

Exploring Musical Borealism with VILDÁ

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Table of contents

Introduction	3
Case: VILDÁ	3
My place in VILDÁ	4
Stereotypes meeting the real life up in the North	4
Theoretical perspective: borealism	5
Methods: VILDÁ in the media	6
Research aim and questions	6
Data collection	7
Data analysis	7
VILDÁ by VILDÁ: In our own words	7
Analysis of reviews	10
Northern identity	10
Fitting in or standing out	12
Critical reflection	14
Summary	14
Conclusion	16
Reference list	18

Introduction

There is often a seed of truth in a stereotype. As an artist it can be difficult to balance between the expectations of the public and the presentation of one's own preferred public identity: achieving a balance between the demands of commercial success and pure artistic visions, between imagination and true life. Artists may verbally describe, picture by images or sonically express far-away places like the North and so the musical product can be seen as an outcome of artistic vision, an outcome of one's imagination. But the line between pure artistic expression and economically guided exoticizing and Othering may be blurry. The artists' cultural and social positioning in relation to their own art as well as the position of those experiencing and interpreting the art impacts the way and extent to which exoticizing is experienced. In this paper, I look particularly at my own work as part of the VILDÁ duo, through the theoretical lens of borealism. Exploring how borealism shapes understandings of indigeneity, exoticism and cultural stereotypes in musical practice and the way it is received by audiences, I pose the research questions: How can we understand media representations of artistic work from the North (such as VILDÁ) through the theory of borealism? And how might this shape the public perception of culture through music?

Case: VILDÁ

VILDÁ duo was formed in autumn 2016. I met vocalist Hildá Länsman at the University of the Arts Helsinki where we both begun our studies at the Global Music program that time. I was born in eastern Finland to Finnish parents and had been studying accordion and music since the age of six. Hildá was born in the northernmost municipality of Finland (also known as Sápmi, Sámi land or Lapland) into an indigenous Sámi family. She is a vocalist continuing her family's joik¹ tradition in the footsteps of her mother. Joik singing is a particular, traditional practise in the Sámi communities and it is commonly understood and seen as a heritable cultural practise more than a musical style which one has to study. Our aim together was to create original music combining our musical and cultural backgrounds as well as our individual strengths as musicians. In a relatively short time VILDÁ became an internationally

¹ The Sami vocal tradition of joik is often anglicized to yoik.

touring band with a debut album which was selected among the 10 best albums of 2019 by Songlines music magazine. It seems that in three years we managed to create a “brand” of new and innovative “Northern” world music from Finland and Sámi land.

My place in VILDÁ

I have spent a lot of time thinking about my own position in VILDÁ. There has been moments when I feel uncomfortable about how our music is presented by the media or in concerts and other public events. For me it can feel sometimes problematic that VILDÁ is placed under the umbrella of indigenous music. When we are placed in that “genre” (indigenous music is often seen as one genre, no matter what kind of music the artist is actually doing) I automatically feel slightly outsider of my own duo. I am afraid of presenting VILDÁ as indigenous music ensemble since I am not indigenous myself and therefore it could be interpreted as if I am using that label for my own benefit. Meanwhile for the other half of the duo it would be natural to bring up the same fundamental element as it is part of her musical identity. It is also clearly a benefit for us that in the eyes of the media VILDÁ’s indigenous edge distinguish us “different from the others”, which is needed in order to gain publicity and interest which then leads to occasions to work and to earn a living with our music.

Stereotypes meeting the real life up in the North

Researcher Ann Werner’s article *Digitally Mediated Identity in the Cases of Two Sámi Artists*, published in the Oxford Handbook of Popular Music in the Nordic Countries, is exploring and explaining the public presentations and identities of two well-known Sámi artists Mari Boine and Sofia Jannok. There are a lot of similarities between these presentations and VILDÁ. The wild, vast and pure nature as well as traditional handcrafts and ethnic clothing or accessories are particularly often in the center of social media presence meanwhile as the presence of modern technology is often missing totally. In the modern world where majority of people are centered in the urban areas and are using social media, smart phones and everyday-life high tech, the more primitive images of the Northern

