

Asko, P-K and Espe of 22-Pistepirkko have been playing music together for over 30 years – it's an achievement any band could be proud of. Over these years they've made Finnish alternative rock history and gained a sizable community of fans all over Europe.

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# 22-PP doing their thing

"From Utajärvi, Finland. 2 brothers and a friend, doing their thing. Since 30 years."

These three sentences on the 22-Pistepirkko Facebook page say a lot. It all starts in a small village in northern Finland in the early 1980s, spurred on by the creative dynamics of three people close to each other and a desire to do things their way – including music.

What the last thirty years have proven is that 22-PP's 'own thing' works. It has been an inspiration to fans all over Europe and driven the band to resist the impulse to repeat itself from record to record. They've dabbled in garage, punk, pop, blues and electro, all the while retaining their own identifiable sound. What is it? "Weird rock," says the band's bass and keyboard player Asko Keränen. "Simple rock songs that are a bit off-kilter."

Perhaps the secret to their long life has nothing to do with any specific genre of music? "For us 22-Pistepirk-



ko is a way to do, think and experiment, a way to compensate for our bad sides and strengthen the good ones," singer-guitarist P-K Keränen describes. "Even though none of us is a particularly talented supermusician, we all support each other. We've learned to play in a manner where the music has its own forward momentum. At times it works in a totally unique manner and that's the greatest feeling!"

## Punk with perfectionism

Opportunities to play rock music in the Utajärvi of the 1970s were scant. Nevertheless, maybe the punk scene in the northern Finland of the time was just the place for the rock'n'roll dreams of schoolboys who couldn't play any instrument to take flight.

Their first band, a punk cover project named Matti Mätä & SS, was soon touring nearby towns and villages, playing with other new bands. Their instrumental inability was a source of horror to everyone, including

other punk bands in the region, but people respected their off-the-hook live performances.

22-Pistepirkko was born out of the ruins of this first band and it no longer relied on pure punk energy, but started developing more subtle ways of getting its message across. In 1982 the trio took part in the Finnish Rock Championship contest – the most important avenue for new bands to gain traction and attention at the time – and surprised everyone with songs totally unlike what was expected of these nascent punk rockers. The fragile songs were described as art rock and minimalist, with sounds unlike anything heard in Finnish rock at the time. To everyone's surprise 22-Pistepirkko won the contest and the hunger within the young musicians grew. The next few years were a torrent of nonstop practicing.

Two of the central tendencies in the band were apparent early on: on the one hand, there was the prodigious amount of energy, often released in blinding moments during live performances, and on the other a remorseless perfectionism – the ability to really concentrate and move forward. "Without the ability to concentrate, we'd never made it to the level where our gigs were actually good, since we started from zero, learning to play and everything," Asko says.

Perfectionism has always played an important role in the band's intensive recording sessions, too, which have often stretched on for months and months. Each record has brought something new to the band's stylistic palette, sometimes to the joy and other times chagrin of their fans. In the 1990s the band made radio rock produced by Swedes and used computers a lot, and in



22-PISTEPYRKKÖ - THE KINGS OF HONG KONG

Ben Kella



the 2000s they went back to their garage roots.

"A dissatisfaction with what we've done drives our desire for renewal. It's driven by a desire to take existing things and make them more interesting and better," P-K thinks. Someone comes up with something exciting; sometimes the whole band gets into a new thing – music, equipment, environments, or self. There are constants, too: "To a degree, our style of playing will always dictate what the end result sounds like," drummer Espe Haverinen notes.

### Live gigs give energy

From the get-go, ZZ Top had a dream: to make a living off music and to play outside Finland. "And to be in control of what we do," Asko adds. Part of the dream has become a reality over time. "On a small scale, it has been our livelihood for decades, or at least a lifestyle. It's been interesting, hasn't gotten boring."

The band set its sights on an international career in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Finnish music exports were virtually nonexistent. Cramped vans, small and sometimes bigger venues, and the European music business in all its facets have become familiar to the band. They have fans all over Europe, but they never became a hit band. And the records never sold as well as the band hoped.

It's not a major source of regret for the band, though. Playing live is where the energy comes from – especially if it's a good gig. "I can recall some really great moments of fulfillment, when we've played a great show and the crowd has been into it," Espe says. "But I can also recall shows that were so bad, I just wanted to crawl underground and disappear. First it's up, then it's down," he continues.

