

Against the Modern World: NeoFolk and the Authentic Ritual Experience

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Introduction

Sacred music has long been associated with the creation and maintenance of religious and spiritual belief systems, often distinct from secular genres of music.¹ This article will consider the ways in which boundaries between religious and secular music become blurred. A combination of decreasing religious affiliation and increasing awareness of alternative spiritualities within the context of an unstable modern world has provided the setting in which artists and bands can find new inspirations and expressions. A genre that has been gaining popularity in recent years is NeoFolk. This is a style of music that rejects modernity and looks instead to the past for solutions. Drawing heavily from esoteric, pagan and environmental themes, bands such as Norway's Wardruna and the pan-European Heilung create haunting music that sits in a liminal space, between pagan-inspired folk music and extreme metal. However, the manipulation of concepts as broad as paganism presents challenges when attempting to identify the intersection between alternative belief and popular music. This article will begin with an overview of NeoFolk's development as a musical genre before exploring the ways in which the genre can be associated with established notions of paganism. Finally, drawing on the work of Keith Kahn-Harris and Marcus Moberg on scene as a methodological framework, this article will examine the way in which NeoFolk has created a liminal scene, both in terms of the music they produce and the interaction between artist and audience during their live performances.

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¹ Gordon Lynch, 'The Role of Popular Music in the Construction of Alternative Spiritual Identities and Ideologies', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 45, no. 4 (2006), p. 482.

From 1980s Britain to 1990s Norway: The Wyrd Origins of NeoFolk

NeoFolk, regardless of its recent growth in popularity, remains niche within the broader discussions of global music genres. As such it is important to offer a brief overview of its origins in order to understand its contemporary iterations. The term NeoFolk was first used in reference to bands that emerged from the 1980s British industrial scene, such as Death in June, Current 93, and Sol Invictus. These bands moved away from the electronic industrial scene and began to incorporate acoustic instruments into their projects. The music that was created by these bands was melancholic, rejecting modernity and its ills, and looking to glories of the past as inspiration. In *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music* Peter Webb examines the various social and cultural themes that these bands were presenting through their projects; paganism, occultism, environmentalism, communalism and socialism are some of the key sources of inspiration.² Of significance to these artists and their influence on later bands, were the ways in which they manipulated all of these references in order to not only create something new, but also to encourage their audience to seek these sources of information in order to understand the various references.³ This manipulation of imagery and themes is of significance to modern bands in the genre, as will be explored later in this article.

Another scene that is important in defining modern iterations of NeoFolk takes place in Norway during the 1990s. The distorted, lo-fi, guttural screams of Norwegian Black Metal might seem a far cry from the ambient folk sounds of past and present NeoFolk. However, this extreme metal scene has a complex relationship with modern NeoFolk. British NeoFolk arose as a response to modernity; similarly, Norwegian Black Metal developed in part as a rejection of the dominance of Christianity in Norwegian society. A key event in this period was a series of attempted and successful arsons against Christian churches, described by the perpetrators as a response to the destruction of pagan sites of worship.⁴ This sentiment signified a development in the scene; there was a move away from explicit

² Peter Webb, *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music: Milieu Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 81.

³ Webb, *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music*, p. 96.

⁴ Michael Moynihan and Didrik Söderlind, *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground* (Venice, CA: Feral House, 1998), p. 104.

anti-Christian forms of Satanism, replaced with a greater emphasis on a pagan Norse heritage. This was expressed through band names, the incorporation of runes into band logos, and lyrics drawing inspiration from various aspects of Norse mythology. This was perceived as being a more authentic form of anti-Christian expression as it was understood to be reviving and preserving a lost national identity.⁵



Figure 1 - Einar Selvik of Wardruna performing at Roadburn Festival 2011 (Wikimedia Commons).

NeoFolk Today: Wardruna and Heilung

Turning to modern day NeoFolk, the connection to Norwegian Black Metal is strongest with the band Wardruna, which was founded in 2003 by Einar Selvik, alongside Lindy-Fay Hella and ex-Gorgoroth bandmate, Kristian

⁵ Deena Weinstein, 'Pagan Metal', in *Pop Pagans: Paganism and Popular Music*, eds Donna Weston and Andy Bennett (Durham, UK: Acumen, 2013), p. 60.

