



# BREAKING IN THE MUTED SKIES

Interview with Bjarni Rafn Kjartansson (a.k.a. Muted)

Four years after the release of his debut album, *Muted World*, the Germany-based electronic musician Bjarni Rafn Kjartansson, known as Muted, is back with his second LP, *Empire*. The album was released through his own label on 10 August as a limited edition of 150 copies on 'glowing lava' vinyl. The colourful cover art was painted by Steinunn Harðardóttir, better known as dj. flugvél og geimskip, who also provided vocals on the track 'Undraveröld'. In addition, vocalists Jófríður Ákadóttir, Fanney Ósk Þórisdóttir and Ásdís María Viðarsdóttir contributed to the tracks 'Peaceful Sleep', 'Núna' and 'Waiting for You', respectively.

Words by Wim Van Hooste  
All photos by Eva Götz

Before reading further, consider checking out Spotify, SoundCloud, or any other music service to listen to the album, as it will certainly amplify the reading.

## The *Empire* strikes back

**Very recently, you self-released a second album entitled *Empire*. Was it difficult to make a successor to your *début* album? How does the album differ from the first?**

*Empire* had been in the making on and off since 2015. In the beginning, I started working on three songs. I wanted to make something with them, so I decided to get out my synthesisers and finish them. This became the baseline for 'Empire'. Later that year, in the summer of 2015, I was playing at the LungA festival in Seyðisfjörður, where Jófríður [Ákadóttir] was performing with a side project. I asked her to do a show with me, and while we were rehearsing for that show, 'Peaceful Sleep' was born. A few months later, I moved to Germany and—as always—continued working on music in my spare time. Somewhere along the way, Ásdís María, Fanny (FEY) and Steinunn (dj. flugvél og geimskip) became a part of the album. Then, it was sometime in late 2016 when I asked Steinunn if she wanted to paint the artwork for the album. For the audio side, I got José Diogo Neves, an audio engineering professor based in Tallinn, Estonia, to co-mix and master the album. During the process, I'd never thought about it being difficult to make the next album. Thinking about it now, I rather look at it as an evolution. I always work on music, even sometimes subconsciously, and as time passes, I evolve too. This new album is where I'm currently at in my evolution, and hopefully my next album will be an evolutionary step from that.

*Empire* differs from *Muted World* in many ways. I feel it's more mature, and I would say it has a much brighter feel than *Muted World*, which in my opinion is rather dark and depressing. *Empire* steps more out of that framework and has a more positive outlook on everything. I think that's partly myself reflected in the music. I've changed my life significantly in the past years, and I think that shines through in a positive way.

Concerning the sounds of both albums, *Empire* sports more instruments than its predecessor. I played most of the loops/melodies on physical synthesisers and used them as samples to create the atmosphere. *Muted World*, on the other hand, mainly consisted of samples from somewhere

else with a "main sample" throughout that would determine the melody/direction of the songs.

**Why did you choose the alias Muted?**

It was very fitting for my personality and situation at the time. Being a little introverted and heavily into electronic music while attending a high school in a small community like Egilsstaðir doesn't win you any popularity contests. During the first DJ gigs in my hometown area, I would frequently be asked to play ABBA or Queen whilst trying to play some electronic music to spark some new interest. But to be fair, when thinking back, I was playing for people who just weren't ready for it. Social mechanics in such a small society definitely play a role; it's an interesting thing. Therefore, I often found myself alone, escaping to my refuge, listening to some alien sounds. That's how 'Muted' came along. Kind of an out-of-place loner making music.

**Why did you title this album *Empire* and the previous *Muted World*?**

*Muted World* was chosen to invite the listener into Muted's world of sounds. It was my debut album, an introduction to something new. You can hear my fingerprints on that album, but my sound has evolved greatly since then. This was a metaphor for my soundscape at the time.

As for *Empire*, the official definition of the word "empire" is "an extensive group of states or countries ruled over by a single monarch, an oligarchy or a sovereign state". However, the way I see and decide to interpret it is sort of like I'm standing on top of a mountain, like the painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* by Caspar David Friedrich, where the young man is looking over the vastness of the nature around him. For me, it's a reference to that, a tribute to my home, an ode to nature. It's a feeling I have experienced often, and living away from home has made me cherish these moments even more. Then I tried to explain this idea to Steinunn, and she captured it perfectly in her album artwork. I couldn't have asked for a better person to work with.

