FIREBALL

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People ask me why I always come back to places where it's hot and sunny most of the year. Let me tell you something: when I think of Sweden, where I was born and grew up, what stands out the most in my memory is darkness, biting cold, and piles of snow for nine or ten months of the year, contrasted with just a few warm, sunny weeks in the summer, mainly June and July. People who live in Sweden soak up those few weeks when it's daylight twenty-four hours a day, because you know that just when you're getting used to it, the freezing dark is going to come back and hammer you down. It does something to the Swedish temperament, I think. You feel so constricted for so much of the year, then you get let out of

prison for a couple of months. You can go boating or hiking or just sit in the sun by the side of a lake and stare at the water. Then it's right back to jail.

If I can sit by a pool with palm trees waving in the breeze overhead and the sun beating down on me, it's paradise. Whenever I can enjoy places like that, whether to record a new album or just take a vacation from touring, it reminds me how lucky I am. That frozen, constricted landscape—and mindscape—of Sweden in the 1970s was a cage I had to escape from. It only made me more determined to have the impossible career and someday sit in my car with the top down, listening to the sound of the surf on the beach in some tropical climate.

I grew up in an environment where adults and older siblings surrounded me. I was born on June 30, 1963, the youngest in a household that included my brother, Bjorn, who was two years older than I was, and my sister, Anne-Louise (Lolo), who was six years older. That's a big difference when you're ten and she's sixteen. Even though I was just a kid, a lot of her tastes and interests made a strong impression on me. I was hanging out with her friends and listening to their talk. It was a very political environment, and much of what they debated and argued over I listened in on. My early interest in politics was kind of secondhand, but these days I have very strong opinions.

The environment of Sweden in the 1960s and 1970s had an extremely socialistic, group-minded slant on what the citizens were allowed to be. You didn't stick your head up above the masses, you didn't aspire to do anything that would make you stand out from the crowd, and you *especially* didn't draw attention to yourself in any extravagant way.

There was a lot of talk in those days that the basic amenities of life should be provided free to all by the government. But here's the catch. In life, there is no such thing as free. When you hear "free health care," or free whatever, it isn't. Somebody has to pay for whatever it is. Money doesn't materialize out of thin air. It's simple: you take money from someone and give it to someone else—this for that. It's called the redistribution of wealth, and in any welfare system there's no way around it. This social process was invented and implemented by the Swedish government when I was growing up in the 1970s. It's the country's social welfare system. The basic mechanism of socialism is simple to understand. Margaret Thatcher put it best: "The problem with socialism is that sooner or later you will run out of someone else's money!" You don't get rewarded if you work hard, but you do get rewarded if you do nothing. Society is leveled so everyone becomes "equal." Unfortunately this "equality" brings everybody down, and you can't elevate yourself by pulling someone else down.

The whole country was like that. The input you got from the media—TV and radio, newspapers, films, magazines, the stuff that you saw and heard every day—drilled this way of thinking into you. To be a musician, a star athlete, an actor, or an artist of any stature—such people were looked down on because they were considered not to be model citizens. We had the occasional Nobel Prize–winner whom the country would officially be proud of, but forget it if you aspired to do something that had even a hint of celebrity to it. Some of the best hockey players now are Swedish, but back then they weren't even professionals. That's why they went to the United States. You'd weld a fucking boat, then play hockey at night.

Anybody who aspired to be a musician had to play it down. You could maybe have a little apartment with a tiny working space where you could play your instrument and so forth, but nothing serious. It was just hobby stuff. I guess that's why I'm such an

advocate of being my own person and doing my own thing. I was totally the opposite of the reserved, self-effacing, self-deprecating Swede. By nature, I seemed much more like an outgoing, Mediterranean type of guy—I loved going out on a limb that way, being larger than life and just putting myself out there.

None of the local bands at that time were professional. When I was a teenager, there were maybe a few kicking around, but all the band members had day jobs, and they all played it very, very safe in terms of the music they learned and performed. They were all just doing UFO and Thin Lizzy songs and stuff like that. No one was doing anything extreme or experimental. I don't know if I can express this strongly enough: the Swedish mentality all through the 1970s stifled everybody. If you wanted to stand out above the crowd, it was just a given that you can't do *this*, or God forbid you want to do *that*. It scared away a lot of raw talent all through those years, and now that I think about it, you could even compare it to a really strict religious environment where so many things are taboo. Of course, the society there wasn't religious, but it's the same mindset that tells you "Don't even think about it" if you want to do something outside the accepted behavior of the day. Don't even try.

