

More than three decades into their career, Opeth have trained their admirers to expect the unexpected. But even by their own standards, the Swedish progressive titans have conjured something extraordinary this time around. The band's 14th studio exploration, *The Last Will & Testament*, is the darkest and heaviest record they have made in decades, it is also the most fearlessly progressive. A concept album recounting the reading of one recently deceased man's will to an audience of his surviving family members, it brims with haunting melodrama, shocking revelations and some of the wildest and most unpredictable music that songwriter/frontman Mikael Åkerfeldt has ever written.

"I have become quite interested in family, and the idea that blood is not always thicker than water," Åkerfeldt explains. "I became interested in how family members can turn on each other. I saw an interview with this guy whose family had all turned against him, over the inheritance, so I wrote a song about that on the last record. The idea stuck with me, and then along came the TV show *Succession*, and I loved that series. That was in the back of my head too. It felt like an interesting topic that you could twist and turn a little bit."

The follow-up to 2019's widely acclaimed *In Cauda Venenum*; *The Last Will & Testament* is set in the shadowy, sepia-stained 1920s. It slowly reveals its secrets like some classic thriller from the distant, cobwebbed past, with each successive song shining more light on the stated machinations of our dead (but definitely not harmless) protagonist. The emotional chaos of the story is perfectly matched by Opeth's vivid but claustrophobic soundtrack, which artfully winds its way towards a crestfallen but sumptuous finale. Masters of their own idiosyncratic musical domain, Opeth have never sounded more unique.

"I knew I could go a bit overboard and wild with the music, a bit heavier and a bit more metal, maybe, because I felt it would fit the concept, which is dark and kind of complex. You might dabble with the occult in your youth and write songs about Satan, but this felt like I could make a story about *real* evil, and about human behaviour. It felt like the music for this concept should be on the heavier side of things. It's a pretty heavy topic."

Proud adherents to a progressive ethos, Opeth have never repeated themselves, and *The Last Will & Testament* is every bit as revelatory and adventurous as its 13 predecessors. But one thing is undeniable: Mikael Åkerfeldt's peerless death metal growls are back, for the first time since *Watershed* in 2008.

"I like to be unfashionable, in a way," grins Åkerfeldt. "So, when it comes to bringing that kind of death metal vocal back, I wanted it to happen when people had stopped caring... and I guess that's now! Maybe it's a bit surprising, but we did some anniversary type shows, and we played lots of old songs, and I just thought that my death metal voice sounded good. There's also been a little push because of our new drummer, Walt. He's a death metal guy. Mendez (Opeth bassist) has been a bit of a horse whisperer, too, saying 'Maybe you should do something heavier this time...' In the end I just thought, yeah, let's give it a try."

The Last Will & Testament is destined to be a milestone in Opeth's illustrious recorded history. The band's first out-and-out concept record, it features guest cameos from Jethro Tull legend Ian Anderson and Joey Tempest, frontman with Swedish rock gods Europe. Only one of the album's eight songs has a title: closing ballad *A Story Never Told*. The rest are simply labelled as numbered chapters in this slowly unfolding saga of deceit,

recrimination and betrayal. Enigmatic, unsettling and immersive, *The Last Will & Testament* is a turbulent, prog metal tale like no other.

To add to an overwhelming sense that *The Last Will & Testament* is a landmark record for Opeth, its guest stars are of impeccable and legendary quality. Ian Anderson has been making imaginative and influential music for nearly 60 years, both with Jethro Tull and as a solo artist, and remains one of progressive rock's most revered figures. He joins Opeth here for the first time, performing as the voice of the album's chief protagonist and contributing some glorious flurries of flute.

"With Ian, it's about his voice and just *how he is*. I decided we should have spoken word, and if that was going to happen, the voice should be Ian's. He's like a distinguished gentleman. Everything he says has authority. So, it was just perfect. No one else would have been as good. I felt maybe it was a bit too clichéd to ask him to play a flute solo too, but instead, he asked *me*, 'Do you need a flute solo?' and so obviously I said, 'Yes! Yes, we do!'"

Another legend of the rock world to grace the new Opeth album with his presence and talent is Joey Tempest, singer with Europe.

"On the record, Joey does this call and response with Ian, which was another dream come true for me," Åkerfeldt says. "I love Europe and I love Joey. We've become buddies over the years. So that was a big thing for me. He also knows Ian and had met him a few times. He's a fan of Tull, so it was cool to have them on the same track. You don't want to have guests that just for the glitter and glamour. You want someone that's going to add something to the record, and those two guys were perfect."

Making his recorded debut alongside Opeth's long-established line-up of Mikael Åkerfeldt, guitarist Fredrik Åkesson, bassist Martin Mendez and keyboard maestro Joakim Svalberg on *The Last Will & Testament* is new drummer Waltteri Väyrynen, who joined the band in 2022. Åkerfeldt is eager to commend his new comrade's immense drumming abilities, while observing that recording drums for the new album was a virtually stress-free process.

"I knew Walt was a great drummer, but I didn't know *how* good he was. We're not crappy musicians in this band. We can play. But we sat there at Rockfield Studios, and he just was doing these insane, technical songs in one take. We were almost recording it in real time! [Laughs] He's amazing."

After three decades of dazzling the world, Opeth have made their most daring creative leap yet. *The Last Will & Testament* is a progressive and dramatic triumph, and yet more proof that expecting the unexpected is the only way forward for fans of Sweden's finest.

"It's a restless record for me," concludes Åkerfeldt. "It's an explosion of ideas, which I like. It's a bit shorter and snappier. But I definitely didn't want to rehash anything. The only thing that has come back is some of those death metal screams, but the mindset is still much more forward looking. In typical Opeth fashion, it's not a direct record that you understand and that you love or hate right away. It takes time and if you put that time into it, you might like it... or hate it! It feels like it was written on a whim. Which it was, in a way! I hear things on this album and think, where the fuck did *that* come from?"

