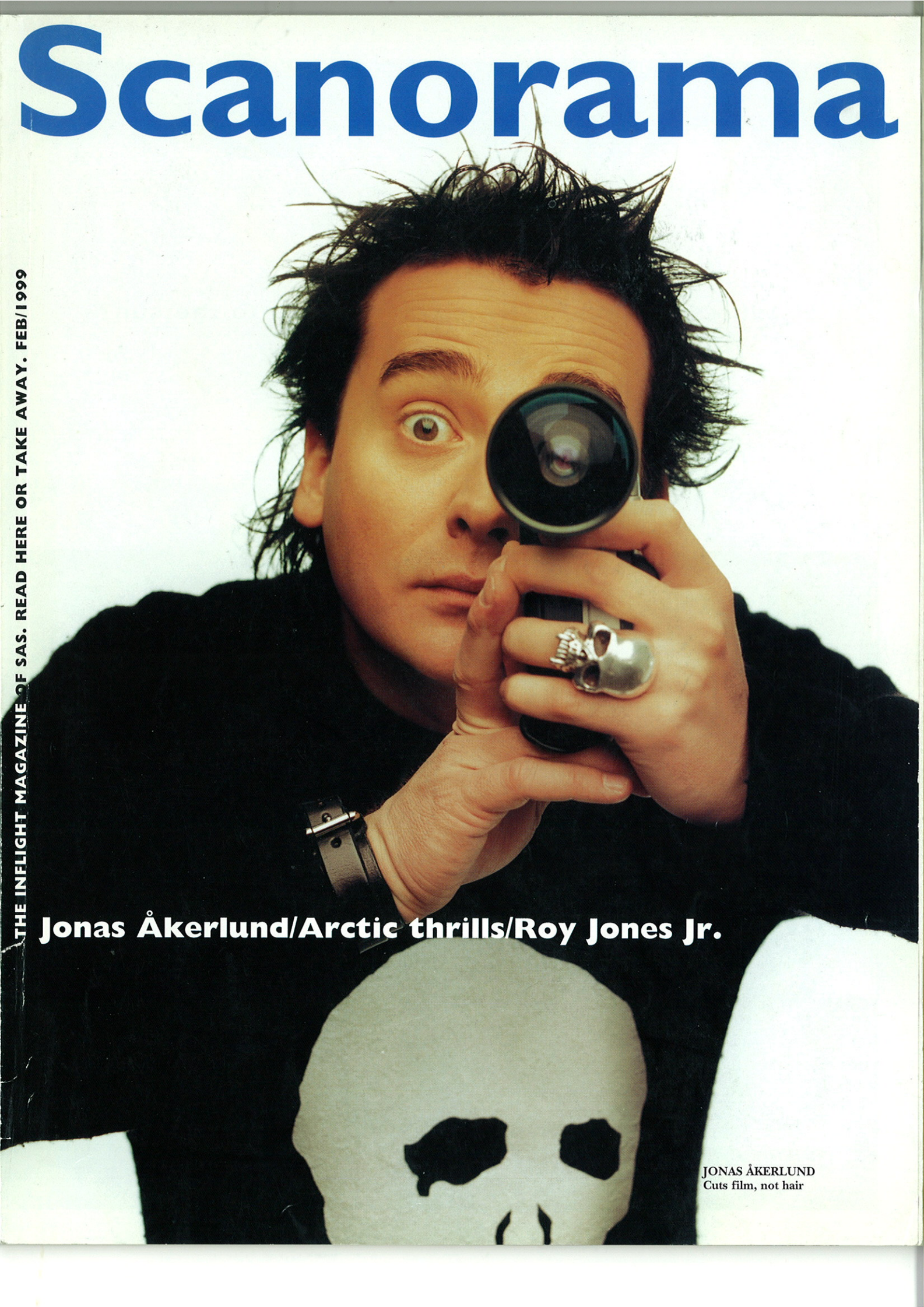


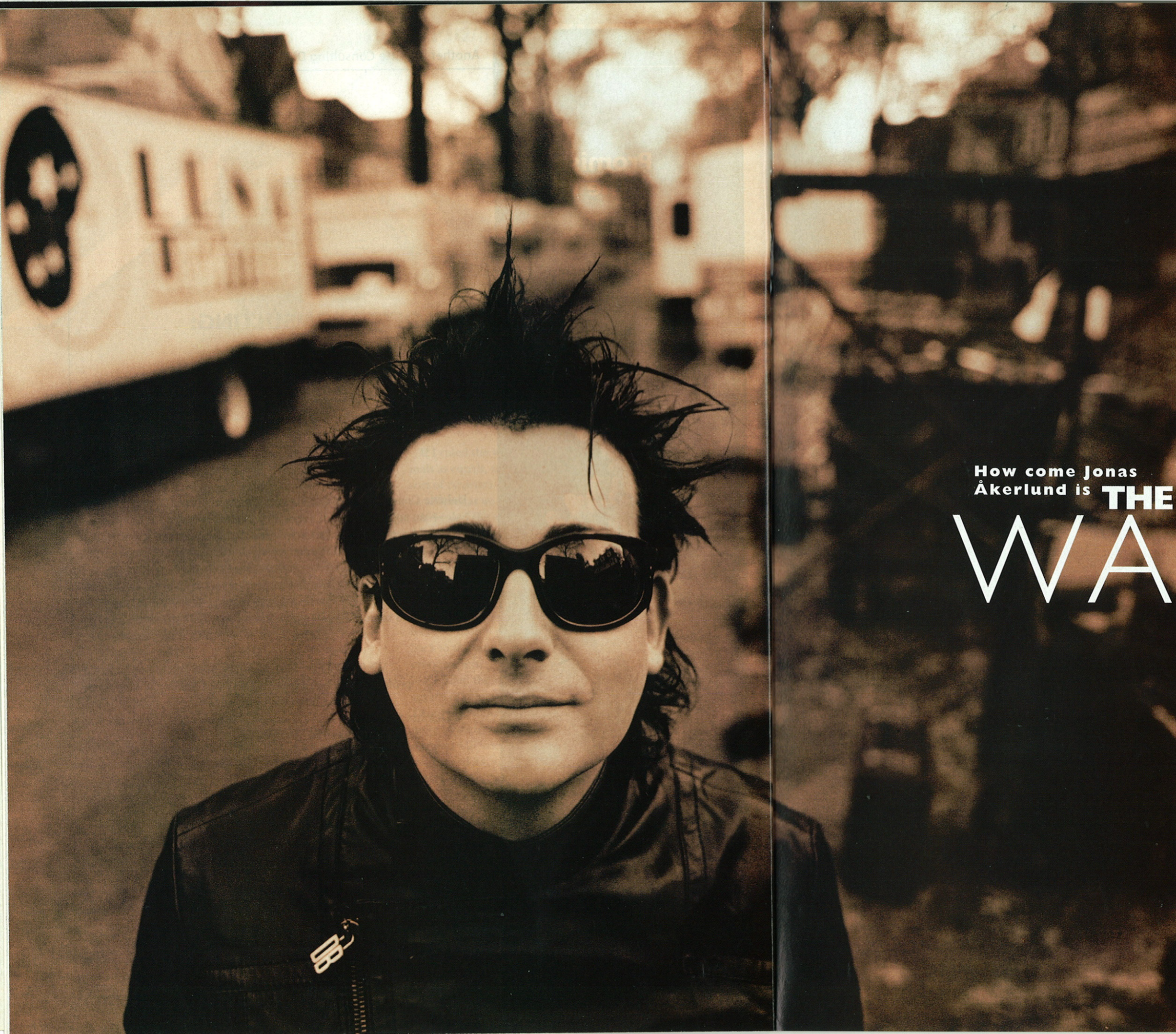
# Scanorama

THE INFLIGHT MAGAZINE OF SAS. READ HERE OR TAKE AWAY. FEB/1999

**Jonas Åkerlund/Arctic thrills/Roy Jones Jr.**

JONAS ÅKERLUND  
Cuts film, not hair





How come Jonas  
Åkerlund is

# THE MOST WANTED

video director in the  
music business? Writer  
Thomas Sjöberg and  
photographer Micke  
Lundström find out

**I was five minutes late** for our meeting, but it would have made no difference if I had been on time. Jonas Åkerlund was on the phone to Mick Jagger, for the fifth time, declining a request to make a video for the Rolling Stones. Meanwhile, I stood engrossed in the hundreds of pictures from his commercials that cover two walls of the conference room of Pettersson Åkerlund Filmproduktion AB, whose offices fill two whole and two



mezzanine floors, with accompanying corridors, loft and roof terrace, in the centre of Stockholm.

