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BULLETS AND OCTANE VALIENT THORR DAMONE TAKOTA

April 11, 2006 @ House of Blues
(Anaheim, CA)
By Brian Spiegel

The last time Venus' second-best band, Valient Thorr, graced a Southern California stage, Olympic snowboarding gold medalist Shaun White was in the crowd at the cramped, vomit-stenched Viper Room. Forget the fact that it was strange that White was in Los Angeles while the Olympics were still in full swing, it was even odder to see a crowd full of record execs, drunk journalists, and their younger dates crowd around him to take a picture with this pint-sized American hero while the band they were supposed to be watching rocked the stage just five feet in front of them. The funny thing about what transpired that chilly evening was while many will remember the show for the "Flying Tomato" sighting, if people would have turned their attention towards the stage, they would have noticed that Valient Thorr came into their own that night. Fresh off two months of recording tracks for their new record *LEGENDS OF THE EARTH* (due in July on Volcom Records), the band proved in their hour-long, Jack Daniel's-fueled set that, along with peers like The Riverboat Gambler and Gogol Bordello, Valient Thorr have become one of the few must-see bands currently traversing the country. Valient Thorr's spacecraft (or tour van-whatever) made a return trip to the Los Angeles area in early April for Bullets and Octane's record-release show at the House of Blues Anaheim. And just

as the Scriptures foretold, for 40 glorious minutes, Thorr riffed, shook, and danced their way to a show-stealing performance.

As a band, Valient Thorr come off a bit like Kings of Leon if they had a nervous breakdown and decided that they were a hard rock band that teleported to Earth from the inside of Venus. The band is a card-carrying member of the Southern Rock Music Club (they are based out of the Carolinas after teleporting there six years ago) with screaming guitar solos, lots of denim, and long beards that bring up thoughts of a less-dignified ZZ Top. Thorr's seven-song set included on a few new songs, but it was the more established songs that seemed to grab the audience's attention. "Sticks and Stones" combined wavy guitars, insane ranting, and a dance by lead singer Valient Thorr himself that looked like that one Snoopy does in that Peanuts Christmas special. "The Man Behind the Curtain" is Valient Thorr's political rant against what they call "Governuptsy". Many of Valient's songs seem to have a less-than-subtle political edge to them, as well as many of the bands pre-song rants that contain liberal propaganda slamming both the rich and the ignorant in this country. It's easy to say that it's shocking to learn that even people on Venus hate Bush, but come to think of it, it's not that hard to imagine. (I wonder what their gas prices are?)

While the Thorriors in the crowd ate up Valient's set, being that it was Bullets and Octane's record-release party, it pretty much goes without saying that they got the biggest share of the crowd's kudos. The band's 14-song, headlining set was solid, yet...how to put this?...quite familiar. ("Unoriginal" might be a word most would rush to, but that would also be missing the point.) The band rushed onstage to air-raid sirens, and lead singer

Gene Louis hit the first song with a Vince Neil swagger that was quickly followed with a full-on Axl Rose stutter turn. You could see the band channel the spirit of several '80s and '90s metal bands—all to the delight of the audience. While Bullets and Octane didn't exactly bleed originality, they knew exactly what to do to keep the audience interested. Sure, maybe drinking Jack Daniel's directly out of the bottle to the cheers of the audience isn't exactly rocket science, but there are only so many bands that can make OK COMPUTER. If the other bands can just put on a fun show and keep the mood light, then that's good enough for me.

Show-openers Takota and Damone played to an almost empty house. Takota looked good in their completely white outfits, and their Our Lady Peace-meets-Axl Rose vocals was kind of refreshing at first...but as the set progressed, the sound never actually went anywhere. The band subscribes to the Phil Spector's "wall of sound" club, which was nice for a bit, as it led to a lush sound and some nice reverb; but except for their last song, "Ivory Tower", most of the set felt like it was stuck in neutral.

Damone, on the other hand, seemed to suffer from a rather perplexing problem. While the band threw out a metal vibe from the opening chords, they would be better suited as a pop/rock band—and a very good one, actually. Lead singer Noelle LeBlanc does not have the voice to pull off fronting a hard rock band. Yes, the guitars were booming, and both the guitarist and bassist looked like they hopped on the time machine from '80s England, but the vocals were just too weak to make it over the riffs. I think with a little retooling and a bit more confidence from Noelle, Damone might be someone to watch.