Yes, it's true that Sweden didn't have the problem of homelessness that you see in the United States. In general, everything was very clean, very proper, and very safe. Sweden was an orderly place, well taken care of. But again, who do you think was paying for all that? College (but not the higher-level university) and technical school training after high school were also free, so it was pretty much a given that to get a decent job you had to have a diploma of some kind.

If you didn't, then you would go on the government dole. You were never penniless. You might get thrown out of your apartment for some reason, but there was always a shelter or a home you could go to, so you were never out on the street for long. But the

unintended consequence of the social welfare system was that it basically killed your ambition to try for anything out of the ordinary or to strive to reach higher goals and make something of yourself, because if you did nothing, you'd get taken care of anyway, and if you made something of yourself and got rich, the government would take most of it to pay for those who didn't work.

I never fit into this environment. I was the odd one out, always. I was never part of the mainstream with the other kids—what they were wearing, the records they were buying, or anything. I was on the other end of the spectrum—in every way, shape, and form—as I was growing up, even before I became obsessed with music. So I was branded as a rebel and a troublemaker early on. That continued when I became interested in music.

My home environment had something to do with my inclination to do things my own way. Everybody was very bohemian in my household, unlike in the average Swedish family. That was good for a creative person like myself. My father, Lennart, and my mother, Rigmor, separated when I was around two years old, and then they got divorced, so I grew up without my father. But my brother and sister were close to my father. My immediate household consisted of my mother, Lolo, and Bjorn, who were always in the house around me. We were all musicians, artists, or painters. The attitude was "Oh, there's no dinner ready at six o'clock. Eh, so what? Every man for himself." It was very un-Swedish, I would say. There was a lot of openness and few rules. You could display your emotions without someone telling you to keep a lid on it.

But we weren't bohemian in the sense of being poor or going without a comfortable lifestyle. My mother was able to hold down a well-paying job, although it wasn't what she wanted to do. She was the head of a department that handled import and export for large clients such as Volvo. She really wanted to be a landscape painter, but because she was the breadwinner of the family, she did what she was

expected to do. She was the victim of that whole mentality of putting down the artist; she was basically told, "You can't be a painter—you have a family to raise and support, so don't even think about it."

My maternal grandmother was wealthy enough that she owned an entire building in the center of Stockholm. She lived there in her own apartment and had a lot of tenants, which gave her a substantial income, so she made sure that all of us in her extended family didn't lack anything we needed. It was a beautiful building, and that's where I lived as a teenager before I left Sweden.

My mother's brother had a very traditional family. His children grew up very proper, as well-educated, model citizens with model families. He was a civil engineer and an inventor in the research and development department at Philips, the electronics company, and he was quite influential in my life in a different way. I love the guy so much, and I've stayed very close to him over the years. My father had two brothers who were extremely interesting people, too—one is an opera tenor and the other is an illustrator. I got to know them quite a bit later in my life, but they were out of the picture when I was young and rebellious.

You could say I was a rebel with a cause: I did almost anything that would hit up against the expected norms. I got a lot of frustrated support from my immediate family, who would say things like "This is great what you're doing, but you know, it's probably never going to work. It's just not done." It was a given assumption that there was no way you were going to make a living as a rock musician. If you did, then you had to play whatever music was safe and accepted at the time. You had to follow the rules. There was no *American Idol* where anybody could be anything, given a little bit of luck.

Getting up each morning and going to school was something I didn't want to do, because it was pitch-black outside, with drifts of snow as high as the trees along the roadside. I remember looking outside the classroom windows and seeing a little patch of gray sky that lasted for less than two hours, then suddenly it would be pitch-black again. That was during the school year.

In contrast, my birthday, in June, was the nicest time of the year in Sweden, weatherwise, so I vividly remember every birthday. We were almost always at the summerhouse on the lake. At those times, my life with my mother, my brother, and my sister was the best. It was such a great family group; we were all really tight. There was no father figure per se, as I've said, but my uncle, my mother's brother, was around a lot, and so were his kids.

No one else in the family celebrated a birthday in that perfect, warm, sunny part of the year—I was the only one. Not only did I get gifts (which was nice), the weather itself was a gift: being able to be outside where the sky was so bright blue it almost hurt your eyes.

Many of those birthday gifts were records or musical instruments of some kind. I remember getting one of those music-oriented presents when I was staying in the south of Sweden on my fifth birthday. My family came and woke me up and gave me a big round package wrapped in brown paper. My mother had just been in Poland, and she brought back a guitar. I remember staring at it and wondering, "What am I supposed to do with this?"