"I cannot understand why Mick's so insistent," he said as he hung up. "I had a good idea for 'Memory Hotel' on their live album, Mick thought it was great, but then they changed to 'Gimme Shelter' and I failed to come up with a new idea so I lost interest. My problem is getting those ideas. There's so little time. I get a cassette

**"I get a cassette and a couple of days in which to write a script, which every time has to end up being the best video ever"**

and a couple of days in which to write a script, which every time has to end up being the best video ever."

We chatted for a couple of hours in his cluttered office, where hundreds of video tapes, toy cars, plastic monster dolls, the four Kiss masks, two cowboy hats, a Playmate calendar, photo and fashion books and a death-mask ashtray fought for space with an editing machine. He was in the middle of the final editing of Metallica's new video and asked me if I wanted to see the result so far. Naturally I did, and was very flattered too, since not even the American band themselves had seen it.

To a metal version of Bob Seger's old hit "Turn the Page", Ginger Lynn, one of the big porn stars of the 1980s, plays a hardworking stripper, prostitute and single parent. She sits on the lavatory, she strips, is raped and beaten up before the song ends, and the whole thing takes place in the presence of a ten-year-old girl who plays Lynn's daughter, following her mother to work. The documentary tone makes a strong impression and the video could well be considered a contribution to the sociopolitical debate. It breaks just about every rule by which TV stations are guided. And sure enough, before the world première a week later, American MTV demanded that Åkerlund remove a sex scene and a few seconds showing breasts in a strip club. Paradoxically, the scenes of violence and rape were allowed.

Later that week Åkerlund and Lynn (who had dedicated one of her films, "To Jonas - the pleasure was all mine") were to have appeared on Howard Stern's controversial talk show in New York, but Åkerlund preferred to be at home with his four-year-old son Love Elvis and Swedish girlfriend Titiyo, singing sister of Neneh Cherry. He was tired and bogged down by work after having sat on the jury of the Stockholm Film Festival and seen "a mass of bloody awful films". If he was to go to the USA at all it would only be because Metallica wanted him to make the next video as well (which he later did). Besides, during the weekend, he was to meet his friend

Shooting Metallica's "Whiskey in the Jar" in New York

and client Madonna, whose prize-winning video for "Ray of Light" he had directed, and who was on a PR tour and currently visiting Sweden.

**Jonas Åkerlund is arguably** the world's hottest commercials and video director. He has directed about 250 commercials and almost 40 videos. Roxette has been his most frequent video client, but it was Prodigy's "Smack My Bitch Up" from 1996 that made him world-famous. The video shows the events of a Friday evening, from the perspective of the main character. It consists of drugs, drink, vomit, fighting, strip clubs and prostitution. Adults only and controversial, of course, but nevertheless not unusual one might think, until it transpires that this is a beautiful woman's evening out. Purpose? To warn of what can happen if one isn't cautious and doesn't wind down the partying tempo, claims Åkerlund.

"It caused a hell of a stir in the USA. Even Prodigy were shocked. The film spread like wild-fire across the world on pirate cassettes. So when I got to Los Angeles it was almost a joke: all the agents and people who wanted to meet me, piles of manuscripts and new music to listen to."

Now he's not the only Swedish director with an international following. Traktor is the name of a constellation of six Swedish guys who recently moved their company and families to Santa Monica in California. They have won practically every international award for their commercials – clients include Diesel, Miller Lite, Toyota, Volvo, SAS, Kodak and Tuborg – and they are now producing their first feature film, *Shiny New Enemies*, filmed in the USA with American actors.

Modfilm is another, with clients such as Nike, Coca-Cola, VW and Philips. This production company has a branch office in London so it can be close to the European market and be able to work with the best foreign filmmakers. Along with Traktor and Åkerlund, Modfilm is establishing Sweden as a global advertising power.

Apparently, the international media love this surge of talent. When Åkerlund and his all-Swedish team arrive in Los Angeles the word is that "the Vikings have landed." Åkerlund has been profiled in the major magazines –

*Rolling Stone*, *Billboard*, *US Today* – just as the trade magazines have written everything about Traktor's move to Santa Monica.

This success has not arrived by chance. Swedish commercials have long been able to stand comparison with the international competition. Long before commercial TV arrived in Sweden, cinema advertising was an institution in the public psyche. The longer format of cinema commercials – compared with the short TV spots – allowed the advertisers to tell stories, in which the product did not necessarily have to be shown from the start. This suited willful directors such as Roy Andersson, when he began making commercials whilst waiting for feature film opportunities.

