

Jimi Sumén deserves his own chapter in the history of Finnish pop and jazz. First the guitar virtuoso amazed with his skills, then by abandoning international fame and as a leading light in the free jazz scene as Edward Vesala's collaborator. He was forced to change his style, when diagnosed with MS in 2000.

By **TOMMI E. VIRTANEN**

36

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On his own path



Tommi E. Virtanen

Sumén at home in Lappeenranta.

Home had a huge musical influence on Jouko “Jimi” Sumén, who is now 52 years old. His father made a living as an electrician, but also played the trumpet playing frequent live shows. On his mother’s side, Sumén had plenty of musicians including “drummer uncles”. As a boy, he followed in their footsteps and started with the drums with his first recording being as the drummer of a local rockabilly group.

When he discovered **Jimi Hendrix** at the age of 16, Sumén swapped drums to a -73 Fender Stratocaster. With enthusiasm he went deep into Hendrix – not just the music but the whole show.

“The way I studied him was very much based on emotion, so I focused on reaching the same feeling as Hendrix achieved more than on fingering and notes. The sound was the most important thing. I did a lot of work to make it sound like it did on record,” Sumén explains on the veranda of his home in Lappeenranta, eastern Finland.

The lessons of his youth provided an unexpected advantage, when Sumén was diagnosed with MS in 2000. Because of it, his motor skills started deteriorating, which made it impossible to play at all – he could no longer even hold a plectrum. He didn’t let these things stop him, and developed a new technique based on controlling feedback and using the whammy bar. Hunting for “that one note” got a new meaning.

From Hendrix to Bowie

The young guitar hero’s talent was noticed early in Lappeenranta, and soon people started to call him simply Jimi. In 1977 **Jimi Sumén & Dreams** travelled to Helsinki for the Finnish Rock Championships, where the band’s set of Hendrix hits was unheard of, since the competition was about finding new talent with their own repertoire. That didn’t stop Dreams, who were the last band to play and the one to take the championship with an intense performance.

The jury and audience were especially impressed by the virtuosity of the guitarist, who repeated Hendrix’s trademarks from playing the guitar behind his back to using his teeth to play. The way he did it was also so energetic and natural that it was hard to believe that Sumén had been playing the guitar for only three years. Dreams played *Fire* as the set’s finale with Sumén repeating Hendrix’s trick of burning his guitar. By that time, after the first three songs, the television crews had packed their equipment for the day, so the only documentation of the flaming guitar are some black and white photos. Sumén’s flame was so hot, though, that just playing *Hey Joe* on national television was enough to make the guitarist an instant phenomenon.

Sumén spent the next few years to get rid of his Hendrix reputation. After releasing his first album, the guitar-heavy *Key West*, this Finnish chameleon shed his skin for the first time. Six months in London had an immediate influence with the guitar making way for syn-

thesisers. Sumén’s next records, *Screenplay* and *Between Orient and Accidents*, directly reflected London trends, and the futurist pop sounded so like **David Bowie** – including Jimi’s vocal style – that the press named him “Finland’s Bowie”.

New surroundings

Sticking with the “Bowie blueprint” would probably never have opened up the gates of international success, so fate stepped in. Sumén’s band got to warm-up for **Classix Nouveaux**, a band that was riding atop the wave of new romanticism. The British band was impressed by Jimi’s charismatic performance, and he was invited for an audition in London. He got the spot as Classix Nouveaux’s guitarist, and accepted his role as a mere band member, even though in Finland the musician he’d always been known as someone who follows his own path.

“A move to London tempted me and so did the thought of pop stardom. And the band’s music wasn’t unbearable either,” says Sumén 30 years later.