Playing is fun. "It's a way to be involved in something really fantastic. Writing, recording and performing music is, as far as I can tell, something all of us enjoy and that's why we've always had the energy to go on doing it," P-K states. "And we think we're a good band," Espe adds.

The band's loyal fans agree. "I'm overjoyed that people still pay attention to what we do, at least some of them. And there are always new people discovering our music," Asko tells us. "We've done something right if after all these decades people still come to our shows and are honestly moved by the experience – it's great. It helps make sense of it all," P-K says.

### The dynamic triangle

The band is still not bored with playing together after 30 years. Quite the opposite: there's a new, relaxed vibe to their ensemble playing. "It's more and more fun all the time. We know each other so well now that we know ex-

actly what the others are doing," Espe says. "We really don't have to practice a lot anymore," Asko confesses. "We know how to do this."

When talking about the band, the fact that two of the members are brothers is impossible to pass by. The trio admits that this has a major impact on the group dynamics. "Sometimes it's a good thing, other times a bad thing. Something's going on all the time, though," P-K says. Espe is an important balancing element. Everyone has their roles: Asko has ideas and writes lyrics, P-K and Espe write songs. Of course, the roles get mixed up, too. "All three of us embody both discipline and improvisation – a sensitivity to the moment," Asko ruminates.

The dynamic triangle formed by three very different people is what drives the band's creative energy. Would the band still be together if it had been bigger? "Staying together would've been harder," Espe admits. "There are fewer dissenting opinions in a trio. A two vote majority wins, so you only have to talk one person around to your point of view."

"For playing live, three is perfect," P-K says. "We've recorded with more people and it's been a lot of fun. Refreshing, too. You can do things that just us three wouldn't come up with," P-K says.

The most important of their 'adjunct members' has, without a doubt, been **Riku Mattila**, who produced their first four albums. "We learned a lot about the making of records then," P-K explains. They've worked with a lot of other producers over the years, too, and each has made a huge contribution to the band. "Our recording sessions tend to go on and on, so you always learn a lot from the producers," Asko says.

The tight-knit trio has opened up to other band projects over the last few years. "At some point it felt like we spent too much time together," Asko clarifies. Nowadays, in addition to his duties in the mother band, Asko plays as a duo with his girlfriend **Marjatta Oja** as **You/Me**, and P-K plays with Gambian percussionist **Janko Manneh**, as well as playing solo shows.

"We've done this for long enough that we don't have to be jealous about what our band mates are doing, which is nice," Asko states. "We can trust in our ability to play together. As a result, it's fun to try other things,"

## There's always room for improvement

Even after all this time, keeping the band together is not a foregone conclusion for the trio. There are many outside demands on the members' time, like P-K's recent role in a new Finnish movie called *Miss Farkku-Suomi*.

They have their own record company **Bone Voyage Recordings** that tries to provide exposure for new bands and make its own, Pistepirkko-style contribution to the

rock lifecycle. "New bands prove the age-old axiom, that there's always a new generation that discovers what you discovered, but they do it their way. It's a lot of fun to witness," P-K says.

The idea is for the trio to go on playing and new songs are needed to make a new record. "It'd be great to do something new again," Asko says. "At one point we got so into the whole electronic thing that it became boring, but now we are starting to feel a little nostalgic for

those sounds again. Might it be fun to do something electronic again?"

"I think it's once again up to us to create the future. It can be done, but it requires hard work and a lot of writing. And we need to give some thought to how we want to deal with today's realities. The venues are all the same and we are not a hit band. We have to consider how we're going to support ourselves. Do we go on playing the same tours or can we do something to change things? Once you start to think about it, there's a lot to do," P-K thinks.

"We do feel that we have the opportunity to do great things, as long as we really want to do them and get into it," P-K says. "We can always make a better record, sing better, write a better song, sell more records, play in countries we haven't played in yet – there's still a lot to be done!" ■

The band's history all the way up to 2004 was chronicled in the book *22-Pistepirkko* by Viljami Puustinen, published in Finnish by Like and available for free in English at the band's website [www.22-pistepirkko.net](http://www.22-pistepirkko.net)

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