

Holy Hell! Dauði Baldrs Turns 20

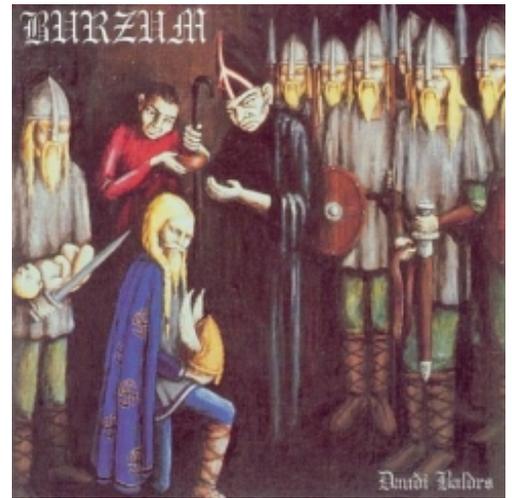
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Varg Vikernes (better known as Burzum) is a committed white nationalist who's made some of the most influential music—beloved, even—of the last 25 years of metal. The defense of his work is always the same: he doesn't use his art to further his views, he's even said so himself. Ah, but it's not as simple as that. As anyone who's seen a Woody Allen movie or listened to an R. Kelly record can attest, artists' deplorable tendencies tend to creep into their work, and Vikernes's is no exception.

Dauði Baldrs is the first of two albums Vikernes released from prison after murdering a bandmate. Normally, he'd make black metal. But all he seems to have been allowed in jail was a cheap Casio, so that's what we hear on *Dauði Baldrs*. The music is rooted in medieval-folk cliché: kingly fanfares, pounding war-drums, pointy-toed minstrels tooting the flute on one leg as hoary men dance with buxom maids. And the titles and sleeve drip with the signifiers of Norse legend (non-Norwegians will recognize names like “Hel” and “Ragnarok”).



Here's where things get hairy. Norse paganism is inexorably intertwined with white nationalism, being a “pure” European religion unaffected by Abrahamic designs. Vikernes makes such an explicit connection between the two in his copious writings that it's ignorant, willfully or otherwise, to call *Dauði Baldrs* apolitical. “Our blood-religion,” Vikernes calls it, and *Dauði Baldrs* plays like a billboard for it—or a cardboard sign by the side of the road.

There's none of the jokey self-consciousness that denotes most Viking worship in metal, where artists project their own machismo and homosocial camaraderie onto their seafaring ancestors. *Dauði Baldrs* is a straight-faced valorization of the Norse aesthetic, and though it's barely 40 minutes long, its individual tracks are lengthy and aim for sweep and scope. It has the feel of a great vernacular epic; the kind nationalists can latch onto to prove the superiority of their culture.

The message of *Dauði Baldrs* seems to be: *Gee, Norse religion sure is a lot cooler than whatever you believe*. Even if we believe his intent isn't rooted in hateful propaganda, Vikernes's love of his source material is clearly far from innocent.

Either way, any power this music could potentially have is undercut by its flimsiness. The one sound that's on every cheap keyboard but that no one has ever actually used—the “Dist. Guitar” preset—inexplicably dominates. Perhaps Vikernes was pining for real guitars. Fake sax is so ubiquitous you'd swear Lisa Simpson had a credit. And the pounding drums of war are rendered in '80s synth-toms straight out of a Stock-Aitken-Waterman production.

As absurd as the record is, the contrast between Vikernes's ambition and his flimsy means of realizing it struck a chord with listeners in the two decades since its release. The dungeon synth subgenre can essentially be chalked up to musicians trying to recreate these records on better equipment. Most chuck the Norse shebang out the window anyway, instead taking inspiration from Tolkien or Moorcock or, in the case of the act Chaucerian Myth, the Canterbury Tales.

So there's tons of music that sounds like this that wasn't made by Nazis: why go back to *Dauði Baldrs*? I can't speak for everyone, but the schadenfreude I get from the image of Vikernes in his cell, hunched over a dinky little keyboard and pathetically trying to realize his vision, is worth the price of admission.

