Kent's Sweden, or what a rock band can tell us about a nation

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The Swedish rock band Kent is not only the most popular band in Sweden, but also perceived as quintessentially Swedish. Using the notion of "everyday nationalism" I argue that Kent both represent and actively shape contemporary Swedish national identity co-constitutively with their audience. Three themes are particularly important to understand this Swedishness. Firstly, the band was formed in the city of Eskilstuna but relocated to Stockholm, which illustrates a Swedish journey through class and space. Secondly, Kent interrogates a series of national myths in their songs. They do so using spatial and environmental metaphors that can be conceptualized as different landscapes – inner, urban, and winter landscapes – representing Sweden. Thirdly, Kent also construct a "public landscape" that reflects on changes in Swedish society, including neoliberal and anti-immigrant tendencies.

Keywords: music geography, Sweden, Kent, national identity, everyday nationalism, media analysis

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Introduction

Music can communicate a great deal about the culture and society that it comes from. This is the case with the contemporary Swedish rock band Kent. Numerous observers in the Swedish media have noted that Kent may not only be the most popular band in Swedish popular music history, but also quintessentially Swedish. Here are some typical voices[1]. According to the Stockholm daily *Dagens Nyheter*, "what Kent have accomplished is unparalleled in Swedish popular culture" (Wahllöf 2005). The *Expressen* newspaper states that Kent's most popular songs are "received as national anthems" (Nordström 2007: 244–245). Kent even "represent Sweden better than any other band," writes the music journal *Musiklandet* (Gustafsson 2003). And in an anthology of the band, the editor uses overtly Swedish metaphors when he writes that Kent is "as deeply rooted among the people as herring and aquavit" (Steen 2007: 10). What has elicited such responses, not just in the media, but also among the music fans and society at large? What is it about Kent that makes them so purportedly Swedish? These are significant questions because popular music is a major cultural phenomenon. An analysis of Kent's music offers a unique lens through which national identity and spatial representations can be understood. The idea of "everyday nationalism" suggests that mundane activities of ordinary life shape national identity and belonging (see next section for a literature overview). From this perspective, music can be a powerful force in the formation of national identity, both through representations of everyday practices as well as the active listening by the fans. In this article, I will discuss three themes that enables the listener to construct a sense of Swedishness associated with Kent's music: (1) the meaning of Kent's origin in the city of Eskilstuna and their subsequent Swedish journey through class and space; (2) how Kent interrogates a series of national myths in their songs by using spatial and environmental metaphors that I conceptualize as three different landscapes representing Sweden – an inner landscape, an urban landscape, and a winter landscape; and

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(3) how Kent construct a "public landscape" built on a critique of neoliberal and anti-immigrant tendencies in today's Sweden. The research material is drawn from the Swedish media and how they have reported about Kent, other secondary sources, and a content analysis of Kent's music and lyrics.

The popularity and cultural significance of Kent can hardly be overstated. From 1995 to present, the band released ten original albums (see Discography). All of them except the debut album *Kent* reached number one position on the Swedish album charts. (An additional compilation album comprised of B-sides from singles peaked at number two.) Kent have also been a best-selling artist in Norway, Finland, and Denmark, but because the songs are primarily performed in Swedish, they are not familiar to most English-speaking audiences. Other Swedish popular artists may have sold more records and are far better known world-wide (e.g. ABBA, Roxette), but none is a *Swedish rock band* on par with Kent.

The band hails from the city of Eskilstuna in central Sweden and was formed in 1990 when the members were about 20 years old. Kent are Joakim Berg (vocal and guitar), Sami Sirviö (guitar), Martin Sköld (bass), and Markus Mustonen (drums). Joakim Berg is the lead singer, and also writes the lyrics and most of the music. For much of their career, Kent also had a fifth member – Harri Mänty (guitar) – who left the band in 2007, and another band member during the early days in Eskilstuna – Martin Roos – is now Kent's manager.

Musically, there is little apparently Swedish about Kent. They draw heavily from British indie rock, especially from the 1980s. The influences that Kent mention in interviews or that journalists and fans hear in their music include Radiohead, The Cure, and Depeche Mode. Attentive listeners may also recognize references in Kent's songs to other sources of inspiration, such as David Bowie, the Smiths, and U2. Kent's music has been relatively consistent in style over time, but as a generalization the two first albums are dominated by straightforward, guitar-oriented rock, the middle albums turn toward a richer and more layered, reverb-laden sound, while the latest albums are increasingly synthesizer-driven both in melody and beat in a way that bridges contemporary electronica and the 1980s "synth-rock" that the band members listened to during their formative youth.

The obvious element that sets Kent apart from their British influences are the Swedish lyrics. A Swedish artist that directly influenced Kent's decision to perform in Swedish (or more specifically, Berg's decision to write lyrics in Swedish) is Jakob Hellman, a singer-songwriter popular around 1990 (Dahlbom & Ericsson 2002). Early in their career Kent also played as an opening act for bob hund, a band which is also renowned for their Swedish lyrics. Writers and poets such as Klas Östergren and Dan Andersson have also been mentioned as sources of inspiration – the former as a skillful wordsmith and the latter for his working class themes (Stenberg 1996; Swantesson 2005). Swedish lyrics can paradoxically be more commercially viable than English ones and increase the chances of wider domestic success, albeit at the expense of a potential international breakthrough. However, Kent's choice to sing in Swedish probably had little to do with financial calculations. Singer Joakim Berg has pointed out that he does not want to hide behind cliché-ridden English lyrics, which is a common result when Swedish artists sing in English (Sjöberg 2000). Kent's lyrics arguably contributed to their career development from indie band to broad mass appeal as songs in Swedish are preferred among the slightly older population that Kent eventually attracted.

Music, place identity, and everyday nationalism

Music is closely connected to the identity of places and people. This is a two-way process where people's identity is shaped by music or where different identities are reflected in the music. Several studies have examined the role of music in the formation of subcultural, regional, and national identities (Slobin 1993; Stokes 1994; Whiteley et al. 2004). Most importantly here, nations are socially constructed ideas created by a set of common beliefs and experiences (such as listening to the same music). The idea of the nation as an "imagined community" was proposed by Benedict Anderson (2006 [originally published in 1983]) who showed how the development of a national language and the spread of print material across the territory of a state created a sense of nationhood where none had previously existed. Today, national media are especially important in providing a common lived experience among people. Sweden is no exception; Löfgren (1990), for example, has shown the

role of Swedish media in constructing the national identity.