“lifestyle” may look wonderfully different among the masses of social media profiles and other bands in the global world, but at the same time flourish the already existing stereotypes of the “less developed” and far-away North. In the context of borealism it is problematic to define if the use of traditional and ethnic elements in promotion material of a band (e.g. pictures, videos, social media) is simply presenting the natural way of being, as it can be also viewed as selling the “Northern Otherness”. (See Werner, 2017)

By using geographic images of places and landscapes to represent home, the artists’ identities are articulated as closely connected to the land, and the land is associated with emotions, spirituality, and women. On the one hand, centering nature in these representations can be understood as promoting Sápmi, thereby resisting colonization’s negative images of the region and striving to preserve the land and culture. On the other hand, it can be seen as reinforcing stereotypical images of indigeneity and femininity so as to sell “Otherness.”

Ann Werner: Digitally Mediated Identity of Two Sámi Artists (The Oxford Handbook of Popular Music in the Nordic Countries), 2017, p.12

Theoretical perspective: borealism

Similar to the perhaps more known concept of orientalism, borealism is a form of exoticism describing the characteristics of the North as a region, the Northern lifestyle and the culture. Indigenous people, such as the Sámi or Inuit people particularly in Nordic and Arctic regions can be seen as the most unifying force for borealism (Bohlman 2017, 11) and their cultures are often presented by outsiders through an exotic gaze. For example tourism industries as well as literature for centuries have been drawing a stereotypical picture of the strange and almost superstitious Sámi people who live in Lapland in an ecological and almost romantic harmony with the nature around them. Their lifestyle is described different from the modern urban life, being strongly connected to their own mythologies and traditions. The North is often pictured as a uniquely savage, pure and frightening cold region of these magic reindeer

herders who are even described as less civilized yet admirable. These stereotypes merge from both historical and contemporary discourses (Lehtonen 2017, 2-4).

Music is also subject to the forces of borealism. According to Bohlman, the sonic North is very recognizable, no matter what genre or style it is presented by. Listeners who want to hear the North are seldom disappointed regardless if they are listening compositions by Jean Sibelius or modern global music from a Sámi joiker. Nature and the stereotypical, imagined Northern landscapes play a significant role in the sonic world and remarkably often serve as the inspiration for composers and musicians. Bohlman (2017, 11) explains that “the nature assumes different roles in musical practice, dependent on historical moment, cultural or social affinity, ethnicity, nationality, genre and repertory” but still remains as something that serves to render the different musics sonically Northern.

Methods: VILDÁ in the media

As described by Bohlman in his article *Musical Borealism: Nordic Music and European History* (2017), Northern music is recognisable and the listeners often have certain kind of expectations of it. For this research I have been reading media articles about VILDÁ, which indicate that media representatives and especially international album reviewers who have listened to our music represent a clear example of Bohlman’s argument. The reviewers seem to have had previous expectations about how the Northern music sounds, and it truly looks like their expectations were also filled. This raised questions as to how VILDÁ’s music can be understood through the theoretical lens of borealism, but also how we might better understand what this theory is and what it does through VILDÁ.

Research aim and questions

The research aim that guided this inquiry was:

How can we understand media representations of artistic work from the North (such as VILDÁ) through the theory of borealism? And how might this shape the public perception of culture through music?

This was investigated further through the following research questions:

1. Does cultural identity shape audience expectations of music?
2. What aspects of the musical product shape audience expectations of music? (e.g. cover art, promotional texts etc).