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‘Gaahl’ Espedal.⁶ Wardruna has a distinctive sound compared to their associated Black Metal acts. Wardruna only uses acoustic instruments and has an absence of distortion, preferring a naturalistic, ambient sound. One point of similarity is Selvik’s style of singing, described by the artist as being a unique style that he developed from the Tuvan style of throat-singing; nevertheless, it is stylistically similar to the distorted vocals of many Norwegian Black Metal acts.⁷ Selvik describes this style of singing as being a type of *seidr*, a form of magic referred to in Norse mythology.⁸

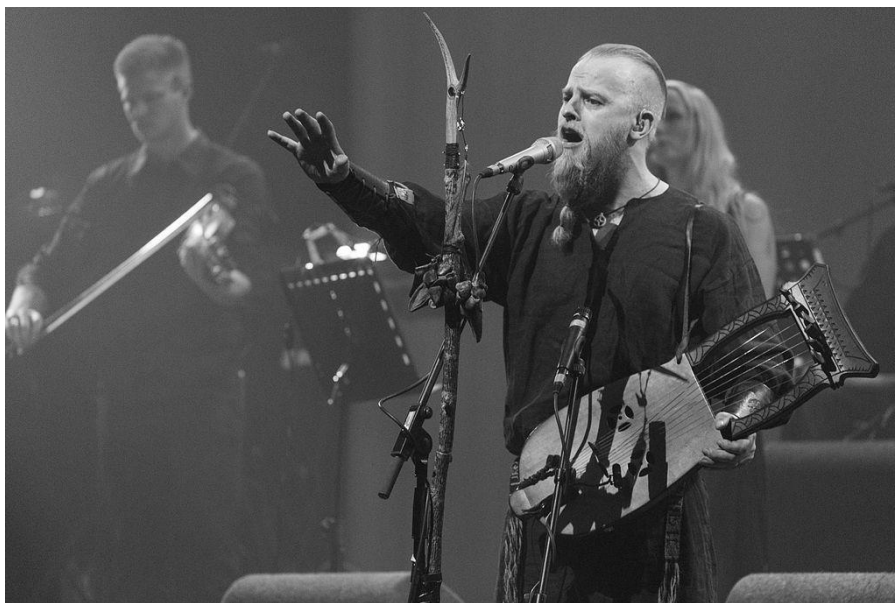


Figure 2 - Einar Selvik of Wardruna performing with a kraviklyra at Roadburn Festival 2015 (Wikimedia Commons).

⁶ Gorgoroth is a Norwegian Black Metal band founded in 1992.

⁷ Niklas Göransson, ‘Wardruna, interview’, *Bardo Methodology* (1 November 2017) at <http://www.bardomethodology.com/articles/2017/01/11/wardruna-interview/>. Accessed 15 January 2020.

⁸ Göransson, ‘Wardruna interview’.

The instruments used by the band are also associated with the Nordic past; these include animal skin drums, goat horns and traditional lyres such as the *kraviklyra* and the *tagelharpa*. In terms of dress, bandmembers wear simple black tunics embroidered with runes and symbols associated with Norse paganism. The simplicity of their outfits and their musical style is contrasted with several of the venues in which they perform. These include: in front of the Gokstad ship at Oslo's Viking Ship Museum; Håkonshallen in Bergen, a medieval banquet hall; and Kirkhellereen Cave in the island of Træna in Norway that dates back to Stone Age settlements. These venues are of cultural and historical significance and reinforce the connection to the past that is a key aspect of the genre.



Figure 3 - Heilung performing at Roskilde Festival 2018 (Wikimedia Commons).

Another band that has played a significant role in increasing the popularity of the genre is the pan-European band Heilung. Formed in 2014 by Kai Uwe Faust (Germany), Christopher Juul (Denmark) and Maria Franz (Norway), Heilung have rapidly gained a large fanbase, recently selling out their 2020 tour of North America.⁹ Furthermore, a YouTube clip of their live

performance at CastleFest in 2017 currently has over 17 million views.¹⁰ Like Wardruna, they use only acoustic instruments with many built by band members. These include animal skin drums, bones, and goat horns; they also incorporate Eastern instruments including a Hindu ritual bell and an Indian *ravanahatha*.¹¹

In contrast to Wardruna, their costume and set designs are elaborate, incorporating animal bones, furs, skins, and other natural found objects. In doing so, Heilung create a distinct ambience, transforming conventional venues into a sort of ritual gathering. The significance of these performances, by both Wardruna and Heilung, will be explored later in this article.