Imagined communities, however, are created by more than national-level macrostructures. According to Billig (1995), relatively unremarkable practices in daily life amount to "banal" nationalism. This includes the routine use of the flag on public buildings or other top-down signifiers of the nation, such as the issuing and use of stamps (Raento 2006) or license plates (Leib 2011) which project national images and messages. Much of this goes unnoticed on a daily basis, as part of a taken-for-granted world. Especially in politically stable countries with few internal or external challenges, such as Sweden, banal forms of national expression dominate over more overt and aggressive forms of nationalism (Billig 1995).

The Billig thesis assumes that the reproduction of nationhood is accomplished through official practices endorsed by the state. Recent research has also proposed that we should investigate how national discourses are reproduced by everyday activities (Fox & Miller-Idriss 2008; Jones & Merriman 2009; Skey 2009; Benwell & Dodds 2011). Such "everyday nationalism" is performed on the microlevel by individuals or small groups of people through participation in organized social activities or political protests, engaging in rituals such as the singing of national anthems, the raising of the national flag, watching a national sports event, and so on. According to Edensor (2002), the formation of contemporary national identity takes place in a decentralized, or "redistributed," fashion through fluid networks of communication among people rather than hierarchical modes of communication. In other words, reproduction of the nation is an ongoing process based on "continual and iterative practice" (Jones & Merriman 2009: 164). This does not mean, however, that national identity is completely reinvented and detached from the past. Existing national meta-narratives provide a "huge catalog of intertextual reference points" (Edensor 2002: 33). Every nation has a set of elements, an international "grammar" of nationhood, that can be deployed as part of a larger meta-narrative. Such elements typically include a particular national mentality and character, values, taste preferences, landscapes, symbols, and texts (Löfgren 1989). For example, the stereotypical Swedish character is orderly and punctual, emotionally controlled, conflict avoiding, melancholic, and lacking in spontaneity (see Daun 1996). These national repertoires are constantly incorporated into evolving national identities. The combination of familiar national iconography and meanings and the experiences of everyday life produce what Edensor (2002) calls an "andscape."

Everyday nationalism may be especially important in Sweden where grand rhetoric and public celebration of the nation is uncommon. Löfgren (1993: 190) writes that in Sweden "national life and emotions are articulated more in private, embedded in the routines of everyday life". I will therefore use the ideas of everyday nationalism to explore how Kent depict Swedish life in a way that brings the ordinary and the familiar to the arena of public discourse, and by doing so make everyday experiences explicitly part of the national identity. Kent's music does not only portray the lived experiences, but it also appropriates a variety of existing ideas about Sweden, a meta-narrative, which are then embedded in their songs of everyday life. What may otherwise be taken-for-granted and rarely reflected upon is given shape and content when the fans listen to Kent's music. As Dittmer (2010: 68) points out, "for a representation to emerge as hegemonic it requires the audience to believe it – it is ultimately a collaboration."

Discourses about a nation have to be disseminated widely in order to be commonly recognized. Edensor (2002) and Dittmer (2010) note that popular culture is better positioned than "high" and "official" culture to influence national identity: it favors the present over the past, it is shared by many, it provides reference points central to the understanding of national identity precisely because of its wide reach, and it is consumed in a mundane, everyday fashion beyond the rhetoric of politics. It is therefore peculiar that music, one of the most common forms of popular culture, has not been scrutinized in the context of everyday nationalism (or its antecedent banal nationalism). So far, other forms of popular culture have been investigated, such as film, television dramas, and comics which reflect and construct national images and culture (Edensor 2002; Dhoest 2007; Dittmer 2010). As identity is often created by affect and emotional experiences as much of intellectual processing, an emphasis on music is overdue.

This is not to say that the general connection between music and place identity has not been explored. According to Connell and Gibson (2003: 15, 117) music is "part of the process by which spaces are created", while at the same time artists "represent themselves and their experiences of places through music". In the case of national

identity, people have sometimes searched for an ancient, unchanging national "soul" in music; an essentialist perspective on the meaning of music. For example, Ireland's identity is strongly connected with the country's music, both traditional folk music, popularized by groups like the Chieftains, and contemporary artists such as U2, Sinead O'Connor, and the Pogues. Such music is often romanticized as the essence of the nation's cultural heritage (McLaughlin & McLoone 2000). In a Nordic context, particularly the era of romantic nationalism of the 19th century produced music that has been understood as an expression of nationhood, most notably Sibelius in Finland (Goss 2009), Grieg in Norway (Benestad & Schjelderup-Ebbe 1993), and Wagner's music which was influenced by pan-Germanic themes popular at the time (Hagerman 2006).

Today, as I have argued above, the meaning of nationhood is constantly remade and reimagined, and therefore non-essentialist approaches to interpreting music are more appropriate. Lily Kong (1997) has explored how Singaporean artists construct a national identity while using elements of globalized popular music. Olaf Kuhlke (2009) contends that the music of the Canadian band the Rheostatics is representative of contemporary Canadian identity. Some of the most important elements of "Canadianness" that Kuhlke identifies in the Rheostatics' music are multiculturalism, identity through the "othering" of the United States, including a particular Canadian political ideology (social democracy "light") that emphasizes the provision of social services by the state, and the use of nature imagery and northern landscapes as "cement" for a sometimes fragmented nation. Just like the meaning of nationhood often tends to be fragmented, the representational aspects of music can be equally contested. For example, Bruce Springsteen's music can, depending on who is listening, be a positive and populist vision of America; or, from a more critical perspective, a lament over the loss of the American Dream. Most famously, Ronald Reagan's use of Springsteen's music for political purposes highlights such contested meanings of music (Cullen 2005).

Turning to Swedish popular music, what is it that makes it distinctly Swedish? Larsen (1993) and Lilliestam (1993) suggest a combination of elements in the music itself together with non-musical phenomena. More specifically, music becomes Swedish when it conveys meanings that can only be fully understood within the framework of Swedish culture, when it is a musical style that dominates or only exists in Sweden, or music that is ideologically Swedish; e.g., it projects or creates a Swedish identity. Even if Swedish popular music is strongly influenced by the global music canon, it is shaped by local circumstances in a way that signals national belonging (Johansson 2012). In a concrete sense, Swedish popular music may contain the following (based on Lilliestam 1998 and Löwstedt et al. 2001): (1) lyrics in Swedish; (2) references to Swedish conditions, events, persons, and places; (3) a specific mood and atmosphere that incorporates melancholy and minor key tonality; (4) elements of traditional Swedish music, such as fiddle and accordion-based folk music or the indigenous singer-songwriter visa tradition (e.g. Carl Michael Bellman, Evert Taube, and Cornelis Vreeswijk); (5) melodious pop songs with a straight-forward beat, often referred to as a *schlager* tradition; or (6) lyrics that stress rural romanticism where coastal and forest landscapes are common geographic themes. As evident later, some of these elements are found in Kent's music, while others are rejected in favor of contemporary ideas of what constitutes Swedishness.