Data collection

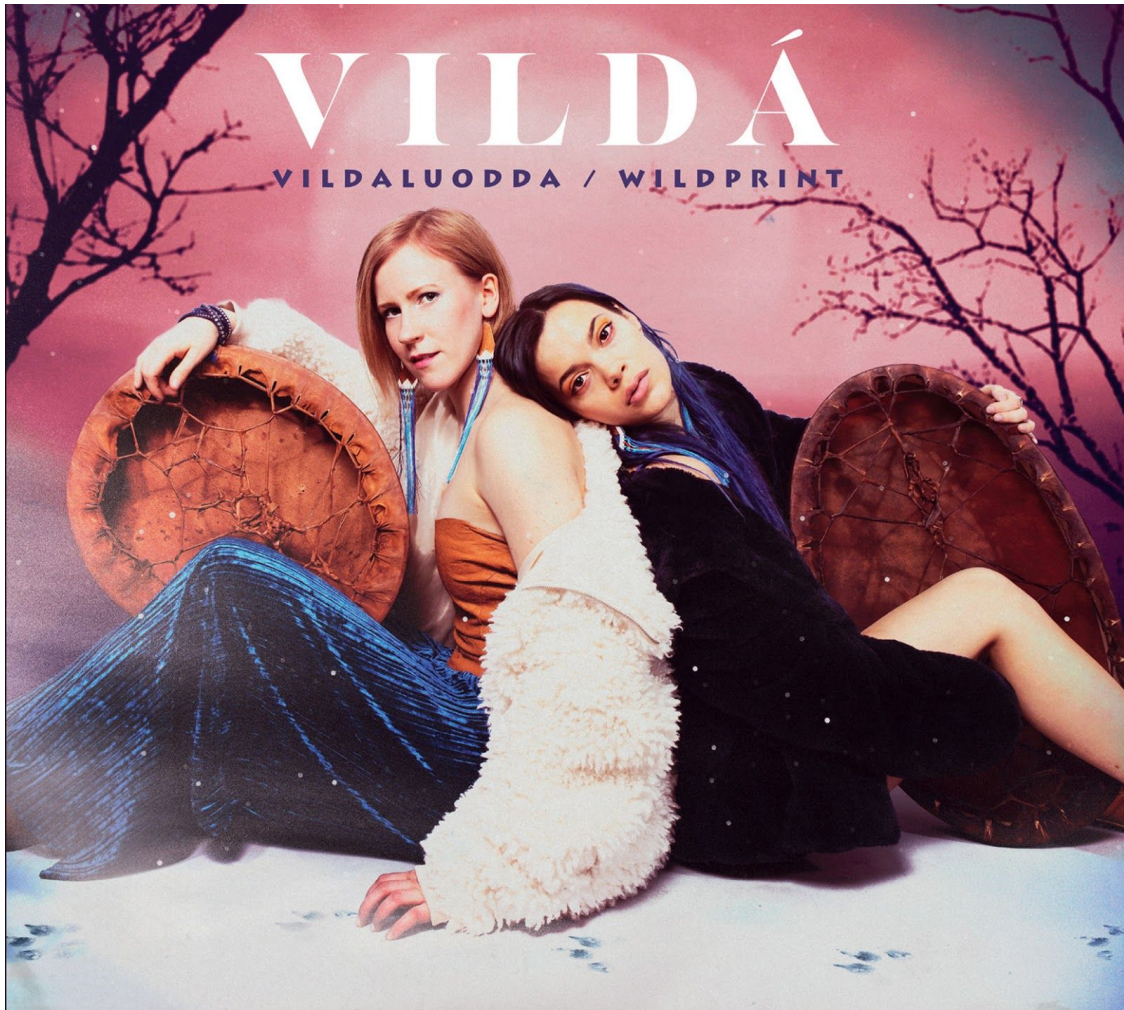
These questions were asked in relation to our own promotional materials as well as media reviews of VILDÁ's debut album *Vildaluodda | Wildprint*. Seven album reviews were included for this study, sourced directly from our own record label's internet page that serves to promote our music. Reviews were selected because they were published in 2019 after the album release, and in English, to consider how international audiences perceive the album.

Data analysis

In order to analyse our promotional materials and the chosen reviews, I did qualitative data analysis using thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke 2006). I used manual coding (different colour highlighting pens) to identify different themes that were present in the texts. With the colour highlighting I was able to easily recognize a few different categories and themes which would repeat in most of the texts and I also found some interesting similarities in the vocabulary that the reviewers used. The themes that I identified through the thematic analysis were: Northern identity, which highlighted aspects of Finnishness or Indigenous culture; and Fitting in or standing out, which highlighted the genre label applied to the music or unique features.