When the Swedish government, around the turn of 1989–1990, decided that the newly started TV4 was to be the first commercially financed, terrestrial channel, there was a whole generation of young filmmakers and advertising agents poised on the starting blocks; raised in an envi-



New kid on the block: the equipment is piling up outside the house in Brooklyn where Åkerlund and his team will shoot the video for Metallica's "Whiskey in the Jar"

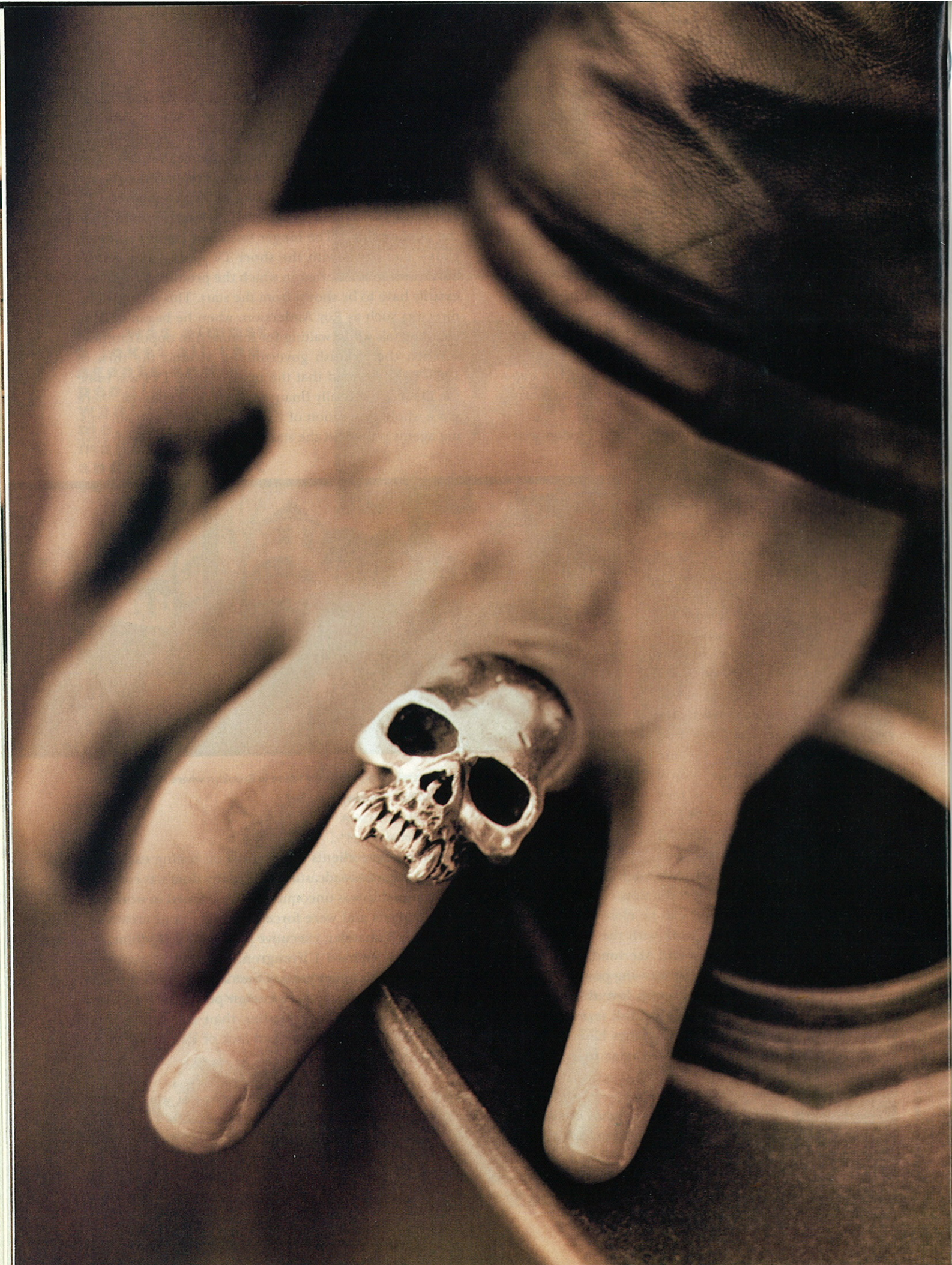
ronment where clients didn't insist on testing each commercial before broadcasting; where freedom was common and censorship was uncommon. "We learned to work with small budgets and were forced to trust in our creativity," says Maria Tamander, executive producer of Modfilm.

