

## **Musik | Interview: Pär Sundström from »Sabaton«**

For many years the Swedish band **Sabaton** has been risking a tightrope walk between musical entertainment and historical education. Many people misunderstand the band's efforts as glorification of war. Now, the first single ›Fields of Verdun‹ from the new album ›The Great War‹ has been released and even the fan community is divided whether the song meets their expectations or not.

**ANNA NOAH** talks with bassist **Pär Sundström** about the creation of an unusual CD.

### **Fields of Verdun**

›The Great War‹ will be released via *Nuclear Blast* on July, 19<sup>th</sup> 2019 just in time for the bands 20th anniversary. The album was produced by Jonas Kjellgren and mastered by Maor Appelbaum.

›Fields of Verdun‹ was chosen as the first single as the history of the *Battle of Verdun* is representative for the whole album. Journalists from all over the world are invited - not only to listen to their music, but also to understand the story behind the songs.



And while other bands offer strange merchandise, **Sabaton** created a YouTube channel that explains the historical background of the songs with *Sabaton History*. The band brought in the historian **Indiana »Indy« Neidell**. He is best known for his *Great War* channel, which documents World War I in real time using modern research and archival footage.

On the history edition of ›The Great War‹ the mysterious voice of a woman speaks the lead-in texts to each song.

#### »Sabaton« Fun Fact

Normally a sabaton is part of a knight's body armour that covers the foot. But since 2016 it's also an orcish word. How could that happen? Matt Vancil created an English-Orcish Dictionary for his web series [JourneyQuest](#). Words could be coined by supporters, so »war drum« became »sabatam«, named after the band Sabaton.

## Enlightenment and Star Wars

[On the history edition of \*The Great War\* a woman speaks the lead-in texts, not Indy Neidell. Who is this woman?](#)

This was a little bit of a flirt with our previous album ›The Art of War‹ from 2008. A lot of people loved that album and they loved the lead-ins between the different songs that are kind of storytelling. You still have the pace of an album. You can enjoy the album without having a twenty minutes history lesson in between the songs. I had that in mind when I wanted to do this and started to script it. It's very difficult to script something that leads into a song with a few words and is still exciting and entertaining.

After that, I went to an agency and then I did a couple of auditions with different people. I was looking for a woman who could both represent being a little bit fragile and also powerful. When I found her I liked her voice immediately. She was a bit shocked because the description of the job said that it's going to be a sort of documentary about World War I. She was interested in history so she thought this will be good, but then found out it's actually a heavy metal album.

It was really fun and a new thing to do for me as well. I scripted it and then I was doing the pilot thing for it. I was trying to direct her because we wouldn't sit in the same room doing it. She would be recording it at her home in England and I was doing my part in my home in Sweden. So I was recording it and she send it back. I am really happy how it turned out. I think that she was absolutely amazing to work with.

[I think she was a very good choice.](#)

Yes! She has spell-binding voice. I really like it. I think that fans who like our album »The Art of War« - they gonna like this little treat, too.

It is also why we made two different main editions of the new album. We made our standard edition, which is more for the people who like to listen to music digitally. They detect their favorite song and they put in their playlist and that's it. But if somebody really wants to enjoy the album from start to the end, press play and then sit and enjoy. The history edition with narration is definitely what I would recommend.

[The last track ›In Flanders Fields‹ is very surprising but it fits perfectly into the concept.](#)

Yes, I think that after all these bombastic tracks and all the heavy metal that you get and then the final track which is the last real song ›The End of the War to End all Wars‹ it's possibly one of the most bombastic songs we've ever written. We thought after this one, we can't just stop. So, we needed a sort of smooth landing for the listeners in the end.

[Do you have a song on the album that you find especially well done? Why?](#)



Okay, for sure we do. I think the fans would not appreciate it, it's not one of those we're going to perform live, but the final real song on the album, the one I just mentioned - 'The End of the War to End all Wars' - I think, it's very well written. The way it's constantly evolving and never returns. It doesn't follow the standard format for a heavy metal - and definitely not for a **Sabatón** - song. So, I like the way it's written but I don't think that it's going to be a lifesaver.

When it comes to the actual songs to perform live, my personal favorite changes a lot but the title track, called 'Great War' - I like that one and I think that fans will definitely like it because it's kind of a mixture of two of our biggest songs ever, 'Carolus Rex' and 'Primo Victoria'. A mixture of those two should be a pretty good recipe for a successful song.

#### What is your process researching a song?

It's usually quite different for every album. On this one it wasn't that difficult because partly there was so much things in the air because of the *100 Years Anniversary* of armistice and the ending of the worst. There were so many people talking about it in the past four years and with Indie Neidell we have a historian on our side who has the biggest documentary series about World War I. We don't really need to look when we need some kind of information or inspiration. The only thing that was a little bit hilarious was when we asked him: Do you have anything about the *Battle of Verdun*? And he said: I covered that thing in something like forty six episodes because it was 300 days and I covered it in weeks.

