

not obtrusive. Because the lyrics are in essence sound poems, you can let your own thoughts be swept along by the music. So you come across perfect hooks, such as the word *Enough* in *Envoi*. In the best rock tradition, the lead singer's place is in the middle of the backing group. Absynthe Minded is becoming an established and valued presence in continental Europe. We have already seen several generations of musicians who cannot manage without American music and Britpop. The continental European input of toe-tapping Balkan and klezmer are a welcome addition that will survive the current trend. Their artistic world finds its expression in the videos of the hit singles: modern dance, avant-garde visual art, rejuvenating architecture, art-house film, creative photography. Whenever a woman appears in the tale she plays the part of an inscrutable being who relates solely to the singer while the others look on with glazed eyes. Lesser clips have been shown for more money.

Pop groups from continental Europe who sing in English are rarely exportable to English-speaking markets. Flanders has been doing extremely well in this field for years. Flemish pop and rock groups are feared in the Netherlands for their originality and the quality of their playing. Some academic research has even been done into this. Absynthe Minded's ambition is to cross the North Sea and enter the lion's den. The band would not be out of place in the Jools Holland live show, now also broadcast by Flemish television. Good pop music, like that of Absynthe Minded, should know no borders.

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'The Last Refuge of the Emigré with Nowhere to Flee'

Gert Vlok Nel

Gert Vlok Nel is an enigma. Born in the small South African town of Beaufort Wes in 1963, the Afrikaans poet-singer seldom gives interviews. He has only written one small book of poetry, *Om te lewe is onnatuurlik* (1993), for which he received the prestigious Ingrid Jonker Prize. And he has recorded *Beautiful Beaufort-Wes* on CD (1998), in which he occasionally sounds like South Africa's answer to Nick Drake, soaking his unusual melodies and phrasing in profound melancholia. Nel sees himself as an old-fashioned troubadour - someone who arrives with his acoustic guitar, plays a few songs, and after a couple of drinks disappears into the long black night.

Yet, despite the shyness, the evasiveness and the minimal output, he has built a big, loyal following, not just in South Africa, but particularly in Belgium and the Netherlands. No less than eight of these poems were included in the definitive selection of Afrikaans poetry made by the Dutch author Gerrit Komrij, *De Afrikaanse poezie in 1000 en enige gedichten*.



Gert Vlok Nel (1963-).

It's not easy to explain this cult hero status. One of the reasons is the stark documentary *Beautiful in Beaufort-Wes*, by Dutch filmmaker Walter Stokman, which was released in 2006, shown on television, won awards and was later added as a bonus DVD to the CD. Stokman portrays the place where Nel grew up and where he still lives with his father. Beaufort-Wes is a small dusty town in the barren Karoo region, mainly brought to life by truckers who stop over on their way between Johannesburg and Cape Town. Stokman shows a dead-end place where people dream about leaving, about life in the faraway towns, and where a blue plastic bag stuck in barbed wire in a windswept veld has poetic resonance. The fact that we never hear Gert Vlok Nel himself talk adds to the mystery.

There's more to the appeal. Part of it has to do with the lack of pretentiousness. The withdrawn Nel, who apart from admiring Bob Dylan and Tom Waits also admits a love for the decidedly uncool Dutch country band Pussycat, reminds his fans of an 'old world' where intensity and quality are more important than kissing models or wearing bling. No celebrity life or twitter for Nel, although he does have a Facebook page, which dryly states that he '*studied English, Afrikaans and history at Stellenbosch University and worked as a guide, a bartender and a watchman*'.

The fact that he never wrote another book of poetry or recorded another CD adds to the outsider appeal - here's someone for whom the song and the poem are natural things. They come when the muse is ready. And it's the deep dark quality of those few tunes and lines that resonates. They manage to translate a state of mind of an isolated part of South Africa and 'Afrikanerdom', untainted by politics. It's that romanticism that reverberates, both locally and internationally.

'I think Gert is much more than the romantic groove in which most of his fans, and most Afrikaners, are wallowing in. Boundless romanticism is the last refuge of the emigré with nowhere to flee', explains friend and fellow poet Charl-Pierre Naudé. *'There is something of the fallen, askance ray (of sun) to Gert. It is an emotional zone that he occupies, a kind of melancholy which seems to be really typical of, and endemic to, a half-desert*

country, such as this one. Almost like 'the blue wave' is to Sweden and Norway.'

Waits and Dylan are often mentioned, but Nel's sensitivity is actually closer to that of the Texas singer-songwriter Townes Van Zandt. Their songs lack the venom of Dylan or the rawness of Waits, but manage to capture both the loneliness of the hobo and the deceptive, addictive lure of the road. On Kathleen Van Zandt sang: *'It's plain to see, the sun won't shine today / But I ain't in the mood for sunshine anyway / Maybe I'll go insane / I got to stop the pain / Or maybe I'll go down to see Kathleen.'*

The words from Nel's poem *Desember & see* (December & sea) fit into the same outsider canon: *'ek wou iets (die oggend) vergestalt in rots of rym / maar het alles reeds weggee / aan herinneringe en pyn. [...] ek onthou vanaand At, vir wat dit was, jou blik: om te lewe is onnatuurlik.'* (I wanted to capture something (the morning) in rock or rhyme / but had already given everything away / to memories and pain [...] I remember tonight At, for what it was, your look: to live is unnatural.)

Fred de Vries