

The Sugarcubes and Their Protégés

The Sugarcubes in August of 1986. From left: Einar Örn, Sigtryggur, Björk, Einar Melax, Friðrik Þór and Bragi. Photo: Unknown.



World Domination or Death!

A few years after Mezzoforte cracked international pop markets on Iceland's behalf, the nation finally got its international pop stars: The Sugarcubes. The band would survive six years before imploding and giving way to the biggest Icelandic star ever, Björk.

The Sugarcubes released several well-received hits, and toured the world over on numerous occasions. Alongside, they used their newfound recognition to promote likeminded bands and collaborators, such as Ham and

Reptile; inescapably their fame also brought light to their country of origin, which few people knew much about.

Pop Group for Money

The obscure artists of Kukl were of course as far removed from pop music as possible, even though they had performed a few "melodic" songs in their earliest incarnation. In the spring of 1986, the band lay in ruins due to personal squabbles and inter-band friction. Smaller units from the band tried their hand at

making music. Guitarist Guðlaugur "Godkrist" Óttarsson made some music that featured Björk singing lyrics by Þór Eldon, her boyfriend since 1983. They called themselves The Elgar Sisters, and three of the songs would much later turn up as B-sides on Björk singles. Björk and drummer Sigtryggur Baldursson also made some music together under the name Ást ríður ("Passion") and made one appearance, supporting Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds at a notoriously dissipated gig in Reykjavík.

Björk and Þór bore a son in June of 1986, so life was taken easy during that spring and summer. Einar Örn finished his studies in London and moved to Iceland. During long meetings at Björk's and Þór's place at Nesvegur, Einar, Björk, Þór and other friends eventually came up with the idea of forming a collective that they would call Smekkleysa ("Bad Taste"). "Bad taste and extravagance," would be Smekkleysa's motto. Various plans were attached to the group: it would be a record label and a book publishing company. The

restaurant Mudpit would open in its name, as well as the radio station Radio Devil (unfortunately neither happened). Also, the company would hand out “Bad Taste awards” to people that excelled in extravagance and bad taste.

Various friends joined Smekkleysa, and a pop group was formed solely to make money and finance its ventures. Björk, Einar and Þór got bassist Bragi and guitarist Friðrik from Purrkur Pillnikk to join along with drummer Sigtryggur and keyboard player Einar Melax from Kuki. “We started playing pop songs that we thought were similar to what other people were playing. It was a total surprise to us that nobody else thought this was pop. Everybody just thought of it as weird music,” Einar remarked many years later. The new band’s first appearance was on July 18, 1986. The band was advertised as Kuki in Morgunblaðið, but called themselves Puki (“Frisk”) for their second gig, a week later. Einar Örn had brought along a gigantic plastic lobster when he came back from London. Pop band Stuðmenn fancied the lobster and made Einar Örn their manager so they could use the plastic crustacean in concert. Puki was called Sykurmolarnir (“The Sugarcubes”) when the band supported Stuðmenn in the sports arena Laugardalshöll. Very few people showed up, so Stuðmenn paid their support act in studio hours at their recording studio, Grettisgat. Twelve weird pop songs were recorded during this session, and two of them were released on Björk’s 21st birthday, on November 21. To



The Bad Taste postcard for 1986’s “Peace Meeting.”

Sykurmolarnir’s debut release, the single *Einn mol’á mann*.

Björk and Einar Örn posing in a supermarket. Photo: Unknown.



finance the release, Smekkleysa sold postcards bearing the image of Reagan and Gorbachev, drawn by guitarist Friðrik. Reagan and the Russian leader had met for a widely publicized peace talk in Iceland in October of 1986, and the postcard sold very well, as nobody else had jumped at the opportunity and made merchandise.

“Oh Shit!”

Einn mol’á mann (“One Cube Per Person”), the first Sugarcubes single (with “Birthday” and “Cat” (both

in Icelandic)), was pressed in Iceland at the Alfa pressing plant, the only vinyl pressing plant that has been operated in Iceland. In fact, theirs was the last ever record to be pressed there. Alfa was never a very good pressing plant, and most of the pressing was defective upon arrival—only around 300 copies or so were presentable enough to distribute.

Few people in Iceland “got” the music, certainly not “Birthday,” which nobody could have predict-

ed would be an international hit a while later. “Cat” was a bit more understandable, people thought. Despite his earlier plans, Einar Örn decided to spend the winter of 1986-1987 in London. An old pal from the Crass days, Derek Birkett, formerly a bass player with anarcho-punk band Flux of Pink Indians, was working in a studio, so he and Einar started processing the songs from the Grettisgat sessions. Derek had just formed a record label, *One Little Indian*, and it was decided he would release The Sugarcubes



The Sugarcubes, rather mysterious looking in 1987. Photo: Unknown.

songs in English. The music was remixed, and new snippets and sounds added to the mix.