Paganism: A Revolt Against the Modern World

A thread running through these background discussions of early and modern NeoFolk is the concept of paganism. The term is often used to denote a wide range of indigenous groups, pre-modern belief systems, and cultural traditions. In a modern context, and in terms of NeoFolk, the term paganism can be defined as a revival of pre-Christian religious traditions and often involves trans-national borrowings and interpretations.¹² The appeal of paganism as a source of inspiration for many bands is its ambiguity and the ways in which it can be appropriated and manipulated by individuals in order to attract those seeking new notions of spirituality.¹³ This manipulation of the past is significant for groups that seek to find unification against a perceived threat. Michael F. Strmiska provides extensive studies of the use of paganism by folk groups in the Baltic nations of Latvia and Lithuania, examining the ways in which pagan movements arose as a form of resistance against external threats.¹⁴ A pagan history was emphasised as a means

⁹ *Antihero Magazine* (6 December 2019), at <https://www.antiheromagazine.com/heilung-sell-out-first-ever-north-american-tour-add-new-dates-and-venues/>. Accessed 9 January 2020.

¹⁰ Heilung, 'Heilung | LIFA - Krigsgaldr LIVE' YouTube (1 November 2017), at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRg_8NNPTD8. Accessed 9 January 2020.

¹¹ Marika Zorzi, 'The Grand Fashion of Heilung & Their Iconic Sound', *New Noise Magazine* (4 August 2018), at: <https://newnoisemagazine.com/grand-fashion-heilung-iconic-sound/>. Accessed 9 January 2020.

¹² Mattias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 137.

¹³ Siân Reid, "'A Religion Without Converts" Revisited: Individuals, Identity and Community in Contemporary Paganism', in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, eds Murphy Pizza and James Lewis (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), p. 182.

through which national identities could be preserved when threatened with loss, for example when the Baltic states were part of the Soviet Union.¹⁵ These notions of authenticity and unification are reflected in the sentiments expressed by the perpetrators of the church arsons during the formation of Norwegian Black Metal. For their NeoFolk successors, Nordic and Germanic paganism is a primary source of inspiration, providing an element of authenticity to their projects and legitimising their emphasis on the past as a solution to modernity's problems.

Contemporary paganism, as described above, has been criticised for its reliance on romanticised perspectives of pre-modern society and the complex relationship between transnational borrowings, both in terms of geographical locations as well as periods of time. In response to these criticisms more radical concepts of paganism have emerged. René Guénon developed the concept of Traditionalism in order to emphasise the importance of preserving traditional belief system of Eastern cultures.¹⁶ Julius Evola, and later Alain de Benoist, developed this further by moving away from Eastern cultures and placing greater significance on the lost traditions of pre-Christian Europe. This has been referred to by adherents as Radical Traditionalism and is defined as:

A means to reject the modern, materialist reign of 'quantity over quality,' the absence of any meaningful spiritual values, environmental devastation, the mechanisation and over-specialisation of urban life, and the imperialism of corporate mono-culture, with its vulgar 'values' of progress and efficiency. It means to yearn for the small, homogenous tribal societies that flourished before Christianity – societies in which every aspect of life was integrated into a holistic system.¹⁷

Radical Traditionalism provides a separate framework through which to consider authentic representations of the past, distinct to the ambiguities of paganism. Sentiments such as these are reflected by both Wardruna and

¹⁴ Michael F. Strmiska, 'Paganism-Inspired Folk Music, Folk Music-Inspired Paganism and New Cultural Fusions in Lithuania and Latvia', in *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production*, eds Carole Cusack and Alex Norman (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), p. 351.

¹⁵ Strmiska, 'Paganism-Inspired Folk Music', p. 354.

¹⁶ Lauren Bernauer, 'Modern German Heathenry and the Radical Traditionalists', in *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on the Sacred*, ed. Frances Di Lauro (Sydney: University Press, 2006), p. 265.

¹⁷ Joshua Buckley, Collin Cleary, and Michael Moynihan, 'What Does It Mean to Be a Radical Traditionalist?', *TYR: Myth, Culture, Tradition* 1 (2002), cover notes.

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Heilung. However, there are issues of ethnicity and nationalism that complicate these issues.

