

OU grad's 'Hope' floats in album

By JEREMY SELWESKI
The Oakland Post

Thor, the Viking God of Thunder, was definitely not somebody you'd want to mess with. Seriously, he was one scary dude. If you crossed him, you'd undoubtedly trigger a violent fit of rage that concluded with an extremely large hammer crushing your feeble, mortal skull.

Therefore, one would assume that any musical artist naming himself after such a beastly deity would have a brutal, aggressive sound to match. In my mind, for instance, it is a moniker that conjures images of enormous, hairy ogres pounding out psychotic death metal of the most lumbering variety.

And therein lies the grand irony of Thor, a Bob Dylan-loving Oakland University alumnus who plays delicate acoustic folk-pop songs in the vein of Bright Eyes, Damien Rice, Iron & Wine, the Mountain Goats, and Devendra Banhart — not exactly the type of stuff you'd hear roaring from an Ozzfest stage.

"Hope is the Future Tense," the 25-year-old singer/songwriter's second full-length album, reveals him to be a charismatic performer and a welcome addition to the ever-

expanding neo-folk scene. While it has its share of flaws, they are ultimately outweighed by Thor's sharp songwriting and grasp of understated beauty.

In an era when most young songwriters are too quick to follow trends, it is refreshing to hear someone whose music bears none of the melodramatic whining of Dashboard Confessional or the slick pretty-boy posturing of Ryan Cabrera. Instead, Thor sounds like a lovesick troubadour chasing his own muse, and it is this spark of honesty that ultimately makes you want to root for him.

On "Hope," Thor has created something warm, hushed and intimate, a whisper of a record that sounds like it was recorded just before sunrise in some secluded bedroom. It's the type of record that is ideal for lonely late-night drives or blocking out the noise of the world with your headphones, a record packed with cryptic details that gradually come more alive with each repeated listen.

Many of the songs feature only Thor's voice and acoustic guitar, but he sprinkles in just enough nimble keyboard

melodies, sparse percussion and subtle vocal harmonies to add dynamics to otherwise straightforward tunes. He also has a knack for writing guitar parts that are rudimentary but memorable, always emphasizing passion and mood over flash.

With a voice that resembles Damien Rice or a soft-spoken Conor Oberst, Thor fills each track with a wistful sense of mystery.

He is plaintive without being sentimental, emotional without being emo,

and what he lacks in range or originality he makes up for in sincere expression.

The only time he falters is when he tries too hard to adopt a bored, cynical tone or when he allows the breathy quality of his vocals to become overpowering.

The opener "Seems to Be" establishes the environment from which Thor rarely strays: subdued picking and strumming, surreal lyrical imagery, and a voice that sighs more than it croons. Spinning a tale of loneliness and paranoia wrapped in boyish romanticism that recalls the early work of Elliott Smith, his

charming melody hovers gracefully before an unexpected guitar interlude sends him searching for new answers.

"Perspective from My Shoes and Her View" is a poignant meditation that features maracas and ghostly harmonica, while "Short Story" is exactly what its title implies: a 20-second fairy tale that sounds like a love song penned by Mother Goose.

The album's finest moment comes on the aching "Better Soon," where Thor's voice and guitar dance perilously along the same melodic wire, yet somehow man-

age not to fall. It is a beautifully concise piece of music, and one that is unafraid to explore the same desperate, cracked vulnerability as Bright Eyes on "Lua."

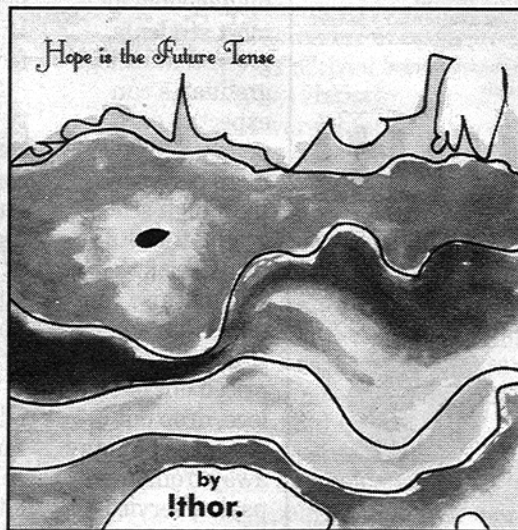
Time and again, Thor's lyrics end up being the make-or-break-point of his songs. His words are very abstract and often filled with childlike whimsy, which results in tunes that are less like complete stories than sprawling mosaics of thoughts and feelings.

This works most of the time, but occasionally, he plunges into the realm of bad high school poetry, as on "Nothing Rhymes with Orange," where he sings the cringe-worthy line "Nothing rhymes with orange/And you don't rhyme with me." Other times, like on the lethargic "Curious Circumstances," he seems to force himself into a lazy, conversational style where he crams too many words into each line.

Still, "Hope" is a rewarding and consistent record, one in which the distance between the strongest and weakest tracks is quite slim.

And if nothing here feels truly revelatory, it is because Thor is not trying to make a big, profound statement geared for a large audience. He has instead made a very genuine record cataloguing his feelings, and it stands as a humble personal triumph.

review



Thor's next show: Saturday, Oct. 29, 7 p.m.

Location: The Barn in Novi

Web site: <http://www.thorthought.com>