The only previous academic study of Kent (Lilliestam 2003) analyzed Swedish media's treatment of Kent and particularly emphasized authenticity and the language that journalists use to describe Kent's music. While a few of the media themes identified by Lilliestam – the band's origin in Eskilstuna, its vaguely leftist politics, and the emotional content of the lyrics – will also appear in my analysis, such discourses should also be understood in the context of how music may contribute to everyday nationalism.

Kent's journey through class and space

The journalist Jonas Hållén (1998: 145) writes that Kent's success cannot be explained by one single factor but rather a larger "package," including "stage performance, dress, attitude, and – finally – origin". In fact, most journalistic accounts about Kent stress that the band comes from Eskilstuna. Such discourses about Kent's origin communicates, I will argue, three interrelated ideas about Sweden. First, Eskilstuna is an archetypical Swedish small city. Second, the band's path to stardom from humble beginnings in Eskilstuna illustrates a "class journey" that resonates with many Swedes. Third, Kent have, like many people, migrated to

the "big city," in their case Stockholm, resulting in an ambivalent relationship with their hometown.

Eskilstuna is a city of 60,000 people (in the larger municipality [*kommun*] that includes suburban areas, there are 96,000 people) located approximately 50 miles west of Stockholm. It is best known for its manufacturing heritage that includes mechanical industries such as guns, locks, tractors, and other machinery. A period of deindustrialization during the 1970s when the Kent members were growing up resulted in unemployment, outmigration, and population losses. An economic turnaround from the 1990s and onward has been credited to the city's relatively central location, improved communication and transportation, and an expansion of the local university. The city regained population, and there are now as many residents in Eskilstuna as there were in 1970 (Eskilstuna kommun 2010; 2012).

Cities like Eskilstuna contribute to Sweden's urbanization rate of 84%, which is high from an international perspective (Population Reference Bureau 2011). Yet, using colloquial Swedish terminology, there are only three "big cities" in the country – Stockholm, Göteborg, and Malmö. Thus, most people in Sweden are residents of smaller towns and cities[2] while many people in Stockholm, Göteborg, and Malmö have family ties to such small towns. The typical Swedish lived experience is, in other words, much like the one in Eskilstuna. Kent's audience is therefore highly familiar with the characterization of life in Eskilstuna, which the band returns to with some frequency in its music. The content of Kent's songs will be considered in detail later; here, it suffices to say that Eskilstuna is described in mostly negative terms: societal conformity, limited personal opportunities, and general dissatisfaction with life.

Media's association between Kent and Eskilstuna usually includes overtones of place irony, such as Kent's origin in "the *sörmländska*[3] metropolis" of Eskilstuna (Bjurman 1996) as a comment on the provincial character of the city. Such reporting devises are particularly common when reporting from prestigious and important Kent concerts, the farther away that Kent has made it from Eskilstuna (such as touring in the United States), or the greater the commercial success of the band has been. For example, a *Dagens Nyheter* concert reviewer felt compelled to point out that "the band *from Eskilstuna* [my emphasis] now attracts as many people as Bruce Springsteen" (Rydell 2007: 249). The *Aftonbladet* paper reports in a similar fashion from Roskilde, one of the largest music festivals in Europe: "Kings of the main stage on the biggest festival. Kent. *From Eskilstuna* [my emphasis]" (Virtanen 2005). The addition of Eskilstuna implies that there is a contradiction between success and anything from Eskilstuna, or perhaps more broadly, between success and the city itself. This attitude is presumably based on the embedded knowledge that journalists and the public hold about Eskilstuna (the Swedish public ranked Eskilstuna as 26 out of 28 cities in a 2011 TNS SIFO survey on most desirable places). The subtext is, how can a band that originated from such a dreary place be so good? That question, though, is generally left unexplored by the media. The reader may only surmise that the Kent members are uniquely talented individuals. In reality, it is not unusual that prominent Swedish artists originate from small places at some distance from the cultural and economic hearth of the country. Johansson (2010) points out that the spatial pattern of successful Swedish artists approximately corresponds to the distribution of the general population and that the provision of various music-related services by the government and the not-for-profit sector has enabled talent to develop beyond the largest cities. For example, Swedish *studieförbund* (adult education associations) subsidize musical infrastructure and bands that partake in "study circles" (e.g. rehearsals) even receive a small government grant. Kent, much like other bands, were supported by these mechanisms of the welfare state (Gradvall 1996).

Eskilstuna, as an industrial city, is a place with a predominantly working class population and a stronghold of labor unions and the Social Democratic labor party. The band members come from modest socio-economic backgrounds, and rather than attending college, they held blue collar jobs before their music career took off. An important part of Kent's public narrative is that the band members used to be nursing home assistants, electricians, and industrial workers (Cederholm 1996; Hållén 1998); a life they willingly left behind, but at the same time have come to embrace as an important part of their identity. The acknowledgement of these working class roots became especially evident a few years into their career, when Kent had had time to reflect on their long-term personal trajectories. A good example of coming to terms with their origin in Eskilstuna is the song "Elite" from the 2002 album *Vapen och ammunition*, which celebrates the industrial working class. When "Elite" was composed, Kent had lived in

Stockholm for several years. Their personal identity developed through the encounter with difference, and life in Stockholm arguably enabled Kent to reassert their identity as inextricably linked to Eskilstuna.

Kent should also be situated in a larger discourse that emerged in Sweden during the 1990s when the band arrived on the music scene. The Swedish sociologist Mats Trondman popularized the phrase *klassresa* ("class journey") in an autobiographical study (1994) about social mobility. The notion of social mobility, while not new, was especially poignant at this time as Sweden moved towards a post-industrial, service-oriented society. This reframing of the nation's identity parallels Kent's own class journey. Kent's path away from traditional working class endeavors may be a bit unusual, but nevertheless part of the new creative industries, and more specifically the globally successful Swedish music industry, with their new skills and ideas reminiscent of innovative industrial capitalism during the late 19th century.

Kent not only epitomize social mobility but also physical mobility as the band moved to Stockholm early during its career. (Only one member, Harri Mänty, continued to live in Eskilstuna until he left Kent in 2007.) The migration to Stockholm is a familiar story in Sweden, as advanced jobs in technical and service fields have expanded in Stockholm at a much quicker pace than elsewhere. The percentage of the Swedish population that lives in greater Stockholm increased from 17% in 1960 to approximately 22% in 2010, according to data from *Statistiska centralbyrån* (Statistics Sweden) (1960, 2010). Especially for young people, Stockholm is a common place to migrate for professional advancement.