VILDÁ by VILDÁ: In our own words

In this section, I am looking into the promotional material of VILDÁ which is made by us during the first two years of the band's existence and is currently used for promotion. I am analysing the material (promotional text as well as the visual material) in relation to the concept of borealism and the commercial value of exoticism.



[VILDÁ: *Vildaluodda* | *Wildprint* album cover art. Photo: Johanna Suomalainen, graphics: Jimmy Träskelin]

VILDÁ is an original blend of mystical joiks, grooving rhythms and improvisation. Inspiration has been sought from Sámi people's strong connection to nature, Nordic folk music and present-day popular music. The result is a unique soundscape that takes the listener to a fascinating journey to the Sámiland, the wild and vast landscapes under the arctic hills and frosty winds - with a girly and fresh vibe.

[Take from a promotional text at the internet page of VILDÁ's booking agency]

The “arctic feel” and Northern spirit is described by words and presented in the pictures throughout VILDÁ’s album and other promotional material online. There is two beautiful

and exotic looking frame drums on the cover art of the *Vildaluodda* | *Wildprint* album and the two women are both wearing a combination of present day fashion mixed with ethnic elements such as traditional Finnish leather shoes (supikas) and Sámi leather shoes (čázet) as well as handmade leather earrings. The background of the picture is surreal and almost magical looking sky with pink haze and light and one can see tree branches on the sides and footprints of a wolf on the white, probably snowy ground. The picture is clearly not showing a natural environment but truly has a strong ethnic and exotic feel in it.

Ethnic exoticness can be, and is used as a tool when selling Nordic tourism to visitors from all over the world (Werner 2017, 11). From my point of view this applies to music as well. What makes the matter interesting in VILDÁ's case is that the band seems to profit not only from "selling" the ethnic exoticness and indigeneity themselves but also from being represented as exotic folk or world music by the international media. By blending ethnic and traditional elements with modern Western styles (in VILDÁ's case especially in the visual promoting material) - just like world music is a mixture of tradition and new (Werner 2017, 10) - the branding of the band is clearly suitable for the global music market, aiming to meet the buyers' expectations about the Northern music. It seems that the discussion in the media has followed the track which was set by the visual and verbal presentations of the band made by the duo.

Researchers have argued that global record companies benefit from the fusion of so-called Third World or indigenous musicians and Western musical traditions through the commercial value of indigeneity (Hutnyk 2000, 96). In VILDÁ's case the look and sound of the band is completely under the control of the band members and has not been guided by producers or other parties outside the duo or without our contribution. Therefore it is difficult to define if the motives of emphasizing the imagined Northern exoticism is actually partly because of the commercial gain that it might give for the promotion of the band or if it is simply a way of representing the natural and personal essence of the duo without further economic motives.

As a member of VILDÁ myself I feel I am not creating an imagined picture or character of myself in the duo but the promotional material of VILDÁ is presenting a true side of me and my own feelings about our music and the inspirations behind it as they are. As the product (here the music of VILDÁ) is an artistic outcome of inspiration drawn from the Northern

nature and cultures of our own, it is not meant to present the real life but instead to be a product of imagination. Putting that into words and pictures may understandably be interpreted in different ways when looking from the marketing and branding point of view and in the light of borealism.

Analysis of reviews

Northern identity

If the official promoting material of the band is sticking to the "arctic feel", so does the international media when writing about VILDÁ's music. The music as representative of some sort of Northern identity or culture was a common theme in many of the reviews. In six out of seven of VILDÁ's album reviews, the joik tradition of the Sámi people and especially Hildá's own joik heritage is mentioned. Furthermore, in five reviews out of seven the writer points out that Hildá is the daughter of her famous musician and joiker mother Ulla Pirttijärvi. For example:

Vilda is a very refreshing addition to the Finnish world music scene, a combination of top-notch accordion playing by Viivi Maria Saarenkylä and the truly unique sounds that Hilda Länsman produces with her voice, both without words and in her native language, Northern Sámi. We have seen her before in the ensemble Solju, where she makes music with her mother Ulla Pirttijärvi-Länsman, also showing her skills as a singer with blues-pop colours. Here, however, the sound is more down to earth and closer to her yoik heritage.

