

33¹/₃ EUROPE



**A BLAZE IN THE
NORTHERN SKY**
by Ross Hagen

B L O O M S B U R Y

Darkthrone's
A Blaze in the
Northern Sky

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Darkthrone's A Blaze in the Northern Sky

Ross Hagen



Series Editor: Fabian Holt

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*For Nora and Graham, and my parents,
Bill and Goldie.*

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Introduction: "Kathaarian Life Code"

For fans of Norwegian black metal, Darkthrone are as much an institution as they are a band. From their beginnings in the late 1980s, they have released seventeen studio albums and several EPs and compilations of demos. The band formed in the latter half of the 1980s in the Oslo suburbs, initially playing death metal and signing with the English independent label Peaceville Records. Their first album, *Soulside Journey* (1990), was a solid death metal album very much in line with the mid-paced death metal that dominated the Peaceville roster at that time. Their second album, *A Blaze in the Northern Sky*, followed in 1992 and marked a radical change in musical and artistic direction, particularly in terms of its unpolished sound. This record ultimately became one of the foundational albums of Norwegian black metal. Darkthrone's following albums, *Under a Funeral Moon* (1993) and *Transilvanian Hunger* (1994), further solidified and defined the black metal style and sound, establishing Darkthrone as one of the early standard-bearers of black metal. In the following decades, the musical duo of Ted "Nocturno Culto" Skjellum (vocals, guitars, bass) and Gylve "Fenriz" Nagell (drums, additional guitar, bass) have become elder statesmen of black metal, with a tireless dedication to the metal underground in spite of their prominence. In keeping with this ethos, Nocturno Culto and Fenriz have

disdained many of the show business aspects of the music industry, even as black metal's popularity has grown by leaps and bounds. This dedication to the underground, along with musical output that changes and evolves according to their whims rather than the expectations of fans or record labels, has endeared them to black metal fans worldwide.

A Blaze in the Northern Sky was conceived largely out of Darkthrone's dissatisfaction with their first album, in spite of its generally positive reception, and their growing disillusionment with death metal overall. In 1991, the band had been hard at work on a sophomore death metal record called *Goatlord*, which was in many ways an even more ambitious and intricate album than their debut. The then-quartet, including guitarist Ivar "Zephyrous" Enger and bassist Dag Nilsen, had worked incredibly hard writing and rehearsing their ultimate death metal opus, but Ted, Gylve, and Ivar were growing increasingly unsatisfied and restless with the more technical material. They began to worry that they were painting themselves into a corner, and they had also been reveling in the "primitive" sound and uncomplicated musical aesthetic of older underground metal like Celtic Frost and Bathory. Between the three of them, they decided that this was the direction that Darkthrone should take as well. Dag Nilsen, for his part, was apparently none too pleased to abandon *Goatlord* but agreed to stay on and play the sessions.¹

This decision left Darkthrone in a slightly problematic situation, as they were already booked to record at Creative Studios in Kolbotn in about five months. They hurriedly wrote three new songs in their new "primitive" black metal style—"Kathaarian Life Code," "Where Cold Winds Blow," and "In the Shadow of the Horns"—and set about reworking material from *Goatlord* into the remaining three songs. Of those three,

“Paragon Belial” and “The Pagan Winter” are patchworks of older death metal material and more “blackened” elements, while the song structure of “A Blaze in the Northern Sky” remains more or less intact from the version on *Goatlord*, but with a markedly different approach to the drum performance in some parts. The album’s running order intermingles the older and newer material, opening with two of the new black metal tracks (“Kathaarian Life Code” and “In the Shadow of the Horns”), switching gears to the older “Paragon Belial,” returning to black metal with “Where Cold Winds Blow,” and then closing with “A Blaze in the Northern Sky” and “The Pagan Winter.” Taken as a whole, the album is, then, a bit of a mixed affair stylistically, although the deliberately low-fi production does a lot to hold it all together. Although Peaceville Records had understandable reservations about the record, it was released in February 1992 for an international black metal audience that, it should be said, did not actually exist at the time. Yet, the album quickly came to have a profound influence on many metal musicians thanks to Peaceville’s reach as a label and the fact that *Soulside Journey* had already established Darkthrone’s status both in Norway and abroad.

As the first Norwegian black metal record to gain significant international distribution and attention, Darkthrone’s *A Blaze in the Northern Sky* also marks the start of a broader turning point in the history of Scandinavian rock music. Prior to the advent of Norwegian black metal, most people in the English-speaking world would have been hard-pressed to name a distinctly Norwegian style of music, or any Norwegian singers or musicians. Even today, most English-speaking listeners’ experience of Norwegian popular music would probably consist of “Take on Me,” “What Does the Fox Say?,” and the numerous hit songs written and/or produced by the Trondheim