For Kent it was a personal and professional imperative to move to Stockholm. A career in music was their way out of dead-end jobs, limited prospects, and the societal expectation to settle and start a family early in life. For many of Kent's peers in Eskilstuna, the psychological distance – not the physical distance – between Eskilstuna and Stockholm was too great to be overcome. In "Frank" from the debut album *Kent*, Frank is a person that the narrator of the song idolized, but Frank did not move on in life (understood to mean away from Eskilstuna), and now the narrator is "somebody" but Frank is not. The later song "Columbus" has a similar theme as it's about exploring the land of opportunities, which took place "way back in '93" (lyric segment originally in English), a date that corresponds to the time when Kent moved to Stockholm.

A consistent theme in Kent's lyrics about Eskilstuna, which explains the imperative to migrate, is the notion of not fitting in and the intellectual sterility of the small town milieu. In "Spökstad" Berg sings, "I was born in a ghost town/Where everybody knows the earth is flat." In "Sundance Kid" Kent elaborates further: "You and I fought against stupidity/We accompanied each other to the city of our dreams." On one hand, the message is clear: Eskilstuna is a close-minded place. But embedded here is also a reference to author Per Anders Fogelström's popular historical novel *Mina drömmars stad* (1960, "The City of My Dreams") about Stockholm where the life of the 19th century migrant is harsh, yet ultimately better than in the hinterland. For Kent, the hinterland is undoubtedly Eskilstuna, although they never mention the city directly in this song or, in fact, in any of their lyrics. The closest Kent have come to do so is to call Eskilstuna smestan ("blacksmith town") in "Vy från ett luftslott." The choice of only obliquely referring to Eskilstuna purposefully creates a certain place mystique. The listener can only infer, based on local knowledge about Eskilstuna's geography, or occasional public comments from Kent about their songs, that the mental landscapes conjured up by the lyrics are indeed about, or at least inspired by, Eskilstuna.

One of the most obvious Eskilstuna references is *Hagnesta Hill*, an album named after a neighborhood in Eskilstuna where the band had rehearsal space early in its career. *Hagnesta Hill* was released in 1999 during an attempt at an international career that forced Kent into long overseas concert and promotional tours. The album title symbolizes a back-to-basics approach to music-making (Börjesson 1999). At that point, enough time had passed from the time of migration that Kent were ready to return, at least thematically, to Eskilstuna. Beyond the album title, the neighborhood is mentioned in the song "Stoppa mig juni (Lilla Ego)." Here, concrete albeit fragmented everyday images of Eskilstuna start to emerge – a bus route number two to Hagnesta Hill, a bus stop, a tree-lined avenue – which adds place specificity to Kent's songs. Later, Hagnesta Hill appears again in the song "Ingenting" on the 2007 album *Tillbaka till samtiden*. Berg now sings about the neighborhood, not from the youthful visitor's perspective, but as an imaginary resident whose increasingly middle-aged self is trapped in suburban conform-

ity ("identical houses") and an unexciting life: "In Hagnesta Hill the TV lights are blinking…The commercials are interrupted for sports."

Particularly the albums *Du och jag döden* and *Tillbaka till samtiden* offer intimate and evocative place details of Eskilstuna. This is fodder for fans trying to understand Kent. For example, I recently followed an online conversation between an Eskilstuna local and a fan who was planning a pilgrimage tour of Eskilstuna and wanted to experience the real geography behind Kent's lyrics. Such places include the now defunct Grönan café and the place where chestnut trees stood near a school; both mentioned in "Järnspöken." Moreover, the line "At a burnt down[4] *stadshotell* (city hotel)/ Memories stubbornly linger" from "Passagerare" invites the listener to reflect how his/her memories may compare with Kent's; a *stadshotell* is a ubiquitous entertainment locale in small Swedish towns.

Unlike fans who seek understanding in the present urban landscape, Kent seek answers in the past, in the city of their youth. Berg sings on "Järnspöken" that "I don't know why, but I always return here/I guess it was something we did/Something we said here that changed my life." Even the song title "Järnspöken" indicates that the Eskilstuna past haunts Kent as it is a pun on the word *hjärnspöken* ("figments of the imagination") that becomes "*järnspöken*" – a reference to the past economic basis of Eskilstuna (because "*järn*" means "iron" and "*spöken*" "ghosts"). The unresolved tension about the meaning of the past also surfaces in "Mannen i den vita hatten (16 år senare)" – which translates to "The Man in the White Hat (16 Years Later)" – where meeting people from the past brings back memories about the need to leave "A city that was always asleep." Sixteen years ago (counting from the release date of the album *Du och jag döden* where the song appeared) would be 1989 when the band members graduated from high school, most likely wearing the white hat of graduating Swedish students, which reinforces the autobiographical character of Kent's lyrics. In fact, the mental state of Eskilstuna and its people is frequently described as ghostly or sleeping. Such characterizations are often evocative, yet vague about the root cause of the formative experiences of the past.

The classic depiction of small towns as eventless, as suggested above, is tempered by Kent's realization that their upbringing makes them who they are. Yes, Eskilstuna was a city to escape, but in retrospect, Kent's own rebellion was juvenile: "Our silly crusade against an equally stupid city" ("Mannen i den vita hatten (16 år senare)"). Kent's identification with the city is also associated with the notion of being an underdog, which is embedded in much of what Kent say about themselves (e.g. in Swantesson 2005); they struggle against the odds because they come from Eskilstuna and because of their less-than-privileged background. This has fostered a "we against the world" attitude. "We have always been *bonngänget* ['a bunch of hicks'] from Tuna" says guitarist Sami Sirviö (Dahlbom & Eriksson 2002: 62), using the colloquial term "Tuna" for Eskilstuna, which is typical of locals, but not so much outsiders. The use of Tuna signifies that the origin still matters greatly to the band's own identity and sense of belonging. However, on the recent (2010) album *En plats i solen*, so much time has past since Kent left Eskilstuna that Berg now concludes in "Passagerare": "One time you were my city/Now there's nothing of me left/I'm absolutely positive." Ultimately, Kent displays ambivalence, as part of a rust belt diaspora from Sweden's past, regarding their sense of geographical belonging and connection to Eskilstuna.