Producer Richard Ulfvengren, one of the owners of Traktor, says his generation of Swedish filmmakers is a little more hungry than their foreign peers. "And we move the boundaries a little further than our competitors through our naive attitude and lack of knowledge about the American rules and laws."

**Lars Petterson**, the managing director who together with Åkerlund and film director Johan Renck (i.e. artist Stakka Bo) are partners in Petterson Åkerlund, remembers with pleasure the first time he met the 21-year-old Åkerlund in 1986. Petterson then worked at Mekano, the production company which had up to that time made per-

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*Thomas Sjöberg (thomas@simon.pp.se) is a feature journalist and author based in Stockholm. He recently published a biography of Ingvar Kamprad, the founder of Ikea. His two favourite videos are "Let It All Hang Out" with John Cougar Mellencamp and "Dead Ringer for Love" with Meatloaf*



haps the best-noticed cinema commercials for Hennes & Mauritz, Volvo and Falcon Beer. "Jonas came in looking like a hard rocker and began as a production assistant. About 200 such kids pass through the film and production companies each year. Only a few stay."

Up until then, Åkerlund had played truant throughout most of his high-school years; had become a drummer in what was to become the internationally famous Swedish speed-metal cult band Bathory, had lived in London and earned his living as a building worker and solarium owner; had completed his military service as an infantryman with highest marks and had almost decided to become a regular soldier. But, during his service, he had made information films for the army. A growing interest in film editing, in combination with the realisation that he was not a sufficiently good drummer, made him sit down with a phone directory and run his finger down the list of "Film Companies". It stopped by chance at M, as in Mekano. "I had no idea what sort of company it was," Åkerlund admits today. "I was fantastically lucky, because it was the biggest and most modern and just the place for me. Anything else would have been wrong."

His timing was pretty well perfect, even though he had really never had much genuine interest in filmmaking and had no ambition to be a director. As the government decision on commercial TV was taken, he suddenly found himself in "the business to be in" and was given assignments with the most creative advertisers in the country. He was given real money to play with and real clients and everything he made was broadcast on TV. "We could have an idea in the morning and carry it out in the afternoon."

He turned out to be a natural, and today Lars Pettersson sees him not just as a talented director who understands the technology and who can make both tongue-in-cheek commercials for mineral water Vichy Nouveau and music videos like "Smack My Bitch Up", but also a good strategist and businessman. "After ten years of working with 33 dif-

**He had completed his military service with highest marks and had almost decided to become a regular soldier**

Despite the accolades for his artistry Åkerlund sees himself as more of a craftsman. "I'm doing a service job," he says. "It isn't art so long as they're paying me to sell their CDs"



ferent directors, Jonas was the only one I could consider going into business with."

Today, Pettersson Åkerlund has a turnover of around SKr45m (\$5,6m), although the profit-margin is only between 0.5-8 percent. External production costs are enormous and even though music videos generally have a budget of between \$90,000 and \$375,000, they hardly ever make any money. "We always do more than we get paid for," claims Pettersson. Åkerlund's personal salary, on the other hand, is nothing to be ashamed of: last year he filed an annual income of roughly SKr700,000 (\$90,000).

**Bonnie De Souza, project manager,** and William Russmark, responsible for music at the Swedish ZTV channel which now broadcasts from London, claim that Åkerlund's greatest talent is to bring out the songs in his videos; that he makes films that are relevant to the lyrics and the music. "If we get a sack of new videos we check Jonas's first. He has that kind of status. Whatever he does is cool," says De Souza.