They made a little home movie of me running around in the street playing it, but it was more like a toy than anything else. They had asked me what I wanted for my birthday, and I'd said I wanted a dog and a sword. I didn't get a live dog, but I did get a little sword and a toy dog, and this strange Polish acoustic guitar. The year before, they'd given me a mini violin. They were obviously trying to encourage me in a musical direction, but it wasn't really happening—not yet, anyway.

Music really began for me on September 18, 1970. That's the date I learned about the death of Jimi Hendrix, the amazing, iconic-looking rocker from the United States. I didn't really know anything about him, but he was big enough in Sweden that the national news showed a piece on him the day he died. I just happened to be watching it at the time. They showed a brief clip from the Monterey Pop Festival where he set his Stratocaster on fire. You can imagine how that affected me at age seven. It totally melted my mind.

Seeing Jimi Hendrix burning his guitar onstage made me want to play guitar. I swear to God, that was the initial reason. It just looked so fucking awesome. That news program lit the fire in me—a fire that to this day has never gone out.

I used to like to play air guitar to Beatles records by holding a tennis racket when I was five or so. Back then, my biggest musical heroes were the Monkees. They were on TV, and I thought they were the Shit. There was really no Swedish rock music on the air. There was classical music, jazz, and folk music, which actually had a good deal of influence on me in terms of melody and song structures. One of the first songs I ever learned to play was a Scandinavian folk song from the seventeenth century called "The Barkbread Song." It was basically just an A-minor arpeggio, easy beginner stuff.

But after I saw Hendrix, a lot of things changed in me.

A year later, for my eighth birthday, I was given Deep Purple's *Fireball*. It was my very first LP, and I was so proud of it. My sister and my brother had a bunch of records that I listened to, but this one was completely mine. Remember how that album starts? It starts with just the drums—a pounding double-kick beat before anyone or anything else chimes in. To my knowledge, that was the first rock band to open an album that way. Then, after the drum intro, the rest of the band kicks in with a really massive onslaught

of sound. I know that most fans of Deep Purple think *Machine Head* is their best album, but I disagree. *Fireball*, for me, was just the very best there was: a true musical revelation. I still have that early piece of vinyl, sort of enshrined in my studio.

I immediately set about learning the songs, sitting in my bedroom listening over and over to the album, following along with my guitar. By then, I had spent the last year figuring out where all the notes were on the guitar and how to play a melody line, so it wasn't that hard to pick up the basic songs. Even as brilliant as the album is, it's basic pentatonic songwriting. I was so intrigued by everything about it. In the liner notes, there was a small black-and-white picture of Ritchie Blackmore, looking all mysterious, and I used to stare at that picture, wondering what he was like and what he was doing now: Was he on tour? Was he recording? What string gauges was he using? And so on. You couldn't just hop on the Internet in those days and track the guy down. All I could do was look at that picture and wonder.

In a lot of ways, that was the magic of it all. That element of mystique, the fact that you didn't know every detail about the person, made him larger than life to you. People often ask me why I was so into Deep Purple instead of Led Zeppelin back then. I didn't know about Led Zeppelin, or Black Sabbath. I was aware of Alice Cooper and, somewhat later, Kiss and Sweet—bands that some of my schoolmates were into. I was intrigued by what I'd heard about the extreme drama of those stage shows, but Deep Purple was by far the rock band that made the biggest impression on me then.

Purple really hit big when *Made in Japan* came out. The band became huge, actually, not long after, and everybody had its records. I was nine then. I would save up my weekly pocket money, my allowance that I got from doing the dishes and things like that, and I would go down to the local record store and say, "Do you

have any Deep Purple?" The only album they had at first was *In Rock*, and that album sounds as fresh today as it did then. I can put the CD in the player in my car, and when I listen to songs like "Speed King," "Child in Time," "Bloodsucker," and "Living Wreck," I'm still knocked out by how good they are. To this day, it doesn't sound dated.

I always wondered why those Purple albums weren't bigger in the United States. When you play some of the early Sabbath albums, Tony Iommi's riffs are awesome, but the recording sounds like a demo tape. Not to dis those guys, but it doesn't hold up in comparison. But you put on *In Rock*, and it still melts your head. Imagine what those songs did to an impressionable seven- or eight-year-old kid.

