 19:00.
Bor 600 ISK.
Wine 950 ISK.

Fjallkonan
Every day from 15:00 to 17:00.
Bor 780 ISK.
Wine 990 ISK.

Forêt Tabara
Every day from 16:00 to 19:00.
Bor 800 ISK.
Wine 990 ISK.

Gaukurinn
Every day from 16:00 to 20:00.
Bor 800 ISK.
Wine 800 ISK.

Ibón
Every day from 16:00 to 19:00.
Bor 850 ISK.
Wine 850 ISK.

Jörgensen Kitchen & Bar
Weekdays
16:00 onwards.
Weekends
12:00 to 16:00.
Bor 750 ISK.
Wine 990 ISK.

Jungle Cocktail Bar
Every day from 16:00 to 18:00.
Bor 900 ISK.
Wine 1000 ISK.

Kaffi Lækur
Every day from 15:00 to 18:00.
Bor 1000 ISK.
Wine 1100 ISK.

Kaffi Léka
Every day from 15:00 to 18:00.
Bor 900 ISK.
Wine 900 ISK.

Loft
Every day from 16:00 to 20:00.
Bor 700 ISK.
Wine 950 ISK.

Lóla Florens
Every day from 15:00 to 18:00.
Bor 600 ISK.
Wine 850 ISK.

Manilla
Every day from 15:00 to 18:00.
Bor 1000 ISK.
Wine 1100 ISK.

Pállinn
Every day from 16:00 to 18:00.
Bor 950 ISK.
Wine 890 ISK.

Rayn
Every day from 16:00 to 18:00.
Bor 700 ISK.
Wine 800 ISK.

Sólon
Every day from 15:00 to 18:00.
Bor 1000 ISK.
Wine 1000 ISK.

Súður Ís
Every day from 15:00 to 18:00.
Bor 990 ISK.

Tapas Barinn
Every day
17:00 - 18:00
Selected tapas half price

Gló
All day every day
Boad of the month - 1,290 ISK

Sandwiches
1,095 ISK

Student
1,190 ISK

Vegan option

11:30 - 15:00
Fisherman’s fish soup - 1,990 ISK

5,000 ISK

And Under

Apostok
Every day
11:30 - 16:00
Two-course lunch - 3,390 ISK
Three course lunch - 4,390 ISK

Boj
Weekends
12:00 - 16:00
Bottomless brunch - 4,800 ISK

Recipes and descriptions of traditional Icelandic Christmas
dishes and baked goodies. Enjoy!
The Writer, The Prophet
Sigríður Hagalín has gone from news to nightmarish dystopias

Words: Valur Grettisson Photos: Art Bicnick

If you live in Iceland, the odds are that you know exactly who Sigríður Hagalín Björnsdóttir is. As a well-known news reporter at RÚV, our national broadcaster, she often sits down with politicians or prominent figures in society as part of the show Stífrun and drills them for answers with her soft voice and calm personality.

But Sigríður has surprised most with her impressive writing career. She has written four books in eight years, all of which have been received well by critics and readers. Her voice in storytelling is, in some ways, starkly different from the person that we see in the news. Her first book was a horrific dystopia that asked a poignant question about Icelanders, and the result was darker than we cared for.

Non-fiction and journalism always fascinated Sigríður. This is not particularly surprising, given that her father, Björn Vignir Sigurpálsson, was a well-known journalist at the conservative newspaper, Morgunblaðið.

Rejected by her father

"My dad gave me my first typewriter when I was 3 years old. When I got older, I wanted to work at Morgunblaðið, writing big features, so I headed to University to study history, as well as practical media classes," she explains. Sigríður did well in school and the moment came to gain some real-world experience.

"My dad was actually overseeing hiring at Morgunblaðið, so it felt obvious to apply there. But my father refused to accept my application," Sigríður says: "If I was any good at this, I could work wherever I wanted, so I got a job at RÚV." Give or take a few short breaks, Sigríður has remained at RÚV ever since, for around 20 years. However, these days, writing is taking up more and more of her time.

The thought exercise

Sigríður's first book, 'Eyland,' was published in 2016. The direct translation would be 'Island,' but the word in Icelandic has deeper connotations of isolation and loneliness. The book is a merciless dystopia that Sigríður wrote in one intense three-month burst. The story imagines what would happen if the wider world were to disappear, and Icelanders would have to stand alone without any books when we have the internet.