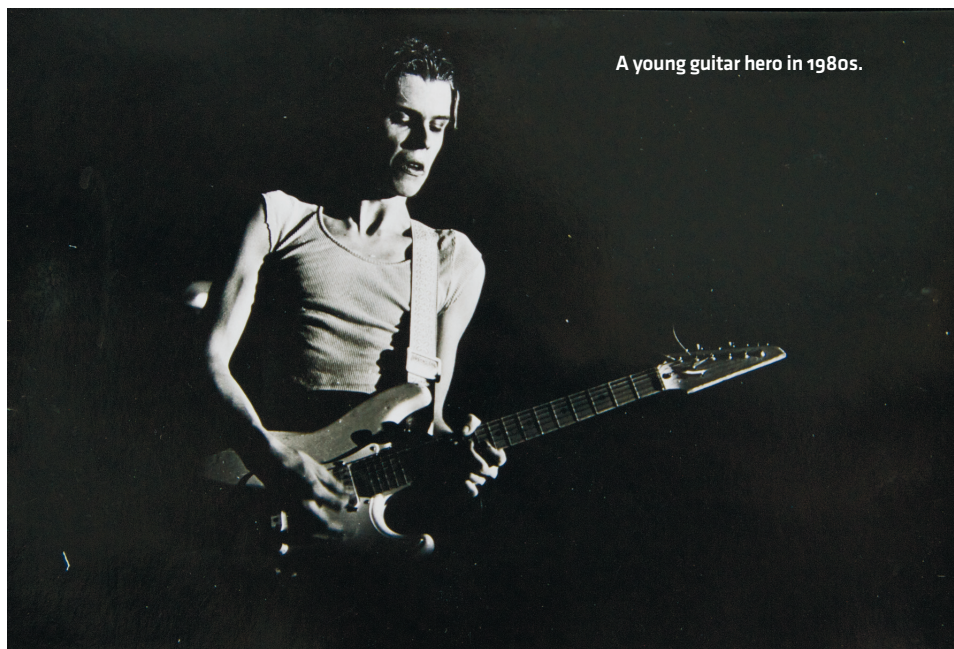
Glamour and shows around the world were enough to give life meaning for some time. In Finland Sumén was thought of as a star living the rock dream, since this kind of an international career was something completely new for someone from Finland. At the time the mere thought of international chart bands such as **The Rasmus** and **HIM** would have been outrageous. Even though Classix Nouveaux’s popularity was on the rise, and they’d become big, for instance, in Hong Kong, Sumén wasn’t satisfied.

“In practice, I only got to play live. We never rehearsed, we never jammed. It frustrated me,” explains Sumén, who enjoyed the gigs whenever there were some.

One show in India says a lot about the Finn’s approach. After the gig, the band members had settled backstage, and were soon listening to the local organisers’ demands with disbelief. The organisers demanded a second set or the band wouldn’t get paid. While the other band members were thinking about playing the same songs a second time, Sumén grabbed his Strato and told the others to relax. The Indian audience were then treated to Sumén’s entire Hendrix repertoire – and it was all the more impressive coming from a bony, tall and long-haired blonde Finn. The cherry on top was Sumén’s virtuoso handling of the guitar. The Indian audience was on its knees after the 15-minute performance and the organiser was satisfied.

Back home

As soon as the next Classix Nouveaux was completed, Sumén packed his bags and moved back to Helsinki. His views and expertise in studio equipment were in high demand in Finland, which meant that he spent the rest of the 1980s as a producer and sound engineer. Sumén had learned to appreciate his Finnish colleagues



A young guitar hero in 1980s.

during his years in London.

“I realised how many good musicians we have in Finland. The English had the right attitude and it was all very professional. The singers of the chart bands were skilled, but the musicians were often hopeless,” Sumén compares.

In Finland it was vice versa: there was usually enough skill but commercial thinking and a professional attitude were missing. Too often potentially fruitful projects were stalled by problems with alcohol or attitude. Rock band **Hanoi Rocks**, who had toured the Far East at the same time as Sumén with *Classix Nouveaux*, were making their dreams come true. On the eve of a bigger breakthrough, though, the band’s drummer **Razzle** was killed in a car accident, and the band’s ascent came to a halt.

