

FEATURES

PAGE 16

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2008

Finnish church services featuring heavy metal, thought of by some as the devil's music, are proving wildly popular with teens

BY **TERHI KINNUNEN**
AFP, MAENTSAELAE, FINLAND



Top: Finnish pastor Haka Keknen, far left, listens to a heavy metal band performing in a church during a Metal Mass.

Right: A heavy metal band performs in a church during a Metal Mass in Maentsaelae, Finland.

Below: Finland, the country that won the Eurovision Song Contest for the first time in 2006 with Lordi's monster heavy metal song, *Hard Rock Hallelujah*, is gripped in metal mania.

PHOTOS: AFP



Praise the Lord, with power chords, shredding and headbanging



Most teens may not get excited about church, but in Finland they go out of their way to attend in the latest testimony to the country's infatuation with heavy metal music: Metal Mass.

"It's nice that there are slightly different church services compared to the usual ones," says 15-year-old Teea Pallaskari, who skipped geography class to make the service in the plain, red-brick Lutheran Church — the state religion — in this small town about 60km north of Helsinki.

Inside, Pallaskari and her classmates squish together on packed pews, belting out hymns as a lead singer moshes wildly onstage to his band's earsplitting tones.

When the music stops, the students burst into ecstatic applause and whistles — to smiling approval from Pastor Haka Kekelaeninen. It's Metal Mass — or Metallimessu — and it's okay to be loud.

"It was really good," Akseli Inkinen, a 17-year-old high school student with long, messy hair and big head-phones, says afterwards.

It is hardly surprising that masses with metal hymns have surfaced in Finland, which won the Eurovision Song Contest for the first time in 2006 with Lordi's monster heavy metal song *Hard Rock Hallelujah*.

If it has a niche audience elsewhere, heavy metal is now mainstream in Finland. Helsinki alone abounds

with heavy metal karaoke bars, dedicated metal clubs and regular gigs, adding to the dozens of summertime heavy metal festivals held around the Nordic country.

Some say the answer lies in the Finnish character. "Finns are known to be reserved, serious and very honest. Somehow heavy metal fits into this as it is nonsense, honest, straightforward and quite gloomy," Mikko Saari, a co-founder of Metallimessu, said.

"When you switch on the radio in Finland, you hear heavy metal music. The Finnish Eurovision Song Contest and even *Idols* (the Finnish equivalent to the *American Idol* competition), were won with metal songs," says Kimmo Kuusniemi, one of Finland's metal music pioneers.

The first Metal Mass in Finland was held in 2006 at the Tuska (Pain) metal music festival in Helsinki. Since then, a Metal Mass tour bus has been zigzagging across the country.

"This is not the church's plan. Bishops did not plan this. It was started by five metal fans, three of whom worked at a church," Saari says.

Not everyone is happy with the mix. Some churchgoers feel loud rock music has no place in a house of God, and some pure metal fans accuse the Lutheran Church of co-opting their music to lure young people.

"Of course some Christian circles were scared and

some true metal people were irate. But many said that the idea was great and that they had been waiting for it," Saari says.

Kuusniemi, 50, who is producing a documentary about Finnish metal music, says he too was at first skeptical. "For me, Metal Mass was a surprise. Metal music and church did not fit in the same room," he said.

But the Finnish music scene has changed dramatically since he started his own band, Sarcophagus, in the late 1970s when the genre was widely considered "devil music," he said. Today, heavy metal "is truly a mainstream phenomenon; metal is everywhere, and people have a positive attitude towards it."

So far this year, Finland's top 10 album sellers include three heavy metal records.

Heavy metal gained a foothold in Finland thanks to independent record labels that gave little-known metal bands a chance to record, according to Jouni Markkanen, a promoter and agent with Finnish Metal Events.

But now, the big — and small — record companies are investing heavily.

"There are many bands with export potential in Finland, it has been proven," says Markkanen, saying bands Nightwish and HIM as well as Children of Bodom have sold well abroad.

But "we are still waiting for a mega class success."

Bangladesh's 'first' surfer looks to create waves around the world

Surfing the Nations, a non-profit organization that promotes surfing in impoverished countries, helps enthusiasts like Jafar Alam learn the sport

BY **JULIE CLOTHIER**
AFP, COX'S BAZAR, BANGLADESH

With his fluorescent board shorts and muscular body, Jafar Alam does not look like a typical Bangladeshi.

While most men his age in this conservative Muslim country are obsessed with cricket, the 25-year-old is more likely to be found surfing the waves on one of the world's longest beaches.

Alam, who says he is Bangladesh's first surfer, is working to not only popularize the sport, but also to build international recognition for the largely untouched beach where he surfs.

This month he will hold his fourth annual surfing competition, when a group of 15 American surfers will descend on the beach to compete against locals.

Until Alam started the Cox's Bazar Surf Club in 2002 — based out of the two-room house he shares with five family members — he said the sport did not exist in his country. He now has 48 students, including 12 girls.

Although home to a 125km stretch of unbroken coast, it was only the occasional intrepid international tourist who would test the waves, he said.

A decade ago Alam bought a surfboard from

a visiting Australian tourist for US\$20, and for five years tried to teach himself.

He found it difficult to stand up and would often lose his board as he had no leash.

Finally he was spotted through a pair of binoculars by Tom Bauer, founder of the Honolulu-based non-profit organization Surfing the Nations, which promotes surfing in impoverished countries.

"He gave me a proper leash and polished my board with wax. It was the first time I'd heard the words leash and wax," Alam says. "He asked me how many surfers were in my country. He'd found none except me."

Bauer, who will return to Cox's Bazar for this month's competition, likens the surfing conditions in southern Bangladesh to those at the famous Huntington Beach in California.

He says the sport has enormous potential to boost tourism in Bangladesh, where nearly 40 percent of the 144 million population survive on less than US\$1 a day.

"It's one of the hottest things for tourism in the whole nation," Bauer says, adding that Alam has even used his surfboard to save people from drowning.

"Like all Islamic nations, people don't go into the ocean. They go fishing, but so many kids

drown. They don't know about water safety."

Bauer says that while the world's surfers go out of their way to find waves off the beaten track, Bangladesh is still very much under the radar.

"When I first went there, people would say Are you crazy? But I always knew there were waves. We are showing the world," he said.

International tourism is a tiny sector in Bangladesh. Just 0.1 percent of visitors to the Asia Pacific region will stop off in Bangladesh, according to the World Tourism Organization.

Cox's Bazar local politician Mohammed Shahiduzzaman believes surfing could help

bring foreign visitors to the region.

"It could create a lot of interest. The potential is endless," he said.

Both Alam and Bauer say that trying to make the sport mainstream in Bangladesh is not always easy.

"The girls wear a T-shirt and cotton trousers while they surf. They can't wear the saris that they normally wear out of the water because you can't surf in a sari," Alam says.

"Five of my female students have dropped out because some families say surfing attacks social and religious values. Some girls wear shorts and T-shirts."

Running the surf club is now Alam's full-time job and Surfing the Nations has sponsored him to visit Indonesia and Sri Lanka to take part in surfing contests.

Bauer says despite the challenges, he believes Alam's legacy as the country's first surfer will have a place in the history books.

"Surfing will revolutionize how people in Bangladesh think about the water in the same way surfing has revolutionized the beaches in Australia."

Left: Surfer Jafar Alam poses with his surfboard at his home in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

PHOTOS: AFP

