

A-Ha - Cast In Steel (Deluxe Edition) [2015]

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CD1: 01. *Cast In Steel* 02. *Under The Makeup* 03. *The Wake* 04. *Forest Fire* 05. *Objects In The Mirror* 06. *Door Ajar* 07. *Living At The End Of The World* 08. *Mythomania* 09. *She's Humming A Tune* 10. *Shadow Endeavors* 11. *Giving Up The Ghost* 12. *Goodbye Thompson*
CD2:

01. *The End Of The Affair* 02. *Mother Nature Goes To Heaven ((Original Version))* 03. *Nothing Is Keeping You Here ((Original Version))* 04. *Shadowside ((Demo Version))* 05. *Start The Simulator ((Stereophonic Mix))* 06. *Foot Of The Mountain ((Mark Saunders Remix))*
Morten Harket - vocals Magne Furuholmen - keyboards Paul Waaktaar-Savoy - guitars

It was difficult to get too emotional once the last strains of 'Take On Me' had echoed around the Brighton Centre, one of the dates on a-ha's 'Ending On A High Note' UK tour in 2010. By their very nature, farewell tours generally attract a greater audience, and I always felt the so-called split was more a cynical marketing ploy rather than a desire to draw a permanent line under an extraordinary career. As guitarist and principal songwriter, Paul Waaktaar-Savoy, confirmed to the band's official website: "The idea to end the band was forced. Not natural. It felt like a business decision to me. Just someone's bright idea."

a-ha actually reformed less than a year later in August 2011, albeit in exceptional circumstances, performing 'Stay On These Roads' at the Oslo Spektrum, in remembrance of the victims of the Norway massacre the previous month. And, if there was ever a reminder needed of the band's enduring popularity in their native country, it came in November 2012 when they were awarded the Knights First Class of the Royal Norwegian Order of St. Olav for their outstanding contribution to music.

With an opportunity to perform again at 'Rock In Rio' (the scene of, arguably, their biggest triumph in 1991) too tempting to resist, the full scale of a-ha's reunion was eventually

announced – somewhat nervously – at a press conference in March this year, with details of a 2-year plan encompassing a brand new studio album and tour.

During the conference, Paul flippantly observed that he'd been “super busy and released one song” (the excellent ‘Manmade Lake’) in five years. In fact, he'd also collaborated with Jimmy Gnecco on ‘Weathervane’ for the *Headhunters* soundtrack in 2011, and contributed to albums by Linnea Dale and Hågen Rørmark. He also continued work on the next studio album for his other excellent band Savoy (who have to date released five studio albums and a retrospective), and other solo endeavours.

Magne Furuholmen, meanwhile, busied himself composing the soundtrack for last year's Norwegian film, *Beatles*, and also contributed to albums by Tini Flaat Mykland, Marius Beck, Martin Halla and the Backstreet Boys. In 2012, the ‘supergroup’ Mags formed with Coldplay's Guy Berryman, Apparattjik, released their second album, *Square Peg In A Round Hole*. He has also continued his dual-career as a visual artist, and in 2013 released a compendium of his 20+ year career, titled *In Transit*.

Morten Harket was equally as active, consolidating his career as a credible solo artist with a brace of fine albums. *Out Of My Hands* (unfairly lambasted by the Norwegian media upon its release in 2011) picked up where *Foot Of The Mountain* left off (retaining the core of its musicians and producers) and featured collaborations with Pet Shop Boys and Swedish band, Kent. By contrast, 2012's *Brother* was a more organic and retrospective affair.

With the 30th anniversary of ‘Take on Me’ chart success fast approaching there is still plenty more to look forward to. Not only have fans been rather spoilt with a mouth-watering 5-disc edition of ‘Hunting High and Low’, but there are also deluxe reissues of the band's mid-period albums, *Stay On These Roads*, *East Of The Sun, West Of The Moon* and *Memorial Beach* due for imminent release. A new biography of the band is also in the pipeline. And, of course, there's also a-ha's tenth studio release, *Cast In Steel*...

Whilst the sun doesn't always shine on this new opus, it certainly glistens in places. Gone is the back-to-basics approach employed so successfully on the excellent *Foot Of The Mountain* album, which – save for one Mags composition and a collaboration on the cut and paste title track – saw Paul restored as the primary songwriter. In its place is the more democratic template that fans have been accustomed to since their first reunion album in 2000 (*Minor Earth Minor Sky*), with each member making equal – though rather mixed – contributions to the new

project.

The album starts in earnest with the excellent mid-tempo title track, surprisingly overlooked as a single in favour of the next track, the epic ballad, 'Under The Make-Up'. This was a brave choice of single, beautifully sung by Morten and effectively augmented by strings, but the chorus doesn't quite hit the mark for me. Arguably the biggest surprise of the album is the songwriting input from Morten – 'The Wake', already garnering heavy rotation on Radio 2, is a fine pop single with an excellent chorus, while the beautiful, shimmering 'Living At The End Of The World' is one of the highlights of the album. Mags' highlights include the full-on synthpop of 'Forest Fire' and the lyrically-biting 'Mythomania', ("You caught belief, like some disease/No words can save ya"), which has shades of De/Vision and some lovely OMD-esque choral flourishes. Somewhat surprisingly, the two weakest offerings come from Paul: There's the rather plodding 'Door Ajar' ("I hit my head on the pillow hard" – really?!) and the similarly over-produced 'Shadow Endeavours' which, though featuring a nice gliding Harket vocal, ultimately loses itself in its frenetic arrangement and fizzles out in the coda. Fortunately he redeems himself with the lovely Beatles-esque closing track, 'Goodbye Thompson'. And then there's the stunning 'She's Humming A Tune'. It's a track that dates to the band's early days – bookended by some vinyl crackles to emphasize its early 80s vintage – and seemingly cut from the same musical cloth as 'Scoundrel Days'.

Overall it's a worthy, if not entirely cohesive, addition to the catalogue; one that could have been tightened up with the loss of a couple of tracks. It's great to have them back. ---PaulB,
electricity-club.co.uk

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