In addition to learning to play guitar from Deep Purple, I learned a lot of blues licks from a couple of records my mother had, stuff like John Mayall and Eric Clapton. But Purple had the greatest effect on me. I managed to pick up most of the songs from *Fireball* quite quickly, but I remember that the solo in "Demon's Eye" gave me a lot of trouble. That was before I knew that you could play the same note on different strings. Then it dawned on me that I could choose where I wanted to play the same notes in the same octave. You could play a note on the high E string or a few frets farther up on the B string, and that way you could actually play the octave without jumping the neck. That revelation opened up the door for me. I thought, "Wow—now I understand. What a cool trick." I already knew how to find the same notes anywhere in different octaves from my piano lessons, but on the guitar you can play the same note in the same octave in three or four different places.

It sometimes annoys me when I read today, "Oh, yes, of course Yngwie Malmsteen plays classically inspired music, because his hero is Ritchie Blackmore." I still adore the guy, and I don't have a bad thing to say about him at all, but my classical style of

playing—neoclassical rock, which I'm often credited with inventing—didn't come from him. If anything, Genesis had a much greater influence in pushing me toward classical structures. Tony Banks, the keyboardist, was like a virtual Bach jukebox, with his arsenal of tricks like pedal notes and diminished chords. Because he was the keyboard player, he didn't play with his teeth or do anything visually flashy. It was Peter Gabriel, the front man, who gave the band a face. But Tony's contributions made the band's sound unique.

Guitar is a completely different animal from the keyboard. To produce one note on the guitar (or the violin or any other stringed instrument), you need to use two hands. On the keyboard, you can play much faster because you only need one hand to play one note. Tony Banks' keyboard playing influenced me because of that basic truth. Intrigued, I started trying to figure out what he was doing. When I first started picking out the songs from Purple, it was all just different places on the neck in pentatonic modes, like the solos in "Speed King" or "Lazy" or "Demon's Eye." They were all similar. Once I'd figured out one, I pretty much had the others.

But then my sister brought home some Peter Gabriel–era Genesis records, and they didn't fit the pattern I'd learned. There were inverted and diminished chords and pedal notes, which made the songs extremely intriguing because I couldn't play them right away. I was very self-confident in what I was doing at the time, and this stuff actually humbled me, in a way.

Lolo, God bless her, was probably the most influential person of all on me. She bought records by everyone from Genesis to Frank Zappa, stuff like Weather Report; Savoy Brown; Blood, Sweat & Tears; and John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers, and I would listen to all of it. Lolo was very cool in letting her bratty little brother come up to her room and listen to her albums over and over again. I was like a sponge and sucked it all up.

These initial musical influences all came from her. There were so many albums lying around, and I had a huge range of styles and genres I could listen to.

It's funny how things get associated in your mind. For me, the death of Hendrix is tied to contrasts: that flash of brilliance I saw on the tube and the dreariness of the approaching winter outside. I would wake up around six-thirty or seven in the morning, and it would be unbelievably cold and pitch-black outside. I had to go out and walk through huge drifts of snow and howling wind to get to school. When I got there, I would sit in class shivering. Around eleven o'clock sun would come up and the sky would be all gray, and then around two it would get dark again, and I would have to walk home in the same fucking shit.

Obviously, this forced us to spend a lot of time inside. And if there was something you wanted to spend your time doing, you could get really good at it, because you weren't going to be outside riding your bicycle or whatever—which brings me back to Jimi. I was sitting there, saw him on TV, and right that minute I grabbed my guitar and started trying to play it. I used a coin for a pick. The first thing I did—I remember this very clearly—I played the open high E string, found the third fret, and started playing the two notes that sounded like a little bluesy thing. I kept doing that till my fingers started bleeding, so I put Band-Aids on them and just kept doing it until the first string broke. Then I kept at it, using the second string, until it broke, too. I kept on until there was only one string left.

That forced me to figure out more and more about what notes were located on that final string up and down the frets. I listened to

it until it started sounding good. I didn't know how to tune a guitar or how to play a chord—nothing. Bjorn already knew how to play the guitar, but he wouldn't take the time to show me anything. And Lolo knew all the chords and was a really good pianist, but I was so young I couldn't sit still for lessons. I just jumped in and figured things out for myself. Not long afterward, my mom bought me a new set of strings, which I thought was so great—now I had six instead of one.

Every couple of months, we received a catalog called Hobbex, which was like the old Sears catalogs, full of everything you could think of, from heavy tools to small electronics—whatever. For my brother and me, it was like our Bible. We'd spend days looking at this catalog, and in it I found a guitar pickup. I saved up to buy this pickup and could hardly wait. Finally, it came in the mail, and I put it on immediately. I plugged it into an old tube radio, from the 1950s or so, housed in a wooden cabinet. When I cranked it up, I was overjoyed to hear the noise I could make: waves of feedback and shit. I was just a little kid, and this was like only the third week or so after I'd started trying to learn to play, but I was making leaps of progress just by sheer tenacity.

