

Eivør: „While making music, I think with colors”

For more than a decade Eivør Pálsdóttir has been surprising the audiences with her voice and unique sound, combining folk, jazz, and electronic elements. Not only do those various references intrigue the fans of other music genres, but also enable the singer and composer from the Faroe Islands to work on other projects. The certificate of the artist's growing renown is also the high turnout on her last spring tour. I had an opportunity to talk to Eivør before her gig in Erfurt about touring, musical evolution, shamanic drums, and many others.

Alicja Sulowska: Last dates on your spring tour are slowly approaching. Have you visited any new cities you haven't played in yet?

Eivør: It's our first time in Erfurt, recently I've also visited Prague for the first time – it was amazing!

That's true, Prague has something of the artistic atmosphere (laughs). If we're already covering this topic – It's almost become a stereotype that the country of your origin almost completely determines the character of your music. Do you think a non-Scandinavian audience needs some kind of introduction to fully enjoy your music?

No, absolutely not. I like to think of music as something primal and universal, something everyone can identify with. Of course, I am very inspired by my roots and the Faroe Islands, but that's more like an influence deep within me, it's not that literal as it's more about a certain sound or feeling. The music, on the other hand, is something everyone should be able to relate to. Obviously, music taste and everything else has also its place in it, but music isn't something you'd need a lecture on to fully understand (laughs).

I believe you do have fans on the Faroe Islands – do you get to play there often?

Sometimes – like every other year, this year, for example, I'll be part of the music festival there. (a guy from the venue brings us coffee here)

Danke schön! By the way, how to say “thank you very much” in German?

We're mostly good with just a “danke”, “Vielen Dank” and “Danke schön”, you know, Germans are a bit distanced at the first sight (laughs)!

(laughs) In my language, we have like all kinds of “thank you” – we have “takk”, which is just “thank you”, then “tusen takk”, like “thanks a lot”, and others...

Yeah, you can also add the right intonation to it (laughs). Although I live in Germany, I'm Polish, so we've got quite a lot of ways to say “thank you” as well!

Oh my, I have played a few dates in Poland recently! It was so amazing. I've played there once before, at a festival in Białystok two years ago, and it was my first experience with this country. Now I've been back for four shows, most of them were sold out. The audience is so warm and welcoming, just the best.

Your last album, „Slør”, was also released in English. In case of a process like that people often talk about things being "lost in translation". Did you have any similar experiences when English wasn't enough to express what you had to say in music?

Yes, I think this sentence is very true. For some songs, it was almost natural to rewrite them into English, while for others I kind of had to rethink everything as some metaphors were basically untranslatable. The Faroese language has a lot of nature references, lots of words, literally hundreds of synonyms for fog and foggy weather. Its use often depends on the context and translating it into English is tricky, as there's just one word for it (laughs)! On the other hand, it was an exciting thing for me to do; I felt as if I did a remix of the album and of the lyrics, so it was interesting as well because I haven't tried translating lyrics like that before. I don't think I'd do it again though!

Why is it?

It's also hard. When you've made an album, you've put a lot of heart and emotion into it. And revisiting might be difficult. It's like opening the door you've already closed. It was both challenging, and I was also curious to open that door again. But I've already tried, so that's it...

Like you've checked it off your to-do list and went over to the next challenge (laughs). Is it similar to your other albums? While earlier I had an impression that each one of them is a coherent musical whole, „Slør” was more diverse when it comes to musical inspirations. Do you see your albums as a natural evolution or more like single challenges you're facing?

I think for each album I like to hear space or soundscape. I see it as a room where the music is home, where it lives. I think that the albums that came before “Room” were more like a living room, warmer and cozier, while on „Slør” it's moved into the inside of a mountain or somewhere in a cave, and the whole sound of it is affected by that idea in my head somehow. You can kind of hear that. I wanted „Slør” to be more nature-like, like sound of water and river inside the mountains.

Some of your albums, like “Larva”, have these certain labels on them, like “creative rebirth”, etc. Are any other recordings of such a meaning to you? Is it possible to categorize them that way?

Yeah, I think so! As you said. “Larva” was a very important album to make for me. Since I was 15 I've already had this “folk girl” label on me and have been seen as folk singer and songwriter. In the meantime, I have explored a lot with my songwriting and my guitar playing, and I've felt that the labels have locked me somewhere where I couldn't grow anymore. So “Larva” was sort of my break-the-walls album, where I re-thought everything. The album was very dark because I was in a very dark place when I was creating it – it's somehow melancholic as well. It was the end of something and the beginning of the new chapter, which continued with “Room”, “Bridges” and „Slør”. It was also hard to make “Larva” because when people first heard the new songs, they didn't like them at all. They didn't like the new me (laughs)!

Oh, kind of sad, isn't it (laughs)?

I remember they were kind of scared of my electric guitars and all the noise on stage.

When people think of folk or pop or jazz they have a certain image before their eyes of what they expect to see and hear... Do you think it could have influenced their perception?

I believe people wanted to hear the acoustic guitar and quiet songs at that time. But while touring the “Larva” album, I realized that I was getting a lot of new audiences as well, who found my new image more attractive. So it was also a good thing but still kind of scary. The thing is people don't like it when you change – the whole thing was both hard and important, as I've kind of been born again then. And the ideas and creativity started to grow inside of me, and I still feel this kind of vibration inside. The curiosity to create and to move forward with your art, I think it's always important to do what you feel inside.