Kent's journey through class and space, as described above, encountered a roadblock when the band attempted an international career. The albums *Isola* and *Hagnesta Hill* were re-recorded in English for global markets. At that point, the influential British music publication *New Musical Express* concluded that listening to Kent was "like watching beige paint dry" (Robinson 2000). Kent was promoted as a Swedish Radiohead – one of the most popular and critically acclaimed English bands – which led to the perception that the band lacked originality. Kent also failed to gain momentum elsewhere in Europe and in the United States, which could be due to several factors: the music did not culturally "translate" well into English, unsuccessful marketing, or simply the notoriously capricious music industry. The international failure reinforced Kent's image as a Swedish (and Nordic) band. *Aftonbladet* writes "That Kent did not succeed with its American launch was the best thing that could happen…Global breakthroughs are pure death" (Svärdkrona 2002), suggesting that conforming to global market demands would dilute the place specific qualities of Kent's music. The fact that Kent have been successful in all neighboring Nordic countries, but to a slightly lesser degree than in Sweden, also suggests that Kent's music is culturally contingent and the further away, culturally and geographically, from Sweden one gets, the less relevant Kent becomes.

Interrogating the national myths

Kent have, undoubtedly, employed familiar ideas about Sweden both in their songs and in extra-musical media representations. At times, they do so in a way that seems to reinforce national myths, while in other cases they modernize, reshape, or even reject such stereotypes. In virtually all cases, however, Kent approach the notion of Swedishness from a personal, everyday point of view. There are multiple recurrent themes in Kent's lyrics, and to some extent in their public persona, that can be organized into three different yet interrelated national landscapes: the inner (or emotional) landscape, the winter landscape, and the urban landscape.

First, ubiquitous themes such as alienation, isolation, and loneliness in Kent's songs collectively paint a distinct inner landscape. However, the personal emotions in many songs are also projected onto a national canvas. Berg not only sings that he feels emotionally "ice cold" ("På Nära Håll") but this sensation takes place in an "ice cold IKEA-land" ("Pärlor"). Kent particularly describes the isolation and the inability of people to connect with each other. For example, the title (and content) of the album *Isola* suggests that man is an island, and the catch phrase "Kevlar soul" from the song "Kevlarsjäl" captures such emotional disconnect. Berg's emphasis on the human inability to communicate appears to be a nationwide phenomenon: "This is Sweden and we don't cry anymore/There are no words for that in this damn language/I have no words for how we breathe, think, feel the same thing" ("Det finns inga ord"). The end result is a country imagined by Kent to be populated with lonely people. In the song "Ensammast i Sverige" the narrator sits in a car in a rainy Stockholm, the windshield wipers are moving rhythmically and he feels as a participant in the "World championship in keeping a straight face" and as "the loneliest person in Sweden" because he let a loved one slip away as he was unable to communicate, and now the object of affection has left "the cold, quiet country." But the actual *desire* for human closeness is, at the same time, pervasive in Kent's songs. In "Kevlarsjäl" the narrator pleads "Come, make a hole in my Kevlar soul" while again evoking Sweden by clarifying that this inner landscape is located in "my country." *Dagens Nyheter* suggests that Kent engages in a Swedish tradition of conveying through music "all those things that we want, but prefer to express by singing Bellman6 songs – or slurring about when drunk" (Cederskog 2002).

The reputation for dark and somber themes led Kent to design a cover for the album *Du och jag döden* (Fig. 1) that is a pastiche of Ingmar Bergman, the internationally recognized symbol of Swedish seriousness. Specifically, the cover alludes to Bergman's 1957 film *The Seventh Seal*. A recurrent scene in the film is when a knight challenges Death to a game of chess to avoid his own demise in medieval Sweden ravaged by the plague. In Kent's version, Death is a skeleton and his now card-playing opponent is a strangely androgynous beer drinking character; yet, the similarities are such that few will miss the reference, particularly as the album title "You and Me Death" replicates the conversational relationship between the knight and Death in the movie. Playing chess with Death is an iconic image understood by the broad masses in Sweden, not just cultural elites watching art-house movies. While the album cover and title appear to be little more than a wink at Kent's thematic graveness, the grim reaper also appears in the song "400 slag," and in "Du är ånga" Berg sings about being instilled by "Lutheran agony" as a child, a quintessential Bergmanesque theme. Neither do the band members shy away from being perceived as overly serious in media interviews; they even embrace the label "pretentious" as a badge of honor (e.g. Söderström 1996; Olofsson 2005). *Aftonbladet* dubbed Kent "*folkhemsgoth*[5]" and considered them an appropriately popular artist for such a "surly" country as Sweden (Larsson 2005; Virtanen 2009).

Kent not only portray emotional disconnect and somberness as Swedish traits, but also the feeling of not fitting in or being alienated from a relatively homogenous culture. In "Dom andra" there is a fear of becoming like everybody else – "the others." The song laments conformity, which resonates with Kent's alternative audience who recognizes the expectation of closely adhering to social norms and empathizes with attempts at breaking away from it. At times, this cultural critique reveals misanthropic tendencies, such as the call to be different in an "IQ-free country" ("Kärleken väntar") where "People are idiots" ("Idioter") and "One hundred thousand voices can be wrong" ("18: 29–4"). But being different is hard because "In my country you cannot be superior" ("Det finns inga ord"). This is a reference to *Jantelagen*, a well known Swedish (and Nordic) idea that is typically understood as "you shall not think you're somebody special," and supposedly encourages people not to stand out beyond the norm. In public, Kent frequently proclaims their own greatness (Stenberg 1996). At first, this appears to be the antithesis of not elevating oneself and the opposite of being *lagom* –

Fig. 1. Cover art of the 2005 album *Du och jag döden*. Used by permission from Sony Music Entertainment Sweden.

the famous Swedish axiom that approximately translates as "about right" and signals a modesty-is-virtue cultural attitude. Internally within the band, however, media also report that Kent can be self-depreciating and self-critical (Cederskog 2002), which cast doubt on the sincerity of Kent's belief in their own excellence. Rather, what appears to be at work here is a deliberate public juxtaposition of *jantelagen* and the rock ethos of excessive bragging. Kent, then, occupies a middle space between everyday Swedishness and the larger world of popular music.