Bjorn was watching me, and I could see it was starting to worry him a little. When I would show him something I had just figured out, he would say, "Wow, all right, that's pretty good," and then go try to figure out some way to top it. He ordered a real solid-body electric guitar from the Hobbex catalog. It looked just like a little Stratocaster. When he got this guitar, he would brag, "Hey, I got the real thing, and all you got is some fucking acoustic guitar from Poland."

He started showing off, with a wah pedal and everything, really rubbing my nose in it. Little did he know that when he wasn't at home, I was playing his guitar like crazy! I remember thinking his guitar was the best. In reality, it was just a cheap thing—but far

better than mine. That's when I started figuring out what was going on up and down the neck. I became a fanatic at age seven and went full-speed ahead, almost from day one.

Half a year or so later, and I even made a tremolo bar out of a metal comb for my guitar. It sounds laughable, but it worked. I removed the teeth from the comb and screwed it to the tailpiece, which was separate from the bridge, so I could make lots of noise on my acoustic guitar even though it was a piece of crap.

My brother continued trying to undermine me a little bit. He was jealous. Bjorn was really musically talented and very intelligent, but he was just not focused on one thing. He was a great drummer, playing in a band called Squeeze. But he also wanted to play the guitar, then the bass, then the violin, and then the piano, as well as the accordion and the harmonica—he wanted to play everything. He wasn't obsessed with just one of those things the way I was with the guitar, which is why I was leaving him in the dust.

He would do little things to me like hide the needle for my record player. We would end up in some fights and I'd have to defend myself, which wasn't too good, since he was two years older and a lot bigger. But it helped me in the long run. It just made me more determined than ever to keep playing.

By then, Lolo was picking up on how much I was really getting into this guitar-playing thing. When my birthday came around, she fanned the flame by giving me the Deep Purple *Fireball* LP. About the same time, my mother decided to buy the electric guitar from my brother and give it to me. The two women in the family were my allies, you could say. And I can't forget the influence my maternal grandmother had on me. She was the coolest, best person in the whole world—I owe her everything. She supported me in every way she could. Probably her most important contribution was the studio.

In the late 1950s, my uncle built a recording studio down in the

bomb shelter in the building that my grandmother owned. This studio had a control room and wall padding, the whole deal, because he was into that—not as a musician, but as an electronics professional. My grandfather was a Dixieland jazz drummer and had a great drum set, and he used to store his drums and practice down there. He quit playing as he got older, but the drums remained.

Eventually, that drum set ended up at our house. My brother used it when he was playing in his band, until he lost interest, which was cool, because by default the drum set ended up becoming mine. Early on, I played it, too, which is why I've always been a drummer as well as a guitarist.

I would skip school so I could stay home and play my guitar, or I would take the guitar to school, and if somebody said something to me about it or ridiculed me because I had long hair, I would punch him in the nose. Soon I decided I had to have a band. I set about to recruit a few guys and try to whip them into shape.

In my first attempts to recruit a band, I corralled one kid who was sort of a friend at school and informed him, "You're gonna be my drummer." He kind of blinked at me and said, "*What*?" I told him flatly, "You're going to be my drummer, and we're going to practice from [this time] to [this time]." And he said, "No, that's during class." I told him, "No, it isn't—it's band practice time." Then he said, "But I don't have any drums!" "Don't worry about it," I said. "I have a great drum kit." Done. I took absolute control of the situation, and I can't say that I've changed that aspect of my band ethic very much since then.

I taught him how to play "Fools" and "Demon's Eye" and a couple more Purple songs. Obviously, he wasn't into it as much as I was, but we did do a couple of little gigs. I remember the first one was a total disaster. I played through an old amp and it was extremely loud, so everyone was holding their ears. And then I

started grinding my guitar against a table, which I thought was hilarious. I figured I'd eventually have to find a bass player, but in the beginning, it was just me and this poor guy I had recruited (forced, actually) to become my drummer. Luckily for him, I joined up with a couple of other guys. We played Deep Purple songs in the beginning but then started doing really loud and long jams. I had a tremolo bar that I would use to make a really nasty annoying sound that nobody liked, so of course I *really* liked it.

By 1974, I'd formed a little band briefly called Track on Earth, for which I'd drawn some posters to put in my school classrooms. Now get this: when I recently played in Stockholm, my third-grade teacher came to the show, and she had with her some of my old drawings, including those very posters. One of them had like a big footprint or something, making a track. I was amazed to see that she'd kept it for the past thirty years. It completely blew my mind to see that old poster again.