Issues of Interpretation

While Radical Traditionalism seeks to offer an authentic interpretation of the past, problems still arise when it is applied in a modern context. When considering modern interpretations of paganism Strmiska identifies two distinct categories: ethnic-centred and universalistic.¹⁸ As is implied, ethnically-centred pagans are more commonly associated with strict notions of race and ancestry, while universal pagans are more accepting of diversity in their practices. These categories are further distinguished through reconstructionist and eclectic elements. Reconstructionist pagans believe that modern-day practices should conform as closely as possible to pre-modern practices, while eclectic pagans are accepting of re-interpretations and adaptations for modern settings.¹⁹



Figure 4 - Kirkhellere, Trøna, Norway (Wikimedia Commons).

¹⁸ Michael F. Strmiska, 'Pagan Politics in the 21st Century: 'Peace and Love' or 'Blood and Soil'?', *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2018), p. 7.

¹⁹ Strmiska, 'Pagan Politics in the 21st Century', p. 8.

Strmiska acknowledges that such categorisations can manifest in any number of ways. However, he argues that in most cases ethnic pagans are reconstructionist in their practices, while universalist pagans are more eclectic.²⁰ These categorisations allow for pagan groups, and in particular the NeoFolk bands discussed in this article, to be placed along a spectrum and is particularly useful when comparing their practices.

Both Wardruna and Heilung can be viewed as representing a form of Radical Traditionalism, they seek solutions for modernity's ills by looking to the past. However, in terms of Strmiska's categories Wardruna and Heilung sit at either end of the spectrum previously mentioned, particularly upon closer examination of their respective sources of inspiration and the way in which they interpret and re-present these sources to their audience.

Wardruna's lyrics are drawn from Norse mythology and skaldic poetry, sung in Norwegian, Old Norse and Proto-Norse.²¹ Their emphasis is on Norse culture, particularly in opposition to modern Norwegian society and its emphasis on Christianity. In an interview discussing his commission by the Norwegian government to produce a piece celebrating the two hundredth anniversary of Norway's constitution, Wardruna's Einar Selvik expressed criticism of the current representation of history and the emphasis on Christianity in the constitution.²²

The desire to highlight and restore a strong connection to a pagan past is also reflected through the locations in which they record and perform. These cultural sites of performance have been mentioned previously, in addition they also perform on certain dates, such as the winter solstice. By performing in these spaces and at specific times of the year, Wardruna encourages their audience to take note of more than just the music, and instead encourage them to further investigate the history that is being presented.

Furthermore, Selvik is unique in his approach to NeoFolk as he places greater emphasis on the academic aspect of his art. Wardruna often play at cultural festivals that involve re-enactments and are concerned with

²⁰ Strmiska, 'Pagan Politics in the 21st Century', p. 9.

²¹ 'About Wardruna', at <http://www.wardruna.com/about/>, accessed 7 January 2020.

²² Vanessa Salvia, 'Interview: Einar Selvik (Wardruna)', (13 September 2016), at <http://www.invisibleoranges.com/interview-einar-selvik-wardruna/>. Accessed 7 January 2020.

the preservation of knowledge. In 2019 at the festival, *Midgardsblot*,²³ Selvik presented a seminar discussing Norse heritage and its place in contemporary Norway.²⁴ Selvik's knowledge of pre-modern Nordic paganism is also evident in Wardruna's lyrics. Nearly all the lyrics for Wardruna are drawn from Skaldic poetry and the *Prose Edda* and *Elder Edda*'s. For example, 'MannaR – Liv' from the 2016 album *Runaljod – Ragnarok*, describes the story of Ask and Embla, the two trees that Vili, Vé and Odin encounter in the *Gylfaginning*, the first part of Snorri Sturluson's (1179-1241) *Prose Edda*.²⁵ Their latest album *Skald*, a stripped back production featuring minimal instruments and focusing heavily on Slevik's vocals, both re-interprets several of the band's earlier songs in skaldic verse and also draws on several episodes of the *Völuspá*.