When Kent articulate an inner landscape, they often do so in a winter setting. In Kent's world the weather is typically rainy, snowy, cold, dark, or damp. Especially snowfall is an image that Kent returns too in both songs (e.g. "Elever" and "Det finns inga ord") and videos (e.g. "Vinternoll2" and "FF"). The winter

landscape stands in contrast to the aforementioned tendency in Swedish music to romanticize nature by evoking pleasant, rural, and idyllic summer settings. For Kent, as observers of the dark side of life, the winter landscape is more than a setting; the environment is a metaphor for discomfort and troubled emotions. People are at times frozen and ice cold inside ("Livräddaren") or blank as ice ("Som vatten"). Winter is also the season for deteriorating relationships. The song "December" is constructed as a countdown towards a romantic break up as the seasons change and winter is approaching. The theme is repeated in "Kungen är död" where a dreary December day is the opportune time for the narrator to permanently walk away from his partner and leave her stranded in an urban crowd.

Summer songs are far less common, but even when they appear the message is that winter is the normal condition. Summer is a chimera: "My skin is white underneath my watch/There, underneath, the winter never ends" ("Saker man ser"). Summer also exists in stark contrast to the sentiment in songs where people cannot connect with their love interests. For that reason, Berg sings that he cannot stand being in the sun ("Indianer"). Furthermore, summer and pleasant weather are not only depressing, but outright dangerous: "You get cancer from the sun" ("Om Gyllene År").

As a second contrast to common Swedish musical representations of the nation, Kent's songs tend to be urban rather than rural. The urban landscape is also intertwined with the winter and inner landscapes. The city is often described as damp and cold (e.g. "Som vatten") and it is not a happy place, as in "Vinternoll2": "You sense that the city is just like the city has always been/Waiting for a long cold winter/And you say that one can learn to live with loss sometimes/Through an ice cold winter." In the song "Klåparen," the narrator reminds himself that "They turn off the lights on all streets, in all houses/And when the city lies empty, you realize/That this is what your life looks like." The role of the city in Kent's songs is more than a stage for emotional dissatisfaction; it is a protagonist in its own right. *The city* is "quiet and ugly" ("Vinternoll2") and even the most populous of Swedish cities, Stockholm, "lies desolate" ("Pärlor"). On the other hand, cities do not have to be devoid of people to be lifeless and impersonal. This is evident in "Chans" and the video to "Columbus" which contains images of anonymous people in motion not making contact. In the "Columbus" video (filmed in Stockholm) the scenery is also dark, sometimes descending into a sterile subway environment. The album sleeve of *Isola* shows images of urban renewal era housing complexes in cool, monochromatic colors, which is repeated in the video to "En himmelsk drog." Taken together, this is a modernist landscape – traffic, high-rises, streets, asphalt, concrete – and an urban dystopia.

Embedded in Kent's city is yet another element: the theme of fear. Berg sings "People in locked up, quiet houses/Lift the curtain and stare out onto the street/With eyes that are afraid/Of all that can happen" ("Rosor och palmblad"). Kent's treatment of the topic in songs and interviews indicates that violence is the underlying reason for fear. In "Jag vill inte vara rädd," nighttime public spaces are populated with restless, loitering youth where the smallest tension results in a brawl. In "Spökstad," Berg sings "I grew up in a ghost town where the town square turns into a battlefield every night," which describes Kent's experience with the pent up frustration in dead-end Eskilstuna. Later, Kent concludes that the propensity for violence is not unique to Eskilstuna, but equally present in Stockholm ("LSD, någon?").

The public landscapes of Kent

While the theme of urban violence was a foray into social commentary already evident on the first album, Kent moved over time towards further social engagement conveying not just private, inner landscapes but also matters related to national politics, and thus constructing their own public landscapes. While the albums from 1995–1999 (*Kent, Verkligen, Isola*, and *Hagnesta Hill*) brought Kent to the top of the charts, the 2002 *Vapen och ammunition* made them national superstars. The album was musically accessible and covered new thematic grounds by reflecting on broader societal matters, in addition to Kent's traditional emphasis on the personal and emotional. From this time onward, according to *Dagens Nyheter*, Kent start to display "an understanding where they come from" (Rydell 2007: 251) and "there is a subtle love of the homeland in Kent's songs" (Strage 2007: 262). Later albums are also understood in national terms by media, but with a darker undertone: there are "rather serious things that Kent say about this country in their lyrics" (Wahllöf 2005), and the music contains "pitch black studies of the state of Sweden" (Nylin 2009). Addressing such commentary, Joakim Berg says: "I never decide beforehand to say something about Sweden…yet I end up there. It is hard not to comment on what you see" (Wahllöf 2005).

The social commentary of Kent is reinforced by the ethnic Finnish background of three of the five band members. Eskilstuna is one of the cities in Sweden with the greatest proportion of people with Finnish heritage, currently around 17.5% (Vaara 2009). Most of them arrived in Eskilstuna as unskilled labor migrants during the 1960s, which is also true for the band members' families: they left rural regions of Finland plagued by unemployment and peripheral underdevelopment to obtain industrial jobs in Sweden. The Finnish connection not only strengthens Kent's working class credentials, but it also enables the band to speak with some authority on immigration policy matters and to critique anti-immigration sentiment. Sweden has not been immune to the xenophobia of contemporary Europe, as the recent electoral success of the anti-immigrant party *Sverigedemokraterna* attests. While second-generation Finnish people in Sweden are quite assimilated, the alienation felt by an earlier generation exists within living memory and has perhaps translated for Kent into empathy with recent immigrants.

Particularly two songs stand out on *Vapen och ammunition* as distinctly different compared to Kent's back catalog and central to their construction of a public landscape. First, there is the quiet acoustic ballad "Sverige," which became so popular that it was "played during the relaxation portion of ninety percent of all health club exercise classes" (Rydell 2007: 250). Casual listeners viewed it as celebratory in a patriotic fashion (Wahllöf 2005); however, themes of xenophobia and immigration abound in the lyrics. The central message of the song is the complicity of the general public by quietly accepting racism in society: "The silence is frightening/What is it that has happened?" The song continues in the most Swedish of settings, midsummer's eve: "The night is bright in a country without sound/And the glass glitters quietly on our table/As empty as words." Sweden's public rhetoric of solidarity with the poor and oppressed apparently rings hollow to Kent as they end the stanza sarcastically with "Ain't love grand." The charge of complicity continues when Berg sings "Sweden, Sweden, dear friend/A tiger that is ashamed." *En svensk tiger* is a government slogan from World War II that carries a double meaning: "a Swedish tiger," as visualized on World War II posters but also "a Swede keeps quiet." (The word "*tiger*" is both the noun for the animal, as well as the verb "to keep quiet.") The purpose of the slogan was to remind the public to be on guard against potential foreign spies. In Kent's "Sverige" it translates into weariness and distrust of foreigners in general. Sweden was officially neutral during World War II, but its realpolitik was also characterized by Nazi appeasement (see Vetenskapsrådet 2006), which may explain why Kent's tiger is ashamed, connecting the past with the present. The reference to the tiger also clarifies the choice of cover art for *Vapen och ammunition*, a white tiger[7], which adds a racial dimension to the already potent symbolism (Fig. 2). Unable to come to terms with multiculturalism, the Swedish (white) tiger stays mum and "Cheers for another midsummer/Fresh potatoes and herring/As if time stood still." Kent instead opines that Sweden should say "Welcome, welcome here/Whoever you are, wherever you are/Prepare your porch for a feast/For a faraway guest/In the country *lagom* is best." After "Sverige," the presence of xenophobia has been less overt in Kent's music, but the sleeve of the album *Röd* has a picture (Fig. 3) that looks like, according to one commentator, "an angel dressed up in a Ku Klux Klan-hood standing prepared to push two black children into a steam" (Nylin 2009). And "Våga vara rädd" on *Tillbaka till samtiden* describes what appears to be a far right political demonstration with "Riot police everywhere," although "The rest of us are so many more" which suggest hope regarding the challenges of multiculturalism facing the country.