[Review in Finnish Music Quarterly (FIN), 2019]

Hildá was born in a small Sámi village called Ohcejohka in the northernmost municipality of Finland and was raised in the Sámi culture embracing reindeer husbandry, handicrafts and yoik. Her mother, Ulla Pirttijärvi, is a well-known singer in her own right.

[Review in Sun Times Articles (CAN), 2019]

In this light it seems natural to me that Hildá's renowned mother is mentioned in most of the articles as the writers probably see Hildá as someone who is continuing the tradition of her family. In media artists' previous achievements are most of the times being pointed out in reviews and interviews in general and in VILDÁ's reviews her yoik heritage is mentioned similarly. Indigeneity on the other hand, as something separate from joik, is pointed out only three times, for example:

Hilda Länsman, a young vocalist from northern Finland's indigenous Sámi community, fuses traditional joik chant-singing with electronic pop in the duo Solju with her mother Ulla Pirttijärvi-Länsman. In her new duo Vildá, she teams up with accordionist-singer Viivi Maria Saarenkylä for a more ambitious, risk-taking mix of Sámi and Finnish folk with organic sounds from further afield, thanks to various guests.

[Review in Songlines Magazine (UK), 2019]

Four of the articles described that the music is geographically from the arctic or sonically from the mystical, dark, wild and sparsely populated wilderness - the North.

The pair spin a wide array of sonic textures, atmospheres and emotions, from the elegiac accordion solo 'Winter Woods' to 'Utsjoki-Disko', a playful romp of youthful romance in the EU's northernmost municipality - a sparsely populated wilderness where you might seek some place dark to escape the bright midnight sun.

[Review in Songlines Magazine (UK), 2019]

This seemingly produced mental images of an exotic North through the music. In two of the articles words "shamanism" or "shamanistic" are mentioned. In general the texts are highlighting the "arctic mysticism" using words such as beguiling, unearthly, surrealistic, spatial and enthralling. For example:

Vildá have created a treasure with a phenomenon of shaman spirit, shadow, sunlight, sacred places, and special hideways. "Wildprint" is spatial, contemplative, and a journey both intimate and overflowing with life. - - With haunting effect, even the

techno beat influence is done with extraordinary mysticism. The accordion has that wet reverb, as if being played from a cave much of the time. The balance of slow dreamy meditations and upbeat yoik (the ancient singing tradition the Sami) are unearthly, and in that surrealistic state, on a plateau far above the clouds (at least for western ears).

[Review in Big Beautiful Noise -magazine (US), 2019]

On Vildaluodda (Wildprint) Finnish duo VILDÁ offers a contemporary amalgam of Sami transcendent yoiks, shamanic beats and improvisation along with elements from other musical traditions. The human voice and the accordion define the essence of the album. - - Vildaluodda is a beguiling album that will transport you to Samiland and the northern reaches of Finland.

[Review in www.worldmusiccentral.org, 2019]

The apparent Finnish identity of myself and Hildá's Sámi roots seemed to strongly lead the reviewers to "hear" the imagined North in our music. Hildá's Sáminess, which is mentioned in almost every review, seems to be understood as a fundamental element behind the music.

Fitting in or standing out

It seems that the international media representatives experience the music of VILDÁ as Northern world music. According to researcher Rupa Huq (2006) "the "world" in world music is imagined as other places — places from which mainstream popular music does not come, places outside the modern Western world" (p. 65). Through my analysis, both the Nordic and Northern artists as well as the international media are using common stereotypes of the Northern nature and lifestyle as well as musical borealism as a tool to identify and explain the music's speciality and originality - to make the music stand out of the rest. This can be seen from the *Vildaluodda* album reviews, for example:

The rhythm is sparkling and energetic, but there is also space for calm and still landscapes with an Arctic feel.