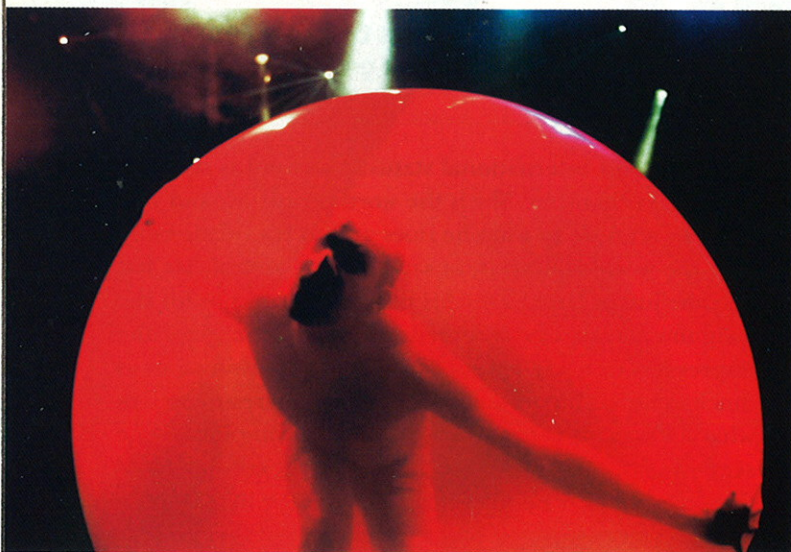
Despite this international status, Åkerlund is still very Swedish in character. Shy is the word people around him use. His attitude to what he does and to his relationship with the world-famous is, to say the least, stoical. He has become just as famous for his many No thanks as for the assignments he has accepted. Moreover, he gives the impression of being an uncomplicated professional in as much as he has no deeper, dark side that expresses itself in what he does. It is true, he works with strong ideas - he sees no reason for making a video that says nothing more than here's this band playing a tune. And he likes to push the boundaries just a bit harder each time: "If they give me

an inch I take a mile". But he definitely doesn't see himself as some sort of artist. "I'm doing a service job. I'm an artisan, cutting and pasting. It isn't art so long as they're paying me to sell their CDs. What makes me happy is seeing a satisfied client and knowing we've done a good job. I'm childishly afraid of disappointing people."

He has stopped looking at what other people do. He used to skim through the fashion magazines and check the commercials. Now he doesn't even have MTV. "As regards to creativity, something happened to me a few years ago. As I looked at my finished products I realised that everything I did well had come from my heart, my experience, dreams and visions, from my son. I've tried to make the most of that. That's one reason why things have become better now; I've relaxed and don't bother too much about what others do."

So, what's left? Super Cirkör, his attention-grabbing circus last summer, was an experience that whetted his appetite. Then there are more commercials and perhaps feature films, even if he has already turned down offers from Oliver Stone and Steven Spielberg. I get a little worried, however, when he tells me his favourite films include *Kingpin* and *Dumb and Dumber*, but am immediately relieved when he also mentions *Rosemary's Baby*. His agents (he has no less than six in the USA, two in Paris and two in London) mercilessly sort through all the manuscripts that are sent to him. One script of interest is by Reidar Jönsson, the author behind Oscar-nominated *My Life as a Dog*. But Åkerlund admits that he has trouble getting started nowadays. "I burn at an even temperature in everything I do. I seldom flare up and feel, This is it! But that doesn't worry me, because I can do a good job just the same. Flare up too much and the job can get overdone, and that can be a disappointment." □

Super Cirkör, directed by Åkerlund, was one of the highlights last year when Stockholm hosted the Cultural Capital of Europe



## Hans Uno Jonas Åkerlund

**Born:** November 10th 1965 in Stockholm

**Profession:** Music video and commercials director

**Education:** None

**Income:** SKr709,000 (\$89,000) in 1997

**Family:** son, Love Elvis, and girlfriend, artist Titiyo

**Resides:** Stockholm, in a two-floor apartment in the same building as his office

**Career:** Drummer in speed-metal cult band Bathory; building worker and solarium owner in London; assistant producer at Mekano Film & TV; award winning director at Pettersson Åkerlund Filmproduktion AB; director of highly acclaimed circus performance Super Cirkör

**Directed videos for:** Madonna, "Ray of Light"; Prodigy, "Smack My Bitch Up"; Moby, "James Bond Theme"; Roxette, "June Afternoon", "Vulnerable", "Run to You"; Cardigans, "My Favourite Game"; Metallica, "Turn the Page", "Whiskey in the Jar"

**Video awards:** The 1998 MTV Video Music Awards for "Ray of Light" (Best Video of the Year, Best Female Video, Best Direction in a Video, Best Choreography in a Video, Best Editing in a Video) and "Smack My Bitch Up" (Best Dance Video, Breakthrough Video)

**Turned down:** Film directors Oliver Stone, Steven Spielberg and Wes Craven and bands including the Rolling Stones, Radiohead, Spice Girls, Smashing Pumpkins, Hanson, All Saints