#### Is that the reason why the single came out first?

No, it was not the reason it came out first. The reason it came out first was that we wanted the album to be represented by a more classic heavy metal song and we also wanted it to be a song which is very representative for the album, for the war and for **Sabatón**.

#### Recently, you said in an interview that »There is so much depth and exciting stories around the songs that we have never had before.« Will those stories appear in your History Channel? Or are they reserved for patrons?

A lot of the stories around the songs will come out later. We are not sure about the form, how *Sabatón History Channel* will look in the future. We will constantly evolve it and I have so many creative ideas that the second producer has to hold me back. First of all we had to launch it, and then we have to make sure that we

have enough subscribers before we can start developing new ideas. And we also need to see the feedback from the people. The *Sabaton History Channel* is a very, very big project. Bigger than I had expected, when we started it.

[That would have been my next question.](#)

There are a lot of people working on it. You know, we have three historians with three different fields of expertise, Indiana being one of the scriptwriters, Spartacus who would be an expert of older history and then we have Markus who is super focused on World War I and II. These are three guys who will be researching for it. And then we have the people who are filming and we have the people who are editing, animators and we have also two people who work with social media and publication and then marketing of it. So, it goes along with the animation, but then we also have the one who researches and find the archive material. So there are a lot of people involved in it and me being the executive producer to bind all things together. It's a lot of work, but it's one of my favorite projects we started with the band and a lot of people really appreciate it. I think it goes well hand-in-hand with what **Sabaton** is doing.

Our songs - they tell stories but only in few words and you wouldn't understand what the song really is about. You get an idea about the song but with the *History Channel*, the format of it, the amount of information that you get is enough for most people because Indy talks a lot. He combines in ten minutes what most people would be saying in a longer time and then I think if you study an episode of *Sabaton History* you can easily hold a 40 minutes lecture for your school with that and that was the whole idea about it - a lesson in history.

[Yes - and not a boring one. And also the songs get deeper with the History Channel.](#)

Yes. But if somebody wants to find out more facts about that, then that person has to go on venture out by themselves and then that person will go deeper than we will ever do.

[What do you think should music \(not only metal\) these days be about education and or cultural issues more often?](#)

Not really. I think that most music should be just enjoyable without thoughts because the world is so full of thoughts anyway. So I think that most people want the music just to escape from what is happening in the real world. And even if we have a historical topic in our songs, I'm sure that most people enjoy the music for what it is and we are first of all a heavy metal band, secondary we need to sing about something that we care about, something that is kind of important.

It is a topic we decided to go for, but it's not necessary that we want people to, you know, enjoy it that way first and the music secondary. If you have an interest in this time, it's good and it can never hurt to educate people. I think it's a good thing because the more educated people will be about history and the background behind conflicts, the lower the chances, they will start their own conflicts.

[That's true.](#)

But the intention of **Sabaton** is not to tell people what to think, what to do with their lives. Our idea is to entertain people.

[Is there any special reason why the war topic is important for you? Did you lose any ancestors yourself?](#)

No - luckily, Sweden has been at peace for a very long time. So we are thankful for that, I wished that the whole world would be at peace. Even if we wouldn't have the topics to write about. I wish that all wars would end because I'm anti war.

What we're doing is telling stories and they have always been told in this way, even before music was invented, people were telling stories about battles and history. The first instruments were created and they were kind of supporting the stories and we're just doing it in a more modern way.

It's a different approach for the same thing you see in a movie, a book or documentary. They're all preserving history. People go to a museum or they can read a book or watch a movie or listen to a song and they all give sort of a different approach to the same subject. And while some people might find listening to a song more attractive than reading a book it will ultimately lead to the same goal.

And then there will be those people who say: »You are encouraging war.« That would be the same as saying »A museum about preserving history, about a war, would encourage war.«

I don't think so. It encourages a memory of what happened so that people should not do it again. And that's pretty much what we're doing as well.

[I often heard that the image of yours is exactly like mentioned above.](#)

We get that question a lot and there are a lot of people who attack us with that case. I have a lot of ammunition to defend myself if somebody would come with their arguments that we are pro war or whatever. Yeah, I don't think that they want to go down that road and have that argument with me. <smiles>

[I think the comparison with the museum was quite perfect.](#)

Yeah - and I think as well. You know, for us it is not necessary to convince all the people who don't like us because that would take so much effort and they wouldn't like us anyway... they will find something else to hate.

Because it's the people who want to find something bad. <laughs> Wherever you look you will find it and if we wouldn't have the history thing, they would find something else to blame us. Perhaps that our singer is a horrible looking person or that he has a bad voice. Now they can blame us for this and it's okay. I can take that and I know that I have the ammunition if they would face me.