In support of the *Vapen och ammunition* album, Kent toured during the summer of 2003. Especially one concert projected Kent's new desire to speak about (and perhaps for) the nation. The concert was held at a sold out (approximately 32,000 people) Stockholm Stadion, a national arena of Sweden built for the 1912 Stockholm Olympics. The concert took place on June 6, Sweden's day of national celebration. *Aftonbladet* writes that it was "without doubt one of the greatest highlights in Swedish rock music history" (Bjurman 2003). *Dagens Nyheter* echoed the sentiment, but with a twist: "the greatest *nationalistic manifestation* [my emphasis] in Swedish rock music history" (Strage 2007: 262), which implies that the concert held symbolic meaning, as a ritual that involved a large group of people acting in unison. The visual impressions of the show were indeed unity and cohesion, central aspects of nationalism. All band members were dressed in white, as was the audience. Kent communicated in advance via their webpage that all concert attendants should wear white clothing, and most obliged (Fig. 4). In part,

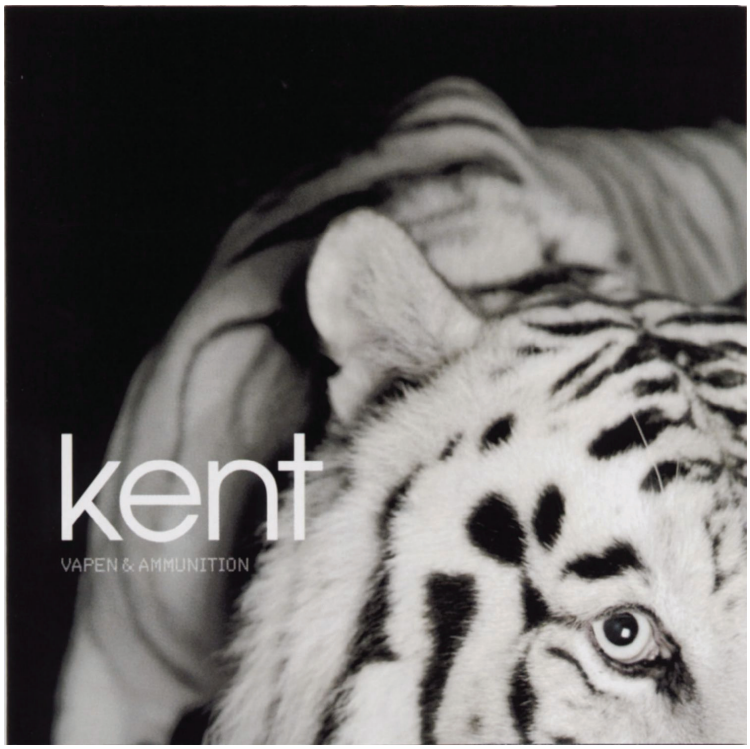

Fig. 2. Cover art of the 2002 album *Vapen och ammunition*. Used by permission from Sony Music Entertainment Sweden.

Fig. 3. Excerpt from the *Röd* album sleeve. Used by permission from Sony Music Entertainment Sweden.

the color scheme was a tongue-in-cheek joke as Kent typically dress in black to suit their serious persona; yet, overtones of nationhood were palpable. Dressing in all white is loaded with cultural meaning; it is the color of Swedish summer, the season of light, and all-white is traditionally worn by graduating students. As an additional element, Kent prominently displayed the Swedish flag on the stage. Although the image of the flag was in black and white, pictures from the concert also show several people in the audience waving the blue-and-yellow banner to great visual effect.

Fig. 4. Kent performing at Stockholm Stadion on June 6, 2003.

Photo: Henrik Ismarker (www.flickr.com). Used under Creative Commons license.

A second song from *Vapen och ammunition* – "Elite" – is also different from Kent's previous material as it opens up with a blues riff and ends with a gospel choir. This song is actually celebratory, but from a class more than a patriotic perspective, exploring the Eskilstuna working class roots of the band and, ultimately, of Sweden. While Kent also sing about the nation in the song, it is personal ancestry that is at the forefront: "My family is full of heroes." These forgotten heroes "Speak through the pen in my hand/And they carried me all the way here." The experiences of labor are depicted as real, while "One hundred upper class poets cannot give me anything." Kent have come to terms with their origin: "I was running to stand still/ Looking for a miracle/When it was right next door." Stockholm and the music industry is the elusive miracle, while the real one is everyday life "next door" in Eskilstuna. "Elite," according to Strage (2003), is about "the band's roots, sweat, and pride in the steel mills, the Sweden that has disappeared." Both Kent and Swedish society at-large have approached this transformation with a mix of positive and negative emotions, engaging both in nostalgia about the accomplishments of the welfare state and a realization that post-industrial change is inevitable. Far from everyone will make this class journey of course; the post-industrial society leaves too many people behind in perpetually low-skilled, low-wage employment, but at the same time, socio-economic mobility is greater today in Sweden than it is, for example, in the United States (Pew Charitable Trusts 2011).

Kent has continued to express vaguely leftist sentiment after "Elite." On "Vals för Satan (din vän pessimisten)" "banners" are waving during "red May" and Kent offer token but ultimately futile opposition to the political right because "Against the dollar and the yen, death easily becomes a joke" ("400 slag"). The neoliberal political wind seems to trouble Kent; in fact, it is a reason to move on (as in "Ensam lång väg hem"): "When…the wind was blowing from the right /I took a train from Stockholm/Wide world, via Flen," but "When spring came/With solidarity/I long back home to Stockholm," ending their critique on a positive note. But Kent also acknowledges in "LSD någon" that migrating to Stockholm in an increasingly individualistic society comes with a price: "Nobody comes here/To return/First and foremost you think about yourself." Kent seemingly embrace and defend the Swedish *folkhem* and welfare state, but they do so in an ambiguous way, which is emblematic of a band whose "message" always remains ambivalent.