[Review in Finnish Music Quarterly, (FIN) 2019]

Many of the critics are describing either the calm and deserted arctic feel which the music evokes, or a magical, even shamanistic haze of the sound world. This “arctic feel”, when putting into words, renders to isolate the imagined North from the rest of the world.

The shamanistic beat or shaman spirit, which was mentioned by two of the reviewers, may be related to the sound of frame drum, occasionally together with the vocals too. For example:

In *Vildahuodda - Wildprint* by the duo Vildá, Hilda Länsman, who has a similar vocal quality to her mother but very much her own approach, joiks, chants and chatters with Viivi Maria Saarenkylä's bellows-chunking, surging, quivering, skittering, distinctively Finnish accordion, joined for some tracks by other vocalists.

[Review in fRoots Magazine, (international) 2019]

Drums similar to the one that is heard in VILDÁ's music are fairly popular all around the globe, but distinctively in the North nowadays the arts, literature and cinema stereotypically connect the frame drum to stories and ancient beliefs and religious systems linked to witchcraft and shamanism. Historically northern witchcraft has been a significant part of the Sámi communities' religious culture, beliefs and mythology until the early 17th century and drums have been used by healers (*noaidi*) during rituals which included also ritual yoiks. However the use of these drums was banned in the beginning of years 1600 when the colonization and assimilation into the christian culture started to take over the Sápmi region (Sámi land) (Hirvasvuopio-Laiti 2008, 41). Today frame drums which are visually similar to the ancient Sámi drums (*goavddis*, *meavrresgárri*) are still common in Sámi music but their presence in the contemporary music is often easily and mistakenly linked to the ancient shamanistic spirituality and healing traditions, especially by people outside of the Sámi community.

Interestingly, four times VILDÁ's music is stated to be Finnish folk or representing Finnish accordion tradition, for example here:

The two musicians met after hearing each others previous music, with the idea that the traditional Finnish accordion and the yoik could be brought together. "Wildprint"

is the result, a heavenly outcome. Certainly a ornate hybrid of traditional folk, boundless Sami, and music that glistens in the ears of the audience.

[Review in Big Beautiful Noise -magazine (US), 2019]

A daring pairing of Finnish joik and accordion.

[Review in Songlines Magazine (UK), 2019]

Almost all of the articles pointed out Hildá's Sáminess and therefore the music is nearly always placed under the genre of indigenous music. I am often stated to present the Finnish accordion tradition or my playing is described as "distinctively Finnish accordion", which also clearly connects our music to the Northern world.

Critical Reflection

In this section, I reflect on our own promotional materials and the media reviews through the theoretical lens of borealism.

Summary

I have never received negative nor critical feedback about our music, visual look or public presence in social media or in other medias. Also our performances in or for the Sámi communities have been always welcomed warmly as well as in Finland or worldwide outside these communities. At the same time, I feel our public presence may be problematic and hard to justify if one starts to examine it critically and reflect it to topics such as Othering, exoticizing and borealism. Reflecting on the ways in which we present ourselves through our promotional materials, there is no doubt that we use the imagined exotic North as the interesting and original factor with the aim to distinguish ourselves from the others. Our visual look can be considered as ethnic and exotic and also directly connected to the indigeneity since Hildá is almost always wearing a traditional Sámi clothing (*gákti*) during our live performances. Also the lyrics of our music and the promotional texts do bring up the connection to the North and emphasize the imagined, far-away North whereas our social media presence is not actually showing out much of the natural North nor it is geographically

much connected to Finland or Sámi land, because we mostly use pictures and advertisement material from our concerts and tours around the world.