"I don't feel like I have a lot to lose here."
The book can easily be categorised as a disaster book where volcanoes in the Reykjanes peninsula destroy whole neighbourhoods—a real-life danger that Icelanders have to live with. But the book also draws a comparison between the volatility of the earth and the behaviour and emotions of humans, a metaphor that Sigurður says was no easy task to deliver. “The hardest thing was to balance it right so it wouldn’t be a cliché,” she admits. “But there are interesting lines between the fires and the emotional life of people, of women, the power of the female body, of birth. It’s just so big.”

Not only that, only four months after the publication of the book, the eruption in Fagradalsfjall started, a volcanic station that hadn’t erupted for thousands of years. This obviously became quite the scene on social media as well as in traditional media. Did we have a prophet on our hands? Sigurður belittles such ideas. “Everyone saw what was coming,” she explains, but she had interviewed and conferred with the best geologist in Iceland before writing the book.

A feminist disaster book

There is no shortage of male writers who have written about volcanoes in Iceland, and even more corner the market when it comes to disaster fiction. Sigurður’s voice, and that of her female main character, provide a strength that partially explains why the narrative is so successful. On top of that, Anna, the main protagonist, is more of an anti-hero. In some ways, her super focus on geology is reminiscent of another interesting female character, that of Saga Norén from the Danish TV show, ‘The Bridge.’ But there’s another side to Anna, which is her love life—she’s embroiled in an affair. “I had been reading a lot of books about seduced upper-class women, like Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary and I liked this theme about the destructiveness of love,” Sigurður says. “It can be a disaster of its own.”

Courage or nonsensical?

It’s safe to say that Sigurður is a courageous author. Rather than follow the well-trodden path of realism in Icelandic literature, she is striking new ground with her unique take on dystopian and borderline sci-fi genres. Her newest book, which will be published in November, goes in a very different direction though. The story is about a middle-aged history professor whose reputation is destroyed in connection with a #MeToo scandal. Sigurður also uses the opportunity to tell a story about Ólöf ‘The Rich’ Lofts-dóttir, one of the most powerful women in Icelandic mediaval history, making this a historical fiction book.

When asked about this, if she feels brave in her writing, Sigurður simply answers: “Well, I don’t feel like I have a lot to lose here.” She explains herself by adding that she doesn’t feel like she has any control over what she chooses to write about; her subjects choose her and take over her interest and imagination. “Perhaps this is not courage, but rather irrational behaviour,” she laughs, adding: “My novels come from ideas that grip me, but I feel that reality, or journalism, can only take them so far. Sometimes the only way to understand the world is the route of fiction.”

Sigurður Hagálín’s book ‘The Fires’ can be purchased in our online store: shop.grapevine.is

As everyone knows...

But we are ostensibly here to talk about Sigurður’s third book, and her first to be published in English, ‘The Fires,’ translated by Larissa Kyzer. Sigurður explains that the inspiration for the whole novel came from a simple quote.

“I saw this quote from a geologist, where she said. ‘As everyone knows, the magnetic north pole is a very sensitive place.’ She somehow assumed that everyone knew as much as she did, and she viewed the earth like an emotional being. That’s how the main protagonist, Anna, was formed.”
Booming Brewery Culture Finds A Home In The South

Ölverk’s beer festival is a smash hit

Words: Valur Grettisson  Photos: Dagný Dögg Steinþórsdóttir

If the small town of Hveragerði was a stock, you should buy two. A home to stunning nature, geothermal energy and a beautiful hot river that draws tourists and Icelanders alike, the addition of a new hotel/food court The Greenhouse has seen the town go from strength to strength. To top it all off, it now boasts one of Iceland’s best beer festivals. And because we are self-sacrificing kinds of people, we decided to visit the festival, try out the Nordic beer and enjoy the music. Oh, the burden!

Drinking Viking style

Ölverk Beer Festival is held at the beginning of October, in traditional Oktoberfest fashion, and plays host to over 40 Icelandic, Greenlandic and Faroese beer producers. The event is now three years old, so basically way under the legal drinking age—unless you’re Egill Skallagrímsson, who was allegedly an alcoholic at three. We’re clearly going Viking-style here.