## Girl Power

**How did you get four fantastic female vocalists for this record?**

Iceland is very small, so if you want to reach out to someone, it's easy to do. Usually you know

someone who knows the person or has a friend-of-a-friend or something like that. Ever since making 'Special Place' with Jófríður on *Muted World*, I've wanted to do more songs with vocals. Over the years, I've been trying to hit the right moments with the right people, and sometimes the stars align. Fannee (FEY) and I connected over the Internet while I was working on the album *Hugarfar* with Icelandic rapper Ari Ma. I sent her the track, and it ended up becoming 'Núna'; she pretty much nailed it right away. She did all the vocal work herself, and it was so good right off the bat that I didn't want to change anything. Ásdís María is the only vocalist contributing to the album that I still haven't met in person. I've known her over the Internet for many years through Doddi of Samaris.

I had been trying to collaborate on a song with her for years, but I never found the right atmosphere for it to work the way we wanted. When I wrote 'Waiting for You', I knew I had to send it to her to see whether she would like to contribute. Thankfully, it worked out, and she completed the track beautifully. She has an awesome voice and I really hope we will collaborate again sometime. Four years ago, I did a remix of Steinunn's song 'Á krossgötum', but we never released it. Since then, I have kept in touch with her, and I really wanted to include her on the album, so I sent her some demos and she ended up choosing the song that would become 'Undraveröld'.

**How did you meet Steinunn and why she was asked to do the cover art?**

Steinunn and I are kindred spirits, and I think we are wired very similarly. I believe this fact ultimately brought our paths together. I discovered her music five years ago and saw her play live in Egilsstaðir once, where I met her briefly for the first time. I then remixed her song and through that, we started sharing music and talking regularly.

I had seen some of her paintings online and loved the style. Being a huge fan of her work, it took me many months to get the courage to ask her to paint the cover for my album. Luckily, she was more than happy to work with me on it and really liked the idea. Now we are here, and it ended up being something quite special.

$$E = mc^2$$

**Let us focus on your musical inspirations. Nature, technology, science, isn't it?**

The biggest inspiration for my music is my environment: the nature around me, my home and my surroundings in everyday life. When I was living in Iceland, I always went out for walks after work, somewhere outside of town. I would take my Zoom field recorder with me, sit down somewhere, take in the moment and record nature sounds. Then, I would head home and start working on music, using those sounds as ammunition for new works.

Living in Germany now, the situation has changed a bit. It's hard to go somewhere to get complete peace of mind. Instead, it just makes me value the quietness and freedom at home so much more. I feel like my mind heads to Iceland and I find myself in these familiar surroundings while I'm working on music. In everyday life here in Germany, I'm working with individuals who are at the highest level in the worlds of technology, artificial intelligence and robotics. That has also had an effect on my thoughts and ambitions. Maybe not in terms of the sound itself, but more the actual thought process whilst working on or thinking about music and life in general.

One day, I would really like to make music for a movie or series. I think that could be a fun new angle to try out. Poetry and literature I really like, but they aren't things I normally sit down and enjoy. My mind is constantly working on projects, be it something with electronics, computers or music. I don't give myself enough time to relax and read. I want to change that in the near future though, and I have a long list of books I want to read.

**You use field recordings in your music. Why is that?**

I've been using field recordings in my works almost the entire time I've been making music. I really like mixing natural sounds with all the other samples I use. In a way, they also serve as memories of these moments. For example, I can hear tiny little sounds in my songs that trigger memories of the exact moment I recorded them, bringing me back there. Also, it's unique. Not many people are doing it, so I feel like by using these recordings, I'm standing out a bit, i.e. not using standard sample packs that countless others have used, but rather having my own sounds. Besides that, it also encourages me to go and spend more time outside.



