

RIISING UK METAL

HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

IT'S HARD TO HAVE HOPE is the sound of defiance in troubled times. At the heart of its creators, **SVALBARD**, is a belief in better that refuses to be defeated...

WORDS: JAMES MACKINNON PHOTOS: NAT WOOD

The alethiometer is a compass-like device in novelist Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy, from which Svalbard guitarists and vocalists Serena Cherry and Liam Phelan lifted their band name. By positioning its needles on particular symbols and focusing their will, the user could discern truth from illusion. A bullshit detector, basically – one that has a fitting parallel with Svalbard's own keen sense of moral truth.

"We've probably alienated a lot of people with our lyrical content, because they might not want to hear what I have to say," offers Serena, talking about their upcoming second album, *It's Hard To Have Hope*, on a bright, calm afternoon in a quiet corner of St Anne's Churchyard, Soho. "But the songs aren't there to tell people about social injustices. They're there to question why social injustices still occur, because

sometimes you don't know how you feel about something until you're having to empathise with someone else. I also feel that metal is so angry and I want to harness that to talk about why I'm angry, not just make generic noise."

"Generic", though, isn't a word anyone could use to describe Svalbard. Since forming in Bristol in 2011, the band – completed by bassist Adam Parrish and Mark Lilley on drums – have been channelling outrage into an indomitable blend of visceral, hardcore-tinged metal and cathartic post-rock over several EPs and 2015's debut album *One Day All This Will End*. At the centre of this maelstrom are Serena's articulate lyrics, which – whether calling out misogyny, slacktivism or anti-abortion laws – cleave through the political lip-service paid in much of modern metal. It is the distillation of these elements that makes *It's Hard To Have Hope* simmer with the incandescent defiance of a force united.

Come and have a go if you think you're 'ard enough

Yet, as Serena explains, she has not always had the support and solidarity that she has found with her bandmates. In fact, going to gigs provided her first personal experiences of injustice – one that is sadly common among women.

"I'd expected metal to be this world of outsiders where everyone would be accepted, but it was very much a boys club and you would get questioned for wearing a band T-shirt," she says. "Then when I got into playing metal and went to a practice room, because I was a 16-year-old girl, people were like, 'Ugh, I'm not jamming with you!' I felt extremely let down."

Determined not to be defeated, she bought a four-track recorder and made three black metal albums by herself. But again, misogyny reared its head when her live band – men she was paying to play with her – moaned she was "too bossy" to work with. "One of my favourite insults," she laughs, recalling the absurdity, "was a guy who said, 'Who do you think you are? [Opeth's] Mikael Åkerfeldt?'"

Serena laughs a lot about memories that aren't really laughing matters. She laughs nervously, thinking about openly hostile men who'd question her presence at gigs. She laughs about a YouTube comment left on a Svalbard video that read, "great song, but the lyrical content can fuck off".

"You laugh because otherwise you would give up," she says with a sad smile. "I do teeter on a line of being so close to calling it quits, because it would be easier to not fight sometimes. But what's the point in taking the easy route?"

Fortunately, the road less travelled led to a gig in Bath, in 2011, and crossed paths with future bandmate Liam. They bonded over his Dying Fetus T-shirt and the shoegaze sounds Serena was making (then as a solo artist); a jam session soon followed. Again by chance, Mark was in the same studio, and as early as that first practice it was clear to all three they could be something special. "We were pulling in all these different influences and it was this real open, creative moment where none of us could explain why, but something was clicking," she recalls excitedly.

After so many years in isolation, things began to gel rapidly. The band solidified once Adam joined the fold after "a revolving door of bassists", and Svalbard found a kinship touring with Pariso, whose Alex Fitzpatrick signed the group to his label, Holy Roar. Since then, Svalbard have formed fast friendships touring with labelmates Ohhms, Conjurer and Employed To Serve. "I often have to pinch myself at how my life is now, because if you had told me I would be in a band with three people that understood me and what I was trying to do, and not only that, but that we would have all these other bands along for the ride as well [I wouldn't have believed you]. It's definitely a musical community."



Svalbard: always first in line for Thorpe Park

"IT WOULD BE EASIER NOT TO FIGHT, BUT WHY TAKE THE EASY ROUTE?"