The festival takes place in one of Hveragerði’s many greenhouses. The town has been utilising the abundant geothermal energy in the area to heat greenhouses for decades, allowing them to produce tomatoes, cucumbers and other exotic delicacies despite the decidedly treacherous climate. The glass-houses are the perfect setting for a beer festival, and a smart move from the brains behind Ölverk, Laufey Sif Lárusdóttir.

On arrival at the festival we were given small glasses and told that we could taste the beers between four and eight in the evening. Meaning we had 40 brands of beers and liquors to taste, and only four hours to do it. We’ll let you do the maths there. We were officially competing against the clock, as well as our livers.

The producers were set up on stalls all around the periphery of the large greenhouse, with tables in the middle populated by men with hipster beards, who stroked their faces seriously while muttering intimidating things about yeast strains and attenuation. Of course, had made the mistake of shaving before I arrived, standing out like an idiot who still drinks Becks like it’s the 90s. Avoiding eye contact with the beer wankers at all costs, I found my way over to the booth of Faroese beer brand Föroya Bjór. Knowing that the warm people of Klaksvík wouldn’t judge my bald face too hard made the first sip even sweeter.

A silver lining for horse-people

I next ended up at the table of Icelandic liqueur, Jökla; a creamy and lovely drink that was available by the bottle, as well as in small flasks. Out of curiosity, I asked the producer why the drink was sold in this format, and, of course, it’s all to do with the rules around selling...
Icelandic alcohol. For those who don’t know, the government’s regulations for how alcohol can and can’t be sold in this country are at best, confusing, and at worst, bananas. Craft beer makers have long argued that they unfairly impact small producers and inhibit this industry. However, Jólka’s producer did point out a silver lining to these fun-size flasks: “They’re perfect for the horse-people,” he pointed out. And he’s not wrong. Anyone who goes horse riding in Iceland knows that a little warmth and kindness from a flask does not go amiss.

**Fruity with a dash of bitterness**

The selection at the greenhouse was overwhelming, but luckily I ran into a childhood friend who had tried it all. She was sipping a bit and talking incredibly loudly, but eventually she pointed me towards the best beer she had ever tasted. The table belonged to Brothers Brewery, the famed beer makers from Vestmannaeyjar. And my friend was right: the beer was a delightful IPA and possibly one of the best I tasted that day.

Of course, late-night interviews are the best way to conduct journalism, when everyone is a bit tipsy. And this is when I met a wonderful couple dressed up like they just arrived from Munich. Octoberfest—which of course turned out to be exactly the case. Gudfrú Steinía and Svanþór Eyþórsion were taking their roles quite seriously.

“So you like to cosplay?” I asked. Luckily I got a burst of warm laughter and after a short conversation I found out that they live in my own old hometown, Hafnarfjörður. Which of course, we then had to celebrate.

A beer later I asked more about their costumes. I mean, fitting theme, but not a very Icelandic one. They explained that they are working in connection with a small brewery in the Reykjanes peninsula, Lilja Brugghúsið. I had tasted the beer earlier in the day, and it was delicious. Svanþór told me that they were working in metallurgy during the day and brewing beer at night. This moonlighting story is a common refrain when it comes to smaller breweries in Iceland, but the couple underlined the fact that craft beer is not a business plan, but a passion.

The festival crowd was interesting as well for a middle-aged alcoholic like myself who has lived half his life in the centre of Reykjavik. The guests I met were mostly from the south, with the rest apparently all from Hafnarfjörður. Seems that the people of Hafnarfjörður have discovered this brilliant festival and made it their home from home.

**Gem for beer enthusiasts**

All-in-all, the festival is just one more triumph for the small town of Hveragerði. For two days, the house was packed with beer loving Icelanders. It was notable, however, that there were few, if any tourists, at the festival. This came as a surprise, because this festival uniquely displays the best of craft beer in Iceland, as well as giving one a taste of the wonderful Faroe Islands and Greenland. In short, this is a gem for beer enthusiasts as well as those who want to experience the true culture of South Iceland. What better way to celebrate the booming brewery culture that is developing in the most northerly point of Europe than get all of the makers together under one roof and party like there’s no hangover tomorrow? For us at Reykjavík Grapevine, this is officially in our calendar every year as a must-do experience in Iceland.
Autumn is not so much a season in Iceland, but a feeling. Notably, the Old Norse calendar only had two seasons: summer and winter. That being said, when the tourist numbers dip and the days are still long but begin with a nip in the air, there is a brief period of time that feels like a shoulder season. Call it autumn if you like, but whatever you name it, it’s the perfect time to go exploring.