### Can you tell us how you record your tracks?

I usually start with the drums/beat using a combination of drum samples and samples from my Zoom recorder. For example, I might record myself shaking something in the kitchen, which could end up being used as a hi-hat in a song. After I have a beat that I'm grooving with, I go to my synthesisers and play some sounds, pads and bass lines until I get something I'm happy with. I record everything that I play on the synthesisers through my Focusrite soundcard. Then I use Sony SoundForge to reduce the audio files to samples to work with in an old version of Propellerheads Reason. I use Reason as a sequencer, placing every sound by hand into the beat, and I work on creating a loop until I'm happy with the outcome.

After I have created a couple of different loops, I start thinking about how I want to arrange and connect them to each other seamlessly. When I have an idea of how I want to build the song, I usually return to the synthesisers and add something that will better distinguish the parts from each other and that will progress the song to where I want it to be. Then, I usually export the song to a folder, where it sits for months as I re-listen to it and think about what I need to fix. In the meantime, I usually start a new project. That's how it has been most of the year. Of course, one is not always motivated to make music, and when I hit a so-called "writer's block", I have various ways to cope. I like going out for a walk or bike ride to clear my mind — but when I'm too lazy, I turn to the box of Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt's "Oblique Strategies" that I keep on my desk. Those cards have often come in handy.

### The Wild East

**You were raised in the East Fjords. How was growing up so far from the "big city"?**

I was born in Akureyri on 7 April 1988, but my parents were living in Egilsstaðir, where I grew up. It's quite different from growing up in Reykjavík, I think. You are kind of just in your own little protected bubble, and most of my childhood was spent freely in the forest, mountains or surrounding areas of Egilsstaðir, on my bicycle or playing football with friends. In the winter, I spent most of my time outside of school up in the mountains skiing. As a kid, I also spent time with my grandparents in Eskifjörður and up in the mountains in Víðirhóll. I love those memories and feel blessed to have experienced that kind of upbringing. My parents

are good people; they let me do whatever I wanted and have always supported me in everything I have done. I don't know how many times my mom was up there with me in the mountains at 6 AM on a Saturday morning, standing in the cold, helping me to prepare for a skiing tournament.

What I also specifically remember as being different from Reykjavík is that almost none of the kids in my elementary school drank or smoked. Everything was much more innocent somehow; it was a highly protected conservative small-town upbringing. It's funny though, when you are a kid in Iceland, you don't really realise the beauty and exceptionality of the environment and nature around you. It's just something that has always been there and something I didn't learn to appreciate until late in my teens.


#### **When did music enter your life?**

Music is a big part of my family. My brother is a talented guitar player and my uncle is a great keyboard player and singer; my cousin sings, my grandfather and late great-grandfather were involved in choirs and my greater-family gatherings usually involve singing. So there is a lot of music in my genes. However, I never utilised my abilities until I was around 20 years old. I was born with poor eyesight, which wasn't discovered until I was 4 years old, when I got my first pair of glasses. During my early years, I had to rely heavily on sound to navigate my environment. Having asked my family about my demeanour during that time, I believe music had a soothing effect on me. Apparently,

I was a hyperactive child, so I think music and sounds have always been in my life. My father is a big fan of music, and I grew up amongst many great vinyl records and cassettes, as well as music playing from his record player in the living room.

I went through all kinds of musical phases growing up. Most of my childhood friends were in a metal/hardcore band, so I was exposed to that genre growing up. My father likes rock and blues music, and I used to listen to Smashing Pumpkins, Deftones, Stranglers, Oasis, Weezer and, on the Icelandic side, Botnleðja and Ensími. I also got into hip-hop at an early age, listening to Cypress Hill and Wu-Tang Clan, as well as Icelandic hip-hop, like Subterreanean, Skyttarnar, Vivid Brain and Forgotten Lores. In 1997, when I was 9 years old, I started listening to Prodigy's *The Fat of The Land*, which ultimately got me into electronic music. In the early 2000s, I used to play the video game *Quake*, and a gaming friend introduced me to drum'n'bass and jungle. From there, I got into more underground subgenres of electronic music. I think drum'n'bass and hip-hop have stuck with me the longest, so I think I will always have a heart beating at 170 bpm and an ear for hip-hop and R&B.