Sumén quickly got a reputation as a studio wizard who knows all there is to know. The status as the go-to producer of Finnish pop bands didn’t keep Sumén satisfied for long. During one recording session, he met drummer **Edward Vesala**, who he’d idolised as a youth. Hello free jazz and bye bye pop – forever.

Vesala’s right hand

Edward Vesala (1945–1999) was a highly regarded drummer, who had played in the best Finnish soul and progressive rock bands of the 1960s and 1970s. Yet his life’s work was done in free jazz. The **Sound & Fury** workshop became a veritable college for Finnish free jazz players, and its leader Vesala enjoyed great respect.

The two musicians recognised they were soulmates the moment they met. Free jazz allowed Sumén to ex-

ecute his most ambitious musical dreams. Vesala was known as an extreme person, who completely immersed himself in the music. Sumén became Vesala’s right hand, who came up with the technical solutions for the composer’s visions. *Sound & Fury*’s ECM-recordings received praise – the UK-based music magazine *Wire* picked the debut album *Lumi* (1986) as one of the ten most important recordings of the 1980s.

“When we toured, I witnessed first-hand how respected Edward was abroad. The world’s top jazz musician played the same festivals as us and Edward knew many of them personally,” Sumén notes.

Even though Vesala was known for revitalising Scandinavian free jazz, the market for the genre was extremely limited in Finland. He believed he never got the attention he deserved in his home country. It made the hot-tempered artist rue the inwardness of Finland, a place considered fairly isolated at the edge of Europe before becoming a member of the EU.

“Everything was happening somewhere else than here. We often considered moving abroad, but the plan failed to materialise, since we had family and the band in Finland,” sighs Sumén.

At the same time, Finland offered a good base for making music. The government grant system has encouraged many musicians to stay in Finland even after the EU made moving from country to country easier.

Hunting for sounds

Vesala and Sumén lived in the countryside, in a former school building, producing massive amounts of music. Vesala’s arsenal included hundreds of instruments,

which he used creatively when recording.

"The school's gym was full of scrap metal, tubs and other junk that was used frequently in recordings. We often hit junkyards to see what we could use," Sumén explains.

The two of them looked for instruments on travels to India, Vietnam and Thailand, and tours were a constant search for more instruments.

"Edward's music was very emotional and unpredictable, and never based on repetition," Sumén describes.

Paintbrush, Rock Penstemon (1993) was one of the results of the collaboration between the two musicians. It is Sumén's solo album with compositions by Vesala. Sound & Fury also played on the album, and its horn section gave the music a strong organic base together with Sumén's electric guitar. The album is considered Sumén's main work together with what he did as part of Sound & Fury. Although with the latter, the work was never completed due to Vesala's early passing away. One more album was recorded but ECM refused to release it.

"Vesala was a hugely creative person, who spread his spectre far and wide, and even though he wasn't publicly recognised in Finland, he was always remembered where decisions were being made. Grants made working possible," Sumén says.

He now receives a governmental artist's pension and lives a peaceful life in a small town in eastern Finland. When his friends ask him to, he might still play a track or two on their records. Sometimes the peace and quiet is broken by gigs with the reformed Sound & Fury, which Sumén – a man who breathes music – can't refuse, even though moving demands such great effort these days. On the other hand, the search for one note can sometimes require great effort. If someone knows it, Sumén does.



Petri Anttonen

Jimi Sumén and Edward Vesala (1994).

■ Tommi E. Virtanen is a journalist specialised in popular culture. He also directs documentaries.

Translation: Jonathan Mander

Jimi Sumén

- :: b. 1958
- :: guitarist, producer
- :: in autumn 1981, joined the English pop band Classix Nouveaux, and returned to Finland after a few years.
- :: through the 1980s worked as a producer and sound engineer.
- :: Edward Vesala's right hand as Sound & Fury's guitarist and sound engineer through the 1990s.
- :: in 2000 was diagnosed with MS and had to stop playing and working. Now on invalidity pension, but occasionally plays with the reformed Sound & Fury.



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