SERENA CHERRY

Building on the solid foundations of raging post-metal and socially conscious lyrics established on One Day All This Will End, *It's Hard To Have Hope* pulses with the seismic undercurrent of a world in turmoil. Inspired by the rock-as-manifesto attitude of bands such as Manic Street Preachers and the direct, outspoken writing of Caitlin Moran, Serena's lyrics tackle the class divide inherent in unpaid internships and, on *For The Sake Of The Breed*, question the preference for purebred dogs over rescue animals. These songs' ability to spark debate was immediately apparent when the latter instigated a discussion with producer and purebred owner, Lewis Johns.

"Initially I was a bit scared," she says, "because we were working together and I didn't want to fall out, but afterwards I was thinking, 'Well, this is why we're raising these issues – conversations like this. We could see where the other was coming from. You need to be able to disagree with people and challenge each other's perceptions. Otherwise, where's the progress?'"

Some of the most politically charged and hardest-hitting moments on the album, though, are also the most personal. *How Do We Stop It?* explores the vulnerability of women at gigs and the low rate of sexual assault convictions. Unflinchingly placing the listener directly in the crowd, it is rooted in Serena's own experience of being sexually assaulted in a mosh pit at Wacken

Festival, when she was 18 years old. It is something she talks about with remarkable candour, but has only recently felt able to do so.

"There's this attitude that women who get sexually assaulted should keep it to themselves because it will 'make things awkward' for people," she sighs. "When I got home, I threw out all my band T-shirts. I didn't want to look like the people who had done that to me. And fucking hell, how many people stood there and let that happen?" It's the kind of provocative question that is raised frequently across the album in different guises, whether it's Liam asking '*Is this just what happens at shows?*' in that song, to the exasperated cry of '*Isn't it obvious?*' when deconstructing the term 'feminazi'. Serena does believe the situation for women in music is

improving, slowly but surely, though, citing the #MeToo movement as a turning point, as well as Architects' Sam Carter calling out a groping incident he witnessed while onstage last year. In the immediate term, there is a practical measure she would like to see implemented at gigs to safeguard women.

"There should be some kind of hand signal that you can do in the crowd to let security know that someone is making you feel threatened. If bigger bands united on this subject and it caught on, just imagine how it would change the gig-going experience for women."

The honesty in these songs will have its detractors, and Serena admits that she is bracing herself for reactions both good and bad. "But do you know what?" she says, leaning in conspiratorially, "I'm prepared for the negative reactions, because I've been getting negative reactions my whole life in metal."

She lets out another laugh, but this is one of anticipation, knowing that in this fight she will now have friends to support her. Because Serena is a fighter. It's why the closing lines of the album are '*I may be aching and exhausted, but life's not over yet/So it doesn't hurt to hope and it will never hurt to try*'. It's why, regardless of YouTube comments, abusers in crowds or attitudes that would seek to separate us, Svalbard refuse to be silenced – because they know just how tough it is to keep that hope alive.

"As hard as it is, the fight goes on, even at rock bottom," she says, with conviction. "Even when you're up against it – politically, mentally, physically – there is always fight." **K!**

IT'S HARD TO HAVE HOPE IS SET FOR RELEASE VIA HOLY ROAR ON MAY 25. SVALBARD PLAY THE UK THIS MONTH – SEE THE GIG GUIDE FOR INFORMATION. MANY THANKS TO THORPE PARK

UPS AND DOWNS

It's not *all* heavy issues with SERENA. She's also a bit of a rollercoaster fiend...

"I'm a rollercoaster enthusiast, which is why I wanted to do this shoot here in Thorpe Park. As much as it is a magical theme park, it's also not afraid to be a bit dark. Derren Brown's *Ghost Train* is all about the psychology of fight-or-flight response

and the swamp area is themed on how people deal with alien attacks and the unknown.

"They really know how to play on people's fears and it's quite a psychological park. I've always been drawn to the

ones that combine a dark theme with a scary ride, because it's so dramatic and cathartic having this crazy structure that you can step aboard and conquer.

"I've ridden some of the tallest and fastest rollercoasters in the world – more

than 500 now – and I even made the guys stop our van in Germany just so I could ride one of the biggest rollercoasters in Europe. There's one in Stavanger in Norway called the Svalbard Express, and when we're over there in October we are *totally* going to ride it!"

