

Between Darkness and Light

Ghent-New York Rock Singer Trixie Whitley

Timeless. If there were a single adjective to describe the music of Trixie Whitley (born in 1987 in Ghent), then that would be it, but don't confuse 'timeless' with 'retro'. Whitley's music does not aim to transport the listener back to a glorious past. For her it is about writing songs which are not bound to a specific trend or period. Her debut album *Fourth Corner* (2013) may contain echoes of blues, gospel and soul, but it is also unmistakably a record of the twenty-first century. In addition to the genres already mentioned, dating back half a century or more, contemporary influences such as hip hop and R&B have also made their mark on *Fourth Corner*. Whitley is often considered to be an 'old soul', but of course she is also a young woman who goes to parties with friends in the here and now.

Just as she looks for a musical path between rootsy and contemporary, in her lyrics Whitley swings between darkness and light. In her own words this allows her to follow the cycle of life and nature: creation follows destruction and vice versa, continually repeating. She finds this endlessly fascinating, because she sees parallels with her own personality. While she is highly optimistic by nature, she also has a truly dark, melancholy side. It's difficult to trace precisely where that comes from, but Whitley's unusual family history must have something to do with it.

Her father was American blues singer and guitarist Chris Whitley (1960-2005), an exceptionally talented man from a family of artists who sadly also had self-destructive tendencies. Arriving in Ghent in the 1980s he met H el ene Gevaert, a woman with an artistic and mildly eccentric family background. Whitley and Gevaert not only formed a band together but also had a child, Trixie. She was born in Ghent, spent her childhood in New York and her teenage years in the musical capital of Flanders, and ten years ago opted once again for the American melting pot of The Big Apple.

A background like that had to lead to a life as a performer. Whitley was already singing along with her father on stage as a small child, deejayed at Ghent's S.M.A.K. (Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art) at the age of twelve, played in youth theatre performances and toured Europe as a dancer with Les Ballets C de la B and choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. Eventually she chose music, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that music chose her.

She began to express herself through song virtually before she had learnt to walk, completely unaware of the fact that she was singing. The guitar, piano and drum kit similarly 'happened' to her: she picked up the instruments and immediately had an almost physical bond with them, as if her blood flowed through them. She spontaneously found a way of communicating her feelings and thoughts. The artisanal approach, as she calls it, meaning working intuitively and creatively, free of external influences such as other people's music, and with the space to experiment, even if it does not always lead to concrete results.

Trial and error, falling and picking yourself up again. This applies as much to her personal life as to her music. Although Whitley prefers to keep the two separate in interviews, they are inextricably connected. In her lyrics she has worked through the sometimes tragic events of her private life (her parents separated when she was still young; she grew up in two very different countries; she never fitted in at school; her father died in her presence when she was seventeen, felled by a lingering illness), never directly in the form of open-hearted confessional lyrics, but rather in indirect, impressionistic images which often point to overwhelming nature, particularly rivers.

This gives her music an intangible, timeless quality, demanding repeated listening for the power to emerge through the initially positive but superficial impressions of her voice and the sound she produces. Despite, or perhaps



because of, her complex, layered sound and her initially impenetrable lyrics, she has reached a loyal and still growing audience. She has already laid foundations to build on in France, the Netherlands and a handful of other European countries. In her current home, New York, she still has to fight it out with the many other fortune seekers – although Whitley already has a head start thanks to her connections with Daniel Lanois (Canadian songwriter, musician and producer of world stars such as U2 and Peter Gabriel), with whom she worked in the supergroup Black Dub.

But it is mainly in Belgium, where she was born, that she has crowds of loyal fans: here 20,000 copies of her debut *Fourth Corner* have been sold – a very respectable success in times of falling record sales – and she appears at the big festivals, her performances invariably selling out. The Belgian public have also seen her grow up on stage, years before her CD debut came out in 2013, at solo concerts in which she would introduce a number somewhat hesitantly, then suddenly launch into song like a great soul diva;

and in performances with a rock band in which she let rip with raw, primitive voodoo blues.

At the end of 2014 she gave a series of small, informal concerts in the Netherlands, Flanders and Switzerland in which she performed songs from *Fourth Corner* in a subtle three-part arrangement and shared a handful of new numbers with the audience from a record to be released in 2015, making the fans a part of the creative process involved in a new album. They heard how Whitley has conquered (or rather accepted) the darkness inside herself, while continuing to extend the boundaries of her sound, integrating North African rhythms into her music, or playing as slowly as possible without it becoming uncomfortable. In one new song she nicely summed up her artistic drive: 'I need to find new frontiers.'

PIETER COUPÉ

Translated by Anna Asbury

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