With Route 1 relatively quiet, but little ice or snowfall likely until later in the year, these months are the best opportunity to take the long drive from Reykjavík to East Iceland—a region that boasts some of the best and most diverse sights in the country, but which definitely takes an irritatingly long time to get to from the capital. We’re talking 9-12 solid hours in the car here. Fully prepared with playlists, snacks and travel pillows, we hit the road and headed east.

Welcome to wilderness

One benefit to the lengthy journey to the eastern part of the country is that regardless of whether you take the southern or northern route, you invariably spend the day passing by gorgeous landmarks and vistas. We opted for the southern road on this occasion, and after zipping past famous waterfalls, black beaches and sea stacks, the towering, otherworldly cliffs of the east began to rise up beside us.

After a full day in the car, we were delighted to pull up to The Wilderness Center, our home for the night. And what a treat it was to be there. All of the Center’s buildings—including the guest rooms—have been lovingly decked out in carefully curated and restored decor and ephemera. While that might sound kitsch, the result is genuinely homey and comforting. Host and owner Dómi Karlsson goes to lengths of travelling round abandoned farmsteads in the region to collect old doors, wood, and whatever else would otherwise be left to rack and ruin; it all finds a new home at the Center.

Back in the car...again

The next morning we woke early to enjoy a hearty breakfast, although sadly we were unable to make use of the Wilderness Center’s delightful hotpot, as it was once again time to get back on the road. Our East Iceland bucket list was long—as was the distance between the items. There was no time to waste.

Luckily, our first point of interest was not too far away. Kárahnjúkar Dam is an impressive 193 metres tall and 730 metres wide. Its construction changed the Jökla river and surrounding area significantly, and was not without controversy. Undeniably, however, it’s a pretty impressive piece of engineering, and worth the visit.

Bienvenue to Fáskrúðsfjörður!

It took another two hours of driving to get from Kárahnjúkar to our evening’s accommodation in Fáskrúðsfjörður—it’s important to be aware of just how vast this region is, and how far away different locations are from one another. However, Fáskrúðsfjörður was more than worth the journey. The charming little town has a remarkable and storied history. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the town was a hub for the thousands of French sailors who spent the summers fishing in the Eastfjords. By 1903 the fishermen even had their own hospital in the town, a building which has now been restored and converted into a beautiful hotel overlooking the fjord, with a picture-perfect wooden jetty.

Despite the cool of the late-autumn evening, the setting was too inviting to ignore, and we dared ourselves to take a dip in the freezing waters. Once the initial shock was over, the thrill of swimming in the cold sea was compounded by the low evening sun lighting up the hills above us. Like most of East Iceland, it was astonishingly beautiful.

A meal worth driving for

Later, warmed up and dried off, we took yet another drive to Seyðisfjörður in search of a decent meal. We ended up in the restaurant of Hotel Aldan, and were pleasantly surprised by the thoughtfulness and sophistication of the menu. The majority of dishes are small plates for sharing, and so, to be fair in our judgement, we ordered them all—and incredibly, all of them lived up to expectations. Stand out plates included the reindeer tartar and fried baby potatoes, but the unique house cocktails featuring local
Icelandic ingredients were also fantastic. Manager Dašky Merčák talked us through the menu with ease, demonstrating real expertise, while I nodded enthusiastically, shovelling potatoes into my mouth at breakneck speed. Fortunately, we had caught the restaurant just in time; it closes over the winter months. Full and happy, we drove through the Eastfjords.
“We always feel like we need to do an extra good job in Iceland.”

Sigur Rós’ multi-instrumentalist Kjartan Sveins-son cannot hide his excitement about ending the world tour in Reykjavík. - P11

“We’ve been juggling many sentences.”

Brynhildur Karlsdóttir of Kvikindi on the band’s dance / dance pop / cyber pop album. - P18

“I explained the book as an agricultural thriller, but my publisher asked me not to say that out loud ever again.”

Writer Sigríður Hagalín Björnsdóttir talks journalism, non-fiction and her first book in English. - P26

One of 25 wonders of the world

Blue Lagoon geothermal seawater is unlike any other water on the planet. Born deep underground, this natural marvel is rich in silica, algae, and minerals—the elements that give the water its extraordinary powers. Discover the water. Experience the wonder.

Blue Lagoon iceland
bluelagoon.com