

Echoes of the Past

As Norse history captures contemporary audiences, the Viking past finds a new presence in music—defying genres from folk to classical.

By Rowdy Geirsson

With lyrics based on texts and runic inscriptions from the Iron Age and Viking Age, Danish-Germanic band Heilung describes their music as “amplified history from early medieval northern Europe.”



A S THE SUN

sets over Norrtälje, Sweden, a small gathering descends from the gravel-paved courtyard of the Pythagoras Industrial Museum, past old factory machinery and down a small staircase where a performance area, makeshift bar and concert merchandise awaits. Sporting band shirts with names culled from the Norse myths, Thor's hammer necklaces and runic tattoos, attendees of the Månegarm Open Air 2023 festival watch as members of its opening act, Fejd (meaning "Feud" in Swedish) take the stage. But newcomers to today's Viking-inspired music scene might be surprised by Fejd's ensemble of instruments—in addition to the usual assortment of electric guitar, drums and bass, the band also employs an eclectic mix of folk instruments including the moraharpa and Swedish bagpipe. And as the band members launch into their first song, their unique sound does not conform to the usual assumptions associated with heavy metal music—instead, it is very melodic with a folksy touch and filled with an element of storytelling that relies on Swedish-language lyrics inspired by Scandinavian folklore and Norse mythology.

Outsiders to the world of "Viking music" might be more familiar with the heavy metal bands more typically associated with the scene that started in the 1980s. But they might not realize that its origins encompass multiple musical genres that, more recently, have joined together under a common conceptual umbrella—which not only borrows from its varied roots, but also now merges with other forms of music including contemporary classical. It has also established a growing presence in movie, television and video-game soundtracks, thanks to a



PHOTO: JOAKIM ÖBERG

The annual music festival Midgardsblot at Midgard Viking Centre in Borre, Norway, celebrates history through metal, folk and Viking-inspired ceremonies.

revived interest in Viking history, mythology and culture through shows such as the History Channel's *Vikings* and recent films like *The Northman*. In this sonic realm, musicians create and perform original compositions intended to evoke the long-lost Nordic past by a variety of means including references to authentic, historic texts, allusions to folklore and mythology, and inspiration found in nature.



PHOTOS: ROWDY GEIRSSON

Swedish band Fejd at Månegarm Open Air 2023.

THE VIKINGS HAVE HAD A PRESENCE IN POPULAR ROCK music going back to the 1970s, in songs like Led Zeppelin’s “Immigrant Song” and in the early 1980s albums of heavy metal icons Manowar. But Viking metal is generally believed to have first gained recognition as a unique subgenre in the late ’80s and early ’90s thanks to the innovative Swedish band Bathory and its founder/songwriter Quorthon, who set about creating a new style of music—one blending the heavy guitar riffs of metal music with an epic pomposity inspired by a common 20th-century view of the Vikings, and with lyrics deeply steeped in themes of Norse-mythology. The 1990 release of their popular album *Hammerheart* served as a catalyst for a generation of young Scandinavian musicians working with Viking-inspired lyrics and imagery throughout the decade, including Swedish band Månegarm, Norwegian bands Einherjer and Helheim, and others.

Concurrent to this movement, a related, though less widespread, development emerged within Scandinavian folk music, as bands such as Swedish/Finnish group Hedningarna and Swedish group Garmarna began to look towards the past for inspiration as well. Rather than utilizing Norse mythology or the Viking Age as an overt theme like the metal musicians,



Swedish band Månegarm performs a cover of the Viking metal song “Mother Earth Father Thunder” at the Månegarm festival.

they instead sought to recapture a sense of the forgotten world through traditional instruments and a nod towards premodern ballads. And though these two styles remained largely separate through the 1990s, over the past two decades, their combined influences have come together through a growing number of bands that—while difficult to label—have sometimes been referred to as neo-folk, dark folk or ambient. Most of these bands share a reliance on acoustic and traditional instruments (either in addition to or in lieu of electronic instruments), rhythmic patterns, native Nordic languages, and lyrics and imagery that overtly allude to a bygone era, one in which people were more connected to the land and nature in general. They also function as a type of aural and mental bridge—an escape from a world that has become increasingly industrialized and digital.

PROMINENT AMONG THESE ARTISTS ARE MEMBERS OF the Norwegian band Wardruna. Formed in the early 2000s by Einar Selvik and Gaahl (Kristian Eivind Espedal) with Lindy-Fay Hella, Wardruna plays not only traditional instruments, such as the talharpa and lur, but also incorporates sounds created by natural elements such as trees



PHOTO: EDWINA HAY

Faroese singer-songwriter Eivør performs at Faroe Islands Culture Days in New York.

and water. Their lyrics include verses culled from the Eddas (the medieval Icelandic manuscripts that preserved the Norse myths in written form) and reference knowledge gleaned from the ancient runes.

Selvik has also been a prolific ambassador for the world of Norse-inspired music. In 2014, he teamed up with Ivar Bjørnson (of the early Norwegian Viking metal band Enslaved) for a unique and historically significant event:

Lyrics include verses culled from the Eddas and from ancient runes.

the bicentennial celebration of the Norwegian Constitution. The two musicians composed and performed a piece of music for the Eidsivablot Viking festival, one of the events programmed over the course of the year in honor of the constitution's 200th anniversary. Eidsivablot was held at Eidsvoll, the site where the constitution had been drafted and signed in 1814 and where the reigning King Harald had also delivered a public speech to inaugurate 2014's extensive string of related festivities. Since then, Selvik and Bjørnson have collaborated further, releasing two full albums that elaborate upon their original composition from Eidsvoll and that delve deeper into Norway's past, weaving together lyrics in both the Old Norse and modern Norwegian languages as well as historic acoustic and modern electronic instruments to convey the story of the nation's history.