Here in Tübingen, I've seen many globally renowned jazz musicians. I really enjoy going alone with my phone turned off to those jazz concerts, just sitting and watching the musicians play and taking in the magic happening in front of me. I really study music as a listener, and I'm constantly in search for the next song to blow my mind. I like so many things from so many directions, so it's hard to sum



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up my tastes. These are some names that come to mind: Flying Lotus, Madlib, Mulatu Astatke, Knxwledge, Radiohead/Thom Yorke, Ametsub, Martyn, Gary Wilson, MF Doom, Pi'erre Bourne, Burial, 2562 and Oneohtrix Point Never. In terms of Icelandic music, I like Þokkabót (70s), Björk, Moses Hightower, Eik (70s), Fufanu, Emilíana Torrini, Volruptus, dj. flugvél og geimskip, Russian Girls, Mammút, Ruxpin and Beatmakin Troopa.

### **Which instruments do you play?**

The short answer is that I don't play any instruments and haven't learned anything instrument-related in school. I'm completely self-taught, and I use whatever I can to make a sound I can record and manipulate further in the computer. From a young age, I was good with computers, and as a teenager, I tried making electronic music on Propellerheads Reason 2.0. However, I quickly gave up, as it turned out to be harder than expected.

It wasn't until late 2008 when I seriously started thinking about making music. I had been DJing for a couple of years by then and was in good contact with the Breakbeat.is family. They needed someone to drive Lynx, an English drum'n'bass artist, around Iceland during Iceland Airwaves to show him around the area. I spent the whole day with him and his girlfriend, and I was able to ask him many questions about music production. Shortly after, I took it up again using the now newer Reason 4.0. I decided to keep trying, even if it would be a struggle to learn, and here I am, almost 10 years later, still using Reason 5.0 alongside Sony SoundForge as an audio editor. I don't really have much knowledge of music theory. All I know is when something fits together and when it doesn't. Therefore, I would say that I work mostly by ear.

### **Have you ever been a member of a band?**

Even though I have collaborated with a handful of great musicians over the Internet, I have mainly been a solo artist my whole career. I have had some good studio sessions, but being in a band wouldn't fit well because I don't have the musical knowledge of the tones, and I think I would always struggle to fit in. I embrace working alone though. Like everything in life, it has its pros and cons, with the pros being the total control over all decisions and deadlines. Timeframes are completely in your own hands, but on the other hand, you have to handle all the work of running a music operation on your own, taking full responsibility for everything.

### **When did you start using the moniker Muted?**

In a few months, I will be celebrating my 10th anniversary as Muted, as this project was started on 11 January 2009. It's been a fun journey; I have done things I couldn't have imagined 10 years ago - travelling to other countries to play my music, having music in documentaries and movies and getting to know good people who have stuck by me throughout my whole life.

I sincerely hope that the next 10 years will be as good, if not even better.

### **You moved to Germany. How does life there differ from that in Iceland?**

In the fall of 2015, I moved to Tübingen in Germany. I had met my German girlfriend in Iceland a year earlier, and she was moving to Tübingen to study medicine. We are still here three years later. She's still studying and I'm working as a systems administrator at the Max Planck Institute for Intelligent Systems, as well as doing freelance jobs as a technology consultant and IoT engineer. I feel that the overall mentality in Germany differs from that in Iceland. It's very sophisticated and there is a plan for everything. I'm very impressed with the social and economic structure here. The food culture is also very different, and of course the language as well. Down to the core, I think Germany corresponds more to Europe, whereas Iceland has more in common with the United States in terms of culture and habits. I really miss Iceland. I miss the food, I miss the nature, I miss my family and friends and I miss speaking my language, but Germany has been good to me and I look forward to spending the next years here.

### **What can we expect from you in the future?**

You can expect many things from me in the future. I have numerous ongoing projects. I'm constantly creating something and slowly pushing all the projects, sort of like a glacier that is crawling forward.

**Thank you for the time to read it. Bjarni hopes he managed to let you into his somewhat complex character. He's looking forward to planning 2019. If you want him to bring a part of Iceland to your hometown, hit up a local promoter and get in touch through his webpage.**

**Thank you Bjarni Rafn!**