Concluding comments

The idea of everyday nationalism has been employed in multiple contexts, but rarely music. Direct bodily experiences, such as listening to music, have a profound impact on how we experience the world, and, as Löfgren (1989: 15) points out, the nation is "strongly articulated in non-verbal forms, in shared smells, *sounds* [my emphasis], tastes, and visions." Therefore, I have suggested in this article that Kent make ordinary Swedish experiences, habits, and rituals visible through their music. While the shaping of national identities ultimately involves all members of a nation – it is a "redistributed" process (Edensor 2002) – Kent have, because of their popularity, a great deal of power in representing Swedishness compared to other actors.

The Swedish (and Nordic) listener's recognition of the content in Kent's music localizes it and makes it place-bound. While some themes in the songs are universal – such as the confines of a small town or relationship problems – Kent situates them in a Swedish context. To communicate a day-to-day lived experience, especially through the Swedish language, creates familiarity, and as the songs convey culturally determined material, the listener has the ability to interpret it based on his or her own experiences. While the music connects with the experiences of the individual listener, Kent's songs are also transformed from individual recognition to a national experience as they are shared among individuals, through media, and heard in concert. One such concert was highlighted in the article, but all concerts – and Kent has toured intensively over the years – are rituals that may endure in the memory of those who attended them. As evident at the high-profile Stockholm Stadion show, the participants were not just passive consumers of music, but active producers of meaning; they become a "physical embodiment of the nation" (Fox & Miller-Idriss 2008: 547).

Kent often describes everyday personal events, which are, in a narrow sense, always local rather than national in character. While Kent's narratives, concretely or discursively, may be about Eskilstuna or Stockholm, these songs would have limited meaning if they were not seen as an integral part of the national experience; the local and the national scale must (and do) intersect. Because, as I have argued, Eskilstuna can be viewed as an archetypical Swedish city, which is also reinforced by Sweden's relatively homogenous character with mod-

est regional differences, Kent's experience rooted in a particular place is seen as very Swedish. Of some importance here are also Joakim Berg's vocals, which are performed in a generic Swedish accent rather than a regional one, which allow the music to transcend the local-national divide. Indeed, one of the foundations of the nation as an imagined community, according to Benedict Anderson (2006), is the development and use of the same language.

Kent depiction of everyday Sweden contains three landscapes, which I conceptualized as inner, urban, and winter landscapes. Through these landscapes, Kent both reinforce and reshape national myths. For example, rural landscapes typically symbolize the nation, both in Sweden and elsewhere, because they seem more primordial compared to ephemeral and contemporary urban landscapes (Edensor 2002). However, Kent has chosen to describe urban landscapes precisely because they are more relevant to contemporary life in Sweden. Similarly, landscapes of dreary and cool weather may be more true to the everyday experience than iconic summer landscapes. Billig (1995) points out that the weather is a way through which nations talk and think about themselves; Sweden and Kent are no exceptions.

In other ways, however, Kent's lyrics stereotype the character of Sweden and its population. There is a fine line between sincerity and effect-seeking emoting that Kent constantly must balance, but based on their critical acclaim and that they are credited with a high degree of authenticity (Lilliestam 2003; Niklasson 2005), the rendering of the national character as gloomy and melancholic becomes credible. Part of the reason is that Kent situate this portrayal in everyday life. While they commonly describe such national characteristics, they also depict attempts at breaking away from this culture. Kent thereby demonstrate that they are inevitably shaped by Swedish culture, but at the same time consciously recognize how they are trapped in it. Thus, Kent engage in a critique from *within* Swedish culture. This is not only manifested in Kent's inner landscape but also in their public landscape. Again, a balance is struck; one that can be dubbed "critical patriotism." The portrayal of Sweden does not shy away from criticism, but it is also experienced by fans as a fair representation of the country and one that invites both recognition and contemplation about what it means to be Swedish. For example, a Swedish academic who read an abstract to a conference version of this article emailed me and confided that "I have lived abroad for many years and used to get a serious case of homesickness when I listened to Kent" (Johansson 2012). The notion of nationhood is usually approached in a cautious manner in Sweden where overt expressions of nationalism are frowned upon, which means that Kent's critical patriotism is culturally appropriate. Even Eskilstuna, which bears the brunt of Kent's scorn, is generally appreciative, and even proud, of the band (Axelsson 2003).

Niklas Wahllöf writes in *Dagens Nyheter* that "However you interpret Kent's music, there is a need for the band out there among a lot of Nordic people" (2005). As documented earlier, Kent have had success in Sweden's neighboring countries. The connection with Finland is especially interesting, not only because of the background of the band members, but also how Kent have been received in Finland. The fact that individual Kent members have been commissioned to act in Finnish beer commercials (the Koff commercial is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=8nc0zQBeNEU) and to contribute to the soundtrack to the 2013 movie *Laulu kotiikävästä/Ingen riktig finne* about a middle-aged rock musician who finds himself caught between Finnish and Swedish culture, indicates that Kent's "Finnish connection" should be explored further. On the other hand, Kent do not appeal to everyone; for example, their fan base does not extend very deep into Sweden's immigrant population. These are avenues of new research that can explore the connection between Kent, Nordic society, and everyday life, perhaps by utilizing interviews with fans to supplement the media and music content analysis of this article.

NOTES

[1] All quotes in this article, both from media and Kent's lyrics, are my own translations from the Swedish. However, I have retained the original song and album titles in Swedish.

[2] Subtracting the 16% of Swedes who lives in rural areas and the number of residents in the three big cities from the total Swedish population of nine million results in that 50–60% (depending on whether population statistics from the municipalities or the urban regions of the three main cities are used) of the Swedish population lives in what can be called smaller cities and towns.

[3] Meaning "originating from Södermanland," the province where Eskilstuna is located.

[4] The downtown Hotel Statt in Eskilstuna was torched by an arsonist in 2009, shortly before the song was written.
[5] Folkhem literally means "the people's home" and is a euphemism for the welfare state of the post-World War Two era.
[6] Carl Michael Bellman is a late 18th century composer whose songs have endured and are familiar to most people in Sweden today.
[7] The white tiger is also connected to the Eskilstuna Zoo, which used to house such distinctly colored animals.

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