

# VIKINGDOM DEPICTS THOR AS A ROCK-STAR GOD INSTEAD OF THE COMIC BOOK HERO WE ALL KNOW.

## CRACKING THE NORSE CODE

It sounds like a recipe for disaster: a low-budget picture about Vikings and Norse gods, filmed in Malaysia by a guy born and raised in that country's capital city, starring an Australian actor who has acknowledged he dislikes mythological fantasy films. Throw in some second-rate CGI, a few Hong Kong action elements, and a journey to the netherworld that involves beautiful golden sirens, undead warriors, and a weird dinosaur/dog creature, and it seems like even more of a half-baked idea. Yet somehow, under the deft hand of director Yusry Halim, *Vikingdom* works.

"A certain pride comes from the effort that was put into the film on all levels of production," says Dominic Purcell (star of the TV shows *John Doe* and *Prison Break*), who through his lead role in the venture gained a newfound appreciation and respect for fantastical adventures. "Filmmaking is hard work and oftentimes not really appreciated or understood on mass levels, because it's so much easier to hurl insults from the sidelines. The budget for *Vikingdom* was a grain of sand compared to the budgets that Hollywood uses for this specific genre, a genre that demands budgets capable of feeding third world countries."

What those meager funds yielded is a unique interpretation of the familiar "Vikings as marauders" vision. In the movie, set in AD 793, Christian monotheism has begun to replace the popular belief in Norse deities, something that the god Thor [portrayed by Conan Stevens (*Man-Thing*, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*)] cannot accept. He seeks to open a mystical doorway that will



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literally unleash Hell on Earth, with the only obstacle standing between him and the subjugation of humanity being Eirik (Purcell), a king who most of his followers believe has died in battle, and a small but diverse band of buccaneers.

The story unfolds with quite a few unexpected twists and turns, particularly for those folks whose primary perception of Thor is based on the Marvel Comics character. That's because this God of Thunder is in no way a superhero: in fact, he's a musclebound villain who's far more an angry anti-hero than any type of admirable idol.

"It was always a conscious decision to move away from the Marvel Thor as much as we could because we are talking about two conflicting characters: one who wants to save mankind, and the other who wants to destroy it," explains Halim. "Here, he's very much like a spoiled rock star. In fact, I often use the term 'rock-star god' to describe my Thor."

*Vikingdom* admittedly lacks most of the trappings of a rock-star production, but—especially at a time when the comic book Thor is a box-office superstar and the History Channel has a hit series showcasing the Viking Age—it's a distinctive take on a trendy yet still mysterious subject. Produced by Epic Pictures Releasing, *Vikingdom* debuts on Blu-ray and DVD in late January.



## 55-YEAR-OLD SCIENCE SONGS STILL INSPIRE

Back in 1959, Isaac Asimov received a children's record that so stirred him he wrote about it in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. Thirty-five years later, that same LP inspired the band They Might Be Giants to release a cover version of one of the songs.

Soon after, popular Japanese DJ Yoshinori Sunahara sampled another track on his sci-fi-themed dance hit, "Journey Beyond the Stars." Yet this clearly influential album—one of a series of six educational recordings devoted to science released between 1959 and 1961—has never been available on CD. Until now.

"Not every child gets to appreciate a parent by understanding their work and seeing how people respond even after the parent's death" says Robert Zaret, the son of Hy Zaret, the late lyricist who penned the words for all 89 tunes in the new six-disc box set. "It definitely fuels my effort to get my dad's songs back in circulation."

Those compositions fired the imaginations of tens of thousands of baby boomers, leading many to become botanists, physicists, biologists, meteorologists, rocket scientists, and, yes, even science fiction fans. Zaret—who's best known for cowriting the Top Ten smash "Unchained Melody"—and composer Lou Singer created the *Ballads for the Age of Science* series specifically to kindle a sense of wonder within children. The albums, all with straightforward titles like *Space Songs*, *Experiment Songs*, and *Energy & Motion Songs*, were performed by artists such as Tom Glazer (famous for his parody single "On Top of Spaghetti"), folksinging duo Marais & Miranda, and Dorothy Collins, who at the time was known as "The Sweetheart of Lucky Strike" for her commercial appearances on behalf of the cigarette company.

Each tune used simple yet technologically accurate lyrics to teach youngsters—and more than a few young-at-heart adults—about the basics of science. Through folksy numbers like "Why Does the Sun Shine?," "Ice is a Solid," and "Ultra Violet and Infra Red," Zaret hoped kids would learn to appreciate and better understand the physical world around them and, at least on the *Space Songs* LP, other worlds, too. At the same time, he realized that, like scientific hypotheses, his words would need to be reworked as new discoveries were made.

"Dad was very protective about his lyrics, and did not want anyone to change them," remembers his son, who was 11 years old when the first album came out. "But he knew the songs in *Ballads* would need updates. Thus, he included spoken word sections in most, with the intent that they could be modified."

Although They Might Be Giants did record "Why Does the Sun Really Shine?," a cleverly updated follow-up to their cover, most of the numbers have never been modernized. With this long-awaited CD release, that's an oversight that hopefully will be fixed, so that future generations of scientists—and sci-fi buffs—can be similarly inspired.