[The fans are allowed to submit themes to you - are there any bizarre things? What would you reject from the beginning?](#)

Fans constantly are sending ideas. I get a lot of emails every day and I read all and put them into a library of different topics. Then we discuss what we could potentially do in the future like maybe we will do one day an album called »this or that« and then if I see in my inbox some fan from Chile who says we should write a song about »this« and it would fit to »this« then I put them into this library. In 2010, when we asked the fans to send in ideas for »Coat of Arms« I received about 10,000 ideas. They arrived in hundreds. It's absolutely great, because it's impossible to sit back in Sweden and try to know the whole world's history. We get so many small little tiny stories people like to tell about their ancestors or whatever. And it's an absolutely amazing way of them contributing to **Sabatón**. Even though the most requested topic of all time would be »Star Wars«. I don't think that it's something we're going to sing one day, but we now have the 20th anniversary of **Sabatón**.

[That would have been my next question.](#)

People were asking us, what we're going to do with the band when we have the anniversary. There were those saying: »You should re-release your old songs in a more attractive way«. Or »You should go on a tour playing only old songs.« and I said No, the twenty years of **Sabatón** should not look so much backwards. And then I thought we could at least say thank you for these twenty years to our fans by giving them something. We cannot give them a box of chocolate because not everybody would like that and it would be a bit complicated to send it out so we thought about what have all our fans in common: they want music, they want us to play

songs and write songs. The most requested topic was »Star Wars« but we felt that it wasn't really the great thing to do. So the second most requested topic - the only one that we thought would make sense would be about the German battleship »Bismarck«.

And I think that all the fans are thankful for that, too. Because when we released it, it was a bit unexpected. It came out of nowhere. And we said: »Here you go. Don't buy it or purchase this, it won't go to a record store. Just enjoy it.«

[Who creates your stage show? Is it like you say: We can do it like that or is it that you brainstorm as a band ...](#)  
The new one - erm - I spent a lot of time on the stage set which we have not revealed in full yet. But I spent a lot of time thinking about how it looks today and what kind of pieces we don't like in it and what we like and how we can adapt them due to the topic of the new album. It was a huge thing. And then we were all sitting together when I presented it like a movie of sorts to the rest of the guys like look at all these images and ideas and creativity and then we all started a crazy brainstorm which lead to too many ideas to be able to achieve in time. Which is usually the thing that happens if you have too many creative people to give input into something.

I just try to do as much as I can with the time that is given to me and I know I have only twenty four hours in a day and I'm limited in the amount of people that we can hire to do all of this. I think when **Sabatón** grows, we bring more and more projects to life. I know I have to put some aside which I really love and want to make sure that they happen. Some we can make and some we cannot. Others have more priority and then I think it goes for the show as well. If I could go absolutely crazy and have all the resources in the world, you would see something amazing. <smirks>

[My last question is about food. What's your favorite German and Swedish food?](#)

I guess you call it food in Germany and that is beer and I think that answer was very expected. But for Swedish it's Tacos. Swedish tacos, not Mexican ones.

### ›The Great War« - Playful and Condemning

The next single release will be »The Red Baron«. He is one of the most iconic heroes of World War I. A Hammond organ is used, at the beginning in the background, later in the front line.

The final song »In Flanders Fields«, mentioned in the interview for the smooth landing, is a poem by the Canadian Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae. It's not a metal song, it has a choir only, concluding with a commemoration of the horrors and martyrs of World War I.



As a person who normally is not anchored in the metal bubble, it's interesting to discover that the rest of the album is really worth listening. The songs focus on the desperation of the people in World War I - and that especially outstandingly in the second last song which demonstrates a dramatic issue with a lot of emotionalism through marching drums and a stomping chorus.

All of this has its roots in a creativity, which has no boundaries. »Wherever I look, whatever I do, I get creative ideas. It's a blessing and a curse at the same time. If I walk around the streets of Berlin during the day, I'll probably email myself a lot of times with different ideas. Because whatever I look at, I get ideas what could be



potentially go together with that and how can we do it better? I think that's when my latest assistant was hired. She took the first two weeks to analyze what was coming into my life and what I was working on and then she said to me: Do you know that you are currently working with over 100 projects and you kept all of that in your mind and I said: I never counted them.«

Hopefully, Pär Sundström keeps his creative flow for the next twenty years and after.

**Sabaton** seem to have reached their position as a »Heavy Metal Band to Remember« especially after releasing the new, outstanding studio album and also after playing a respectable amount of live shows over the years.

| [ANNA NOAH](#)

| FOTOS: PÄR S.: Anna Noah / CD-COVER+BAND: Nuclear Blast

### **Titelangaben**

[Sabaton: The great war](#)

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