Ethnically focused paganism and Radical Traditionalism, as represented by Wardruna, both raise issues of racial notions of nationalism. Returning briefly to the origins of NeoFolk, the variety of references in early bands, such as Death in June and Sol Invictus, included elements of fascist iconography. These include the use of the Black Sun and SS *Totenkopf* (skull of death) in Death in June's logo. Members of both bands were also actively involved in right-wing groups such as the National Front. While such associations have since been rejected, the manipulation of fascist imagery remains; Death in June featured both the Black Sun and *Totenkopf* skull in a set design of 2013.²⁶ Racism, fascism and homophobia were also aspects of the Norwegian extreme metal scene. In order to present themselves as authentically anti-establishment members of the scene not only committed arson but several were also accused and convicted of murder. Such attitudes have been vocally opposed by bands in recent years. While the early progenitors of NeoFolk are not explicitly tied to modern bands such as Wardruna and Heilung, the emphasis on a singly ethnic identity that Wardruna presents should still be critically examined.

²³ A festival in Borre, Norway, a location significant for its collection of Germanic Iron Age burial mounds.

²⁴ 'Midgardsblot', at <https://www.midgardsblot.no/en/program/seminars/2019/ivar.php>. Accessed 15 January 2020.

²⁵ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, ed Anthony Faulkes (London: Dent, 1987), p. 13.

²⁶ 'Death in June Live Paris Réservoir 30 Oct 2013'. Accessed 15 January 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKMAyORODLQ>.

In contrast to Wardruna's ethnically-centred paganism is Heilung's representation of a global pan-indigeneity, with their members representing various nation states, and utilising German, English, Old English, Old Norse and Proto-Norse languages within their lyrics. Where Wardruna's emphasises national heritage and the Nordic myths, Heilung draw from runic inscriptions found on rune stones, preserved spears, amulets and other relics to create their lyrical content.²⁷ While Wardruna emphasise the location of their performance, choosing sites of cultural significance in order to emphasise their connection to place, Heilung evoke the past through their elaborate costume and set design. As has been mentioned, they incorporate various natural objects, such as furs and bones in their design. Their live performances also incorporate a large cast of actors that contribute to a chorus of chanting and drumming encouraging the audience to join in. These performances are becoming increasingly universalistic and eclectic in their conception ad execution.



Figure 5 - Heilung performing at Mėnuo Juodaragis 2018 (Wikimedia Commons).

²⁷ Zorzi, 'The Grand Fashion of Heilung & Their Iconic Sound'.

During their 2020 tour of North America, they performed several of their opening rituals alongside members of local First Nation tribes.²⁸ What this reflects is an acknowledgement of global pan-indigeneity and an attempt to create connections between shared histories. Christopher Juul believes:

If you dig far enough back into your own history, then you realize how similar [our culture] is to any other ancient culture on the planet. Dig far enough back, and you find the same drawings, symbols, stories, songs and instruments.²⁹

This sentiment indicates an acceptance of modernity as a globalised society, in which various nations and cultures interact with one another. Furthermore, it sits in contrast to the ethnic pagan understanding that emphasises a distinct national identity in order to preserve traditions.

A Scene for Alternative Spiritualities

Before examining the distinct experience that Heilung create for their audience it is important to consider the underlying aspect of both bands, that is the construction and communication of alternative spiritualities through popular music.

Over the last two decades there has been a decrease in participation in traditional religious rituals and an increase in the market of ‘spirituality.’³⁰ Gordon Lynch suggests that “alternative spiritualities are providing social spaces and cultural resources for religious affiliation, identities, and meaning-construction beyond the walls of the church, synagogue, or mosque.”³¹ When considered alongside popular music, the medium provides a means through which alternative spiritualities are initiated, developed and spread globally.³² Much of the research into the relationship between

²⁸ ‘Heilung (@amplifiedhistory)’, Instagram, (12 January 2020), at <https://www.instagram.com/p/B7MWvIHxGA/>. Accessed 15 January 2020.

²⁹ Óran Beo, ‘An Interview with Christopher Juul’, *Medium* (28 August 2018), at <https://medium.com/@gaelberdoval/an-interview-with-christopher-juul-ee08ad91099b>. Accessed 12 January 2020.

³⁰ Lynch, ‘The Role of Popular Music in the Construction of Alternative Spiritual Identities and Ideologies’, p. 481.

³¹ Lynch, ‘The Role of Popular Music in the Construction of Alternative Spiritual Identities and Ideologies’, p. 482.

³² Lynch, ‘The Role of Popular Music in the Construction of Alternative Spiritual Identities and Ideologies’, pp. 482-83.

alternative spiritualities and popular music has been focused on the ways in which artists and bands incorporate and manipulate religious, occult, esoteric and pagan themes.³³ What has been lacking has been an examination of the ways in which bands and artists interact with an audience during a live performance and the subsequent reaction from the audience to these experiences during and after the performance.