Hildá's Sámi roots and the joik tradition of the Sámi's is mentioned in our promotional material but I don't see a strong emphasis on indigeneity. We do not categorize our music into any category or established genre in our promotional materials and we do not use any traditional music or for example known Northern mythologies as a creative source for our music or lyrics. Instead our music is more just "feeling" the North with occasional references to certain places such as a forest in Eastern Finland or a fell up in the North. It may be that this is actually the point which raises the question whether we are exotising or even reinforcing stereotypes of the imaginary North. VILDÁ may be seen as creating a picture of some kind of Northern (indigenous) lifestyle, which we do not seemingly connect to anything real in the end. After all for me, VILDÁ and our music is just a creative artistic outcome of imagination and it serves mainly as entertainment. It is like a story told by two artists from the geographical North but not a documentary of the same place, even if it is seemingly placed inside the same frames.

While I analyse VILDÁ from my own point of view and like to think that we are not strongly emphasizing indigeneity nor Finnishness but more the Northern origins of myself and Hildá's in a more general and vague manner, it seems that the media has a different approach to it. Considering the media reviews and the way in which our music is received, the indigeneity and specific connections to the Sámi culture (not only the references to joik tradition but also annotations to Hildá's family background and traditional livelihood of the Sámi people) are very often being picked up first and strongly emphasized. Our music has never been taken by the media as a political statement of any kind however (which is also my aim to not be political or editorialised) but rather seems to be considered just as art and entertainment. Could it be that this positioning creates a favourable and safe ground for the listener to let the imagination fly and so the emphasis in the international album reviews, besides pointing out the indigeneity, leans towards picturing the characteristics of the imagined exotic North? The arctic mysticism seems tangible, may it then be the result of pure expectations for the supposed indigenous music from the far-away and mysterious Sámi land or an accomplishment of our own promotional material and the visual looks. There might be

different factors that serve as the initialisation for the audiences and media to see and hear VILDÁ's music through the lens of borealism but the same lens seems to always be there.

Conclusion

I believe as an artist I have the right to create an artistic work or product which can present an imaginary world - art is not the truth. However, this doesn't take away the fact that theoretically VILDÁ can be seen as an example of the borealism and exoticizing - a musical product suitable and suited for the global music market which is looking for original, ethnic and potentially exotic acts, and meeting the expectations of the people who are wishing to hear the sonical North.

At the same time, as borealism can be seen as a negative concept reinforcing stereotypes, exposing people and/or areas to Othering and excluding as well as shaping understandings of cultures in a way which is not based on real information, I believe it can also function as a beneficial factor which can attract positive interest towards the same matters, and in arts and music business can serve both the media and the artist. As VILDÁ's music is often considered as indigenous music, I would see that the interest towards our music can also potentially raise awareness about Sámi culture and indigenous cultures in general. Especially so when the attention and curiosity is mainly positive and not in e.g. presented in a political context but very much concentrated just on the music and art - or in other words the entertainment - itself.

I consider borealism as a complex phenomena and concept which is relative and evolving and may be interpreted differently depending on who is interpreting and in which context it is appearing. The positive and negative effects of it may appear simultaneously and actually the effects can be at the same time both positive and negative. The North is naturally a rather exotic thing for most of the people in the world simply because of its geographical location and sparse population - it doesn't need to be exoticized to be seen as exotic. As an outsider of indigenous cultures but insider of Northern lifestyle (as a Finnish person born and raised in Finland) I see borealism in music and arts as a delicate opportunity to shape understandings of my culture and region but I also realise the risks and its sensitivity towards reinforcing stereotypes and causing negative effects such as creating unreal mental pictures and even

spreading misinformation. When exoticism or aspects of borealism are intentionally used as a marketing tool, it should be done with consideration and comprehension of its power to shape understandings.

Of course I must consider my artistic work critically and in a wider context and not only as entertainment, but I also feel that as long as multicultural collaborations and fusion is happening in the world of today's music business, if viewed closely enough, there are problematic issues that will be present in all of the artistic work in this world which all have both "good and bad" sides to them.

"Humanity takes itself too seriously. It is the world's original sin. If the cave-man had known how to laugh, History would have been different."

Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray

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Links to the *Vildaluodda* | *Wildprint* album review articles

<http://bafesfactory.fi/vilda/reviews.html>

Internet pages

<https://www.saurabooking.com/en/artist/vilda/>

<https://www.instagram.com/vildaduo/>