AS VIKING-INSPIRED stories have reached international audiences through other media, Selvik has emerged as one of several musicians who have contributed significantly to the Norse renaissance—he even co-founded a music label, By Norse Music, that works specifically

with musicians engaged in the creation of this style of music. He has also produced original music for the *Vikings* television series, where he also made a guest appearance in 2015, and as an artist on the soundtrack of the hit video game *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*, released in 2020. Other individuals bridging the crossover into pop culture include Faroese singer-songwriter Eivør, a winner of the Nordic Council Music Prize in 2021. With a career that has spanned

Eivør incorporates traditional throat-singing and a shamanic drum.

pop and folk music, Eivør incorporates traditional throat-singing and a shamanic drum in her repertoire, and the result is an ethereal, archaic sound that has been found in the opening credits of the popular television series *The Last Kingdom*, as well as the soundtrack of the 2022 video game *God of War Ragnarök*. Meanwhile, Copenhagen-based artist Danheim provided a musical backdrop to the international traveling exhibition *The Vikings Begin*, curated by Gustavianum (the history museum of Uppsala University) and on view from 2018-19 in the U.S. at museums including National Nordic Museum in Seattle, the American Swedish Institute in Minnesota and Mystic Seaport Museum in Connecticut. Danheim's music has also been featured in the History Channel's *Vikings* as well as its Netflix offshoot, *Vikings: Valhalla*.

OTHER ARTISTS HAVE even connected aspects of Norse history with those of other ancient cultures. Danish-German musical troupe Heilung, who has performed to sold-out crowds at Colorado's Red Rocks Amphitheatre (among other venues), is known for what their members refer to as "amplified history" with their use of rattles, bells, bones and throat-singing in performances, which take inspiration from both early Nordic cultures and those of other parts of the world. Other artists inspired by regional history—of their own homeland or elsewhere—include France's Skáld, The



Experimental folk music band Heilung performs at Midgardsblot 2022.

PHOTO: BIRGIT FOSTERVOLD @KNIFEELVST



PHOTO: JOAKIM ÖBERG



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PHOTO: ROWDY GEIRSSON

Performances at Midgardsblot festival include costumes, symbols and instruments derived from Viking history (top and bottom).

Heilung performing with a shamanic drum (top).
Faroese metal band Týr at Månegarm 2023 (bottom).



PHOTO: BERGIT FOSTERVOLD @KINIPSELVIST

Performing with fire torches at Midgardsblot 2022.

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Netherlands's Sowulo and Mongolia's The Hu.

Recently, this musical world has also spread to that of classical, through collaborations and performances. In 2020, Einar Selvik performed with the Bergen Philharmonic and Edvard Grieg Choir as part of the annual Bergen International Festival. In 2023, the Royal Theatre of Denmark premiered a new and ongoing play titled *Ragnarok* that features an original soundtrack penned by Myrkur, the stage name of Danish musician Amalie Bruun, whose work combines all the familiar traits that are a hallmark of the style—Norse imagery, traditional instruments and, like the Faroese artist Eivør, ethereal vocals.

EVEN THE ORIGINAL Norse-inspired heavy metal scene has taken part in these new collaborations. Faroese folk-metal forerunners Týr have performed with the Symphony Orchestra of the Faroe Islands at the Nordic House in Tórshavn; Sólstafir, an Icelandic band formed in 1995, have accompanied screenings of director Hrafn Gunnlaugsson's 1984 Swedish-Icelandic Viking film *When the Raven Flies* at Reykjavik International Film Festival as well as major rock festivals.

But the ultimate indicator of how much Viking history has taken hold of contemporary Nordic culture can be found at its music festivals. Månegarm Open Air, which takes place over the

Each festival begins with their rendition of a blót, an ancient Norse ceremony.

course of two days, is arranged and hosted by the local band Månegarm (named for the wolf that will devour the moon at Ragnarök, according to Norse mythology), who were formed in the 1990s and received Norrtälje's Cultural Prize in 2023. Still bigger is the four-day festival Midgardsblot, which was established in 2015 by Runa Lunde Strandin following the success of her earlier arrangement for 2014's Eidsivablot. An annual event, Midgardsblot is held each August in Borre, Norway, on the grounds of Midgard Viking Centre, a museum built adjacent to a field of pre-Viking and Viking-Age burial mounds boasting a large collection of related artifacts, including a full-scale reconstruction of a royal hall from the era.

IN ADDITION TO ITS ARRAY OF MUSICIANS, MIDGARDS-blots honors Viking history in other ways. Each festival begins with their rendition of a blót, an ancient Norse ceremony from pre-Christian times (minus the animal sacrifices, of course). The following three days of performances are accompanied by lectures and storytelling related to Nordic history, as well as Viking-Age battle re-enactments, and opportunities to shop for handcrafted Viking-related goods. Walking the grounds, visitors will hear the many variations of Norse-inspired music intermingling—from the chart-topping metal of Swedish mainstays Amon Amarth to the ethereal vocals of Eivør, to the ancient, rhythmic sounds of Norway's Folket Bortafør Nordavinden (meaning People Beyond the North Wind). They'll also see the many audience members it attracts, ranging from diehard fans of individual acts to general festival-goers to others attracted primarily by the celebration of ancient Nordic culture. And as Viking history continues to inspire artists—and captivate audiences—at home and abroad, there's no telling where it will go next.

Rowdy Geirsson is the author of *The Scandinavian Aggressors*, an offbeat odyssey set in the present-day Nordic nations, and a recurring contributor to *Scandinavian Review* and the Sons of Norway's *Viking Magazine*. He also writes McSweeney's longest-running internet humor column, "Norse History for Bostonians".



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