A way in which the intersection between popular music and alternative spiritualities can be approached is through the concept of 'scene'. The term has been in use by scholars discussing youth culture since the 1970s, undergoing various developments and encompassing multiple elements of youth culture.³⁴ In his study of extreme metal, Keith Kahn-Harris addresses several associated concepts that are often attributed with a music scene, that of 'subculture' and 'neo-tribes' both of which he regards as being too restrictive when discussing the various elements that contribute to a distinct scene.³⁵ Kahn-Harris' interpretation of scene is dependant on the very ambiguity that it seeks to define: "[t]he concept of scene allows researchers to produce work that is empirically grounded in specific contexts yet is open to connections with other pieces of research and to everyday language."³⁶ Marcus Moberg has developed this concept further through his emphasis on the geographical location of a scene and also the distinct temporal context in which a scene develops.³⁷

NeoFolk has created a new scene, at the intersection between popular music and alternative spirituality. Both Wardruna and Heilung present music that is developed in a distinct geographical location, inspired by a specific period of history. However, as they become recognised internationally, this scene is being consumed and even performed globally. Consequently, both bands attempt to bring a global audience into a liminal scene. For Wardruna this is focused on the preservation of a pagan Norse

³³ For further reading on this topic see Christopher Partridge's *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, 2 volumes (London: Bloomsbury, 2004-2005) and Graham St John's *Rave Culture and Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

³⁴ Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007), pp. 16-17.

³⁵ Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*, p. 19.

³⁶ Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*, p. 21.

³⁷ Marcus Moberg, 'The Concept of *Scene* and Its Applicability in Empirically Grounded Research on the Intersection of Religion/Spirituality and Popular Music', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2011), p. 406.

history, in performing they are bringing their audience into a specific spatial and temporal scene. In contrast, Heilung are more ambiguous with their creation, their re-interpretations create a distinct experience for their audience. The impact of a performance on the audience is a key aspect of understanding the scene. However, due to a lack of ethnographical research into this specific scene there are limits as to what can be accurately discussed. What can be examined is the explicit aims of bands within the scene and the experiences that they provide their audiences.

Wardruna's ethnically-focused, reconstructionist expression of Norse paganism seeks to preserve traditional knowledge and accurately represent this knowledge to their audience. There is increasing appeal of this scene as the Christian hegemony in Northern Europe faces challenges, through secularisation and increasing plurality of religion in modern society.³⁸ Selvik presents himself as both artist and scholar, with many of the instruments and sources of inspiration having no defined interpretation, Selvik is granted a degree of freedom in his artistic expression. Furthermore, Selvik also highlights the audience's participation in his creation, "I always try to leave space in the music for the listener to have their own experience of it, so it's not bombarded with only one meaning."³⁹ As has been discussed previously in this article, layers of interpretation are inherent in expressions of paganism. While Selvik's ethnically-focused expression and his own experiences lend credibility to his creations, the very nature of his primary sources of inspiration must be considered. In particular, his use of the Icelandic *Eddas* is never acknowledged for being composed through a Christian framework, Selvik draws on them as being a direct link to a pre-Christian Nordic identity.

Heilung, in contrast, avoid such problems of interpretation of sources by focusing on the use of past beliefs and traditions in a modern context. Their artistic expression is simply one such interpretation of their sources, presented to a modern audience:

Though we do not wish to present Heilung as 100% [historically] authentic — which would be impossible, since we are dealing with materials that are too old —, we wish to provide our take on the "feeling" from the early Iron

³⁸ Michael F. Strmiska, 'The Evils of Christianization: A Pagan Perspective on European History', in *Cultural Expressions of Evil and Wickedness: Wrath, Sex, Crime*, ed. Terrie Waddell (Amsterdam; New York, NY: Rodopi, 2003), p. 59.

³⁹ Selvik, quoted in Göransson, 'Wardruna interview'.

