



*PopMatters*



## **Dungen**

### **Tio Bitar**

(Kemado)

US release date: 15 May 2007

UK release date: 21 May 2007

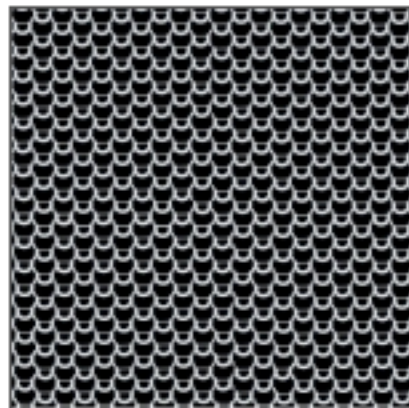
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**by Adrien Begrand**

So rarely does a band so indebted to the classic rock of the late '60s and early '70s produce music that's almost indescribable, but that's exactly what Sweden's Dungen did in 2004, when unsuspecting listeners were blindsided by the barrage of screaming guitar jams, jazzy breaks, and sumptuous vocal melodies heard on the jaw-dropping *Ta Det Lugnt*. You could hear Hawkwind, but it never reached a similar level of ferocious space rock. Hendrix-like solos were offset by rose-tinted, folk-inspired vocal melodies. The album exuded starry-eyed, acid-enhanced euphoria, but lurking below was an anxiousness, whether it was the frenetic guitar fills of the thundering percussion. We heard the sounds of vintage Can one minute, and modern indie band Of Montreal the next. The vocals sounded appealing, but they were sung in *Swedish*, for crying out loud. However you wanted to describe the record, its most admirable accomplishment was how it unified disparate audiences. It was indie rock that attracted classic rock and metal fans; it was hard rock that lured in the indie scenesters. And when Dungen had us all entranced by their free-form jams and pastoral melodies, they brought out the jazz flute, and went Ron Burgundy on all our asses. And after an initial, "What the hell?" we succumbed, and dug it immensely.

Largely a one-man project by multi-instrumentalist Gustav Ejstes (who plays everything from guitar, bass, and drums to keyboards, flute, and strings), Dungen's musical progression has been steady since its inception, from 2002's more folk and jazz-oriented *Stadsvandringar* to the more guitar-centric *Ta Det Lugnt*, and album number five continues that growth, wisely opting to keep things simple and stick to the primary strengths of the Dungen sound. If anything, the 10-track *Tio Bitar* (which aptly translates as, "10 pieces") neatly meshes the sounds of the two previous albums, evoking a strong summery vibe, but at the same time, isn't hesitant to darken the mood every so often, be it via a menacing riff or haunting piano chords. Best of all, Ejstes's trademark production is still there; recorded in the same rural house where *Ta Det Lugnt* was created, the new album exudes a similar warmth in its mix, the overdriven guitar tones and tight drums bearing that familiar slight distortion that made the last disc so appealing.


While the immediacy of such instantly catchy numbers as "Panda" and "Stadsvandringar" is toned down, and there is more emphasis on instrumental pieces, *Tio Bitar* is a much more focused effort than past releases, song lengths mostly held to the three- to five-minute range, arrangements resolving themselves quickly without flying off the handle for extended periods. That's not to say we don't get plenty of the kind of phenomenal guitar noodling that lured us in the first place. In fact, we get that right off the bat on the nearly four-minute, somewhat ironically titled "Intro". Ejstes might be the straw that stirs the proverbial drink when it comes to Dungen's music, but his secret weapon has always been lead guitarist Reine Fiske, and true to form, Fiske makes his presence known immediately on the track, unleashing a torrent of effects laden lead fills that careen toward a distorted, crunchy conclusion, eventually giving way to an oddly incongruous, yet effective recorder melody, the duel with Fiske's screaming feedback seeming as mismatched a butterfly battling an elephant, yet somehow appropriate.



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The guitar squalls and squeals continue on "Gör Det Nu", and again, the furiousness of the rhythm section (it's as if the ridiculously talented Ejstes is channeling both Keith Moon and John Entwistle on each track) is offset by gentler touches, this time more specifically electric piano and Ejstes's trademark vocal harmonies. "Familij" is far gentler, 12-string and acoustic guitars acting more in a supporting role to the spacious, almost playful organ tones and drones. The restraint carries over on to the mellow "C Visar Vägen", Dungen's most outwardly folk-oriented tune since *Stadsvandringar*, acoustic guitar commingling with flute and fiddle, while "Du Ska Inte Tro Att Det Ordnar Sig" is built around a funky central riff, bolstered by Thin Lizzy-esque guitar harmonies courtesy Fiske. Highlighting the album's second half, we get the loose "Så Blev Det Bestämt", a song which would qualify as "uncomfortably twee", that is, until it's rescued by a brilliant acoustic guitar/organ coda that hints at raga-inspired psychedelic rock. In direct contrast, meanwhile, we have "Ett Skäl Att Trivas", which quickly shifts from those sumptuous layered vocals into a wicked descending fretboard-tapping riff that simply screams early 1970s Black Sabbath.

For all the welcome variation, centerpiece track "Mon Amour" provides a welcome dose of visceral hard rock. The only song on the album that dares to stretch out (to the tune of nearly nine minutes), it's one of Ejstes's most thrilling compositions to date. Starting out as an upbeat rocker that centers around a snappy rhythm guitar riff and one of the best lead vocal hooks on the CD, it suddenly shifts gears two and a half minutes in, as if taking an on-ramp from a city street onto the interstate, the tempo increasing as Fiske tears out a raw yet expressive solo. Before we know it, we're in full-throttle Blue Cheer mode, the guitar noise and relentless rhythm section cathartic, but we hit yet another curve in the road, as an organ wafts in, the song suddenly metamorphosing into an extended jam sequence reminiscent of *Ege Bamyasi*-era Can. By the time the song careens toward its conclusion of power chords and cymbal crashes, we want to back up and take the ride again.

It's long been a tendency among the indie crowd to embrace a peculiar new band only to cool off when the surprise of discovery isn't there anymore on subsequent albums. No longer able to surprise listeners with his eccentric sound, Ejstes has issued a challenge to the bandwagon-jumpers with *Tio Bitar*, daring them to stay with Dungen for the long haul and to embrace the familiarity of his exhilarating mélange of vintage sounds. The amount of change from *Ta Det Lugnt* to *Tio Bitar* may be minimal, but this superb new album is no less rewarding.

🎵 "Gör Det Nu" MP3



**RATING:** 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

— 16 May 2007