Meanwhile in Iceland, the band performed several times without Einar. At the time, the band would play a cover version of Lou Reed's "Sweet Jane" amongst other songs. Guitarist Friðrik decided to

leave, so Þór would thereafter be the band's sole guitarist after Árni from Vonbrigði declined an offer to join. Film director Friðrik Þór asked the band to provide soundtrack to his first feature film *Skyttarnar* (AKA *White Whales*). The band provided some instrumental music, most of which didn't make it into the film's final cut. Three tracks turned up on a soundtrack 12" though, with the title track sung by Bubbi Morthens on the A-side.

In the summer of 1987, Einar Örn came to Iceland and the band played several times for 100 peo-

ple or so, roughly the same group of people that had followed Kukl.

One Little Indian released *Birthday* as a 12" on August 17, 1987. It was supposed to promote the forthcoming LP. A week later "Birthday" was picked as "single of the week" in *Melody Maker*. "Oh shit," was reportedly Einar Örn's first reaction when he heard the news.

Surrealistic Pop

Scoring a "single of the week" in the UK music press doesn't necessarily mean instant access to the big time, but in The Sugarcubes' case,

it did. After "Birthday" got the honor, One Little Indian Records was swamped with interview requests and offers from record companies, both indies and majors. There was something about The Sugarcubes' fresh and amusing tone that moved listeners.

In the same week in October 1987, the band graced the front covers of both *The NME* and *Melody Maker*. As would become customary, Björk was put in the forefront, while the band stood in the back, a bit out of focus. The band's first UK gig was supporting US gloom band

Swans at a venue called Town & Country. This was an unlikely combination, as Swans were very intense and have a reputation for playing some of the loudest concerts in history.

As music from Iceland was an exotic novelty, most of the interviews with The Sugarcubes verged into tourism promotion for Iceland—"It is such a strange country, they eat puffins and drink Brennivín all the time, etc. etc., etc." This would be the standard style of Icelandic music coverage for decades to come. As was to be expected, the attention from abroad increased the band's Icelandic fan base. Reykjavík venues were suddenly swamped with hipsters when the band played local shows. All kinds of wild record deal offers were dutifully covered by the Icelandic media, and Ellert B. Schram, editor of the newspaper DV, wrote an outraged editorial when the band declined an offer that amounted to the price of "a brand new trawler."

For years to come Sugarcubes bassist Bragi Ólafsson would send Ellert postcards from all over the world, relaying made-up excess stories of the band on the road. Eventually, as "artistic freedom" was regarded over cash money, the expanding One Little Indian Records went on to sign the band for European markets while Elektra Records scored the American deal. The Sugarcubes' first album, *Life's Too Good*—a title derived from poet/Smekkleysa affiliate Jóhannar's sigh of enjoy-

ment after a hearty meal—was released in April 1988 and scored glowing reviews in Europe. The album contains such classic surrealist pop songs as "Cold Sweat," "Deus" and "Motorcrash," which were all released as singles. The video for "Motorcrash" featured the slick American sedan cars that the Sugarcubes had spent some of their record deal advance on. The video was directed by Björk's new boyfriend, Óskar Jónasson, who would later direct videos for Sugarcubes songs "Planet" and "Regína." In other love affair news, guitarist Þór Eldon's new girlfriend, Margrét Örnólfsdóttir (formerly of the band Reptile), turned up playing keyboards for The Sugarcubes that summer, completing the band's line-up, as Einar Melax had left.

Besides spending their new found pop money on American cars, The Sugarcubes were always very kind and supportive to up-and-coming Icelandic bands. They would release these bands' music on their Smekkleysa imprint, and brought some of them along on tours around the world, like my own band, S.H. Draumur, which supported The Sugarcubes in England in May of 1988. It sure was uplifting to play for 2,000 people at London's Astoria after years of hacking away at Reykjavík's Duus hús for 60 punters. Later, Ham, Reptile and Bless (me again) took baby steps on foreign soil with support from Smekkleysa, playing for more than the usual small crowd of Icelanders and having their records released abroad under the label's far-

fetched war cry of "world domination or death!"

In a Car with Three Lesbians

After Europe, The Sugarcubes went to conquer America. In the states, the band's similarity to the jolly pop of The B-52's was noted, not a totally far-fetched compar-

ison, as The B-52's had always been popular with the Reykjavík hipster elite.

A TV crew follows Björk outside Astoria in London 1988. Photo: Dr. Gunní.

The Sugarcubes at Limelight in NYC in 1992. A fan has jumped on stage. Photo: Einar Falur Ingólfsson.