Age in Scandinavia. Well, that is an interesting line indeed. We do not wish to give exact translations or explanations, because those are still open for great discussion in the scientific community.⁴⁰

What Heilung present is an experience inspired by the past, taking place in the present but occurring parallel to the modern world in which people reside. When asked about the purpose of their live performance, Kai Uwe Faust replied:

We want to invite the listener to a world beyond the concrete, glass, social media pollution, and all the things that keep us busy all day long. [...] We want our listeners to connect via trance or meditation with their primal, very native selves. The victories and struggles of our forefathers made our lives possible.⁴¹

Heilung's aim is to "make people feel how it is to be surrounded by nature, to slaughter their own cattle, to build their own drum, to live from the earth."⁴² They define themselves as "Amplified History" in that they are presenting an interpretation and an amplification of the past in order to enlighten and entertain a modern audience.⁴³

Heilung's acknowledgement of their own biases and the limits of their interpretations grants them greater freedom with their performances. However, there are also challenges when they attempt to actualise their goals, particularly regarding their live performances. Christopher Juul described the band's original intention when designing their first solo show: "our initial idea was to actually do it on the ground, along with the audience — because we intended to invite everyone [to join] the travel that we were performing, in a very real sense."⁴⁴ This was attempted in 2018, in which they performed at a concert hall that had both general admission and elevated seating surrounding the raised stage area. While their original intention had been to perform amongst their audience, this was unable to be achieved due to the logistics of modern conventions. Heilung's eclectic expression of paganism allows them to re-interpret aspects of pre-modern traditions and re-present

⁴⁰ Beo, 'An Interview with Christopher Juul'.

⁴¹ Kai Uwe Faust, quoted in Zorzi, 'The Grand Fashion of Heilung & Their Iconic Sound'.

⁴² Kai Uwe Faust, quoted in Zorzi, 'How Denmark's Heilung are Creating 'Amplified History' with Human Bones, Throat Singing', *Revolver Mag* (15 February 2018), at <https://www.revolvermag.com/music/how-denmarks-heilung-are-creating-amplified-history-human-bones-throat-singing>. Accessed 15 January 2020.

⁴³ Beo, 'An Interview with Christopher Juul'.

⁴⁴ Beo, 'An Interview with Christopher Juul'.

these in unique ways that grants the audience a distinct experience. While these re-interpretations challenges notions of authenticity, particularly in terms of Radical Traditionalism, it allows for greater development of the scene.

The Liminal Scene – From Present to Past

Another way in which the NeoFolk scene can be considered is within the broader context of music. In his study of Baltic paganism, Strmiska identified the importance of bridging tradition and modernity in order to appeal to a wider audience.⁴⁵ NeoFolk creates a bridge between past and present in its interpretation and re-presentation of pre-modern belief and traditions. The scene also sits in a liminal space between pagan inspired folk music and the extreme metal scene that it was partially developed from. Both Wardruna and Heilung have performed at distinctly folk-focused festivals such as Castlefest in the Netherlands and Festival-Mediaeval in Germany, as well as performing at explicitly metal-focused festivals such as Wakken Open Air in Germany and Brutal Assault in the Czech Republic. Furthermore, there is an increasing number of festivals such as Midgardsblot that combine both folk and extreme metal bands, providing a conventional metal festival experience with elements of folk traditions such as food stalls and re-enactments. What this signifies is an increasing cross-over between the two genres, influenced by the rising popularity of NeoFolk bands such as Wardruna and Heilung. While there is a lack of ethnographical fieldwork conducted on the scene of NeoFolk the scene's rapidly growing popularity and its role in bridging genres, suggests that further research should be conducted.

Conclusion

NeoFolk has undergone a rapid development from its origins in the 1980s and has drawn from aspects of both the extreme metal scene as well as pagan inspired music. Any attempt to analyse the sources of inspirations and the specific interpretations of bands such as Wardruna and Heilung is challenging. Categorisations of paganism, while varied, provide a framework through which NeoFolk bands can be approached. The ethnically-centred approach of Wardruna represents a desire to accurately represent the past in

⁴⁵ Strmiska, 'Paganism-Inspired Folk Music, Folk Music-Inspired Paganism and New Cultural Fusions in Lithuania and Latvia', p. 365.

order to maintain a distinct national identity. In contrast, Heilung's eclectic manipulation of the past allows the band to create a unique experience, evocative of pre-modern traditions yet remaining relevant to a modern audience. NeoFolk is developing a liminal scene, one that sits between past and present in terms of inspirations and re-presentations. It is also liminal in its relationship to other genres of music, providing a bridge for audiences to transition and explore notions of alternative spiritualities. NeoFolk's growth in popularity and the unique performances that bands have developed suggests there is a significant relationship to be explored that would be supported by further ethnographic research into the relationship between music and audience.