On the other hand, “Room” was somehow a different and a more personal album. In what way does the work on material like this differ from creating “regular” albums?

My music has always been reflected by the situations in my life. “Larva” was this “Okay, I need to break these walls!!” and I need to be born again kind of album in which I looked at things from different angles. Then “Room” was the album I recorded after I had lost my father and it was emotionally a very hard time. I didn't plan to make an album at all, but I had just started to write a lot of songs. I don't know if it was more difficult, but it was definitely different than in other cases. It was also important to complete because it was somehow a way for me to cope with the loss and emotions. This album again contained some influences from my past sound and then mixed with some electronics.

Your album covers also reflect these changing soundscapes quite well...

I always liked to work on the album covers with people I admire, like graphic designers or artists in general. I think it's always interesting, as the album cover is a face of the music

somehow, what's thrilling to think of. While making music, I think in colors and moods, so I think it's nice to be able to link album covers and the package inside.

Going off topic a bit – Einar Selvik opened a few shows for you recently and you did the same at Wardruna gigs. How did this sort of cooperation start?

Wait, that's a good question - how did it start (laughs)...

With “once upon a time” maybe (laughs)

Almost! I uploaded a post on my Facebook page a year ago or so asking my fans what they were listening to. And basically, everyone was writing Wardruna! At first, I was like “What the hell is going on?” I haven't even heard of Wardruna before! But I decided to check it out considering its popularity among my fans. Later I also got e-mails saying "Please, do something with Wardruna!" so that is how I got to know Einar's music. And then just a few months ago, when I was about to play in Sweden, he sent me an e-mail asking if I wanted him to kind of support my show there. I was like "Okaaay, it's me who should be performing as the supporting band at your concert but sure". He's such a nice guy and I was really up to it. We met when he played the supporting gig then, and now we're about to make a collaboration with him and Ivar on a Norwegian festival. In general, I love to collaborate with other artists, as every artist has always the world on his own, and it's interesting to see how the two worlds meet.

Both you and Einar Selvik have also made music for TV series. Are you yourself an avid series-watcher?

Oh, yes, I'm absolutely hooked on TV-series! I'm not so much into “Vikings”, but I've done music for “The Lost Kingdom”, which is quite similar to it. I love to sing to all of those battle scenes – it's so much fun (laughs). When I watch series, I'm normally more into science fiction stuff like “Westworld” or “Black Mirror” – it's really cool, I just love stuff like that as well as more futuristic things.

And if you had to direct a movie based solely on your music, what kind of movie would it be?

I think it would be that kind of movie where you combine something very old and primal, like nature or origins with technologies and futuristic solutions. Sort of black mirror-ish vibes. That's something I just find very appealing, and I'm curious to see how nature and technology work together because there's always a conflict there.

If technology can work together with nature, do you think it also applies to the fact how folk music may be combined with other genres?

I think so! In my opinion, music is very much in our blood, it's in our nature to make it as well as we have our voice to sing, scream, or shout. It's very organic and that's why combining it with technology and electronic elements, while still being true to these primal instincts, is so exciting.

Continuing this analogy, it's also possible to say there's a conflict between nature and human beings themselves. This sort of metaphor is used on the project you did two years ago, "At the Heart of Selkie". How did your adventure with it start?

I was asked to do this project with Danish Radio Big Band and Danish Radio Choir. I was like “What will I do?”, but then I had the idea of this old and well-known myth from the Faroe Islands about Selkie Woman. She is a seal, but in the full moon she comes up to the land and dances. Then the men steal her skin and she's stuck on land and has to adjust to life in there. But she always has this longing inside of her because she misses her home, which is the ocean. It's kind of about being stuck in between two worlds, and because I've always wanted to write the song about this. So I took the possibility to do it on this project. I hope it answered your question (laughs).

Absolutely (laughs). You were talking about being in-between. Nowadays it quite often applies to music as well. You probably heard about Myrkur – Amalie was a pop singer before, and now she combines metal elements with some folky sound, of which some

people are strongly critical. Are there any rules in music for you when it comes to mixing genres, or is everything possible when it comes to creative work?

I think there are no rules in music, but things can fail. Combining two things doesn't necessarily mean it'll be great. It has to be done very cleverly and with good taste, style, and craft. Crafting is the key word here. I believe that with solid crafting and good artistry everything can be done. You can combine whatever you want if you hit the right spot so to speak. I think it shouldn't be done just for the sake of doing it, there should be a purpose behind it. Like it is beautiful because it sounds great (laughs). As long as it sounds neatly and is done well, it'll work. I've always ignored music genres. I started as a folk singer, then got into jazz. After that I played in an underground rock band and also commenced classical education. At one point in my head genres were just the lines that were becoming more and more blurred with time. Now it's just like clothes you dress the songs into.

That was kind of poetic (laughs)!

Definitely (laughs)!

In the end, I'd like to ask you about one concrete instrument you employ on stage, the shaman drum. How did you get to use it?

I feel it came to me. I wasn't looking for it. I was just wandering the streets of Trondheim one day 15 years ago or so, and I met a man on the street. He was a shaman and he had a few drums with him. I saw the drums literally screaming at me, so I had to ask him what's that. He showed them to me and I was just able to ask "How much!?" (laughs). I bought it and has had it ever since. I have three drums now, but I've actually never planned to play drums, so it was just a very spontaneous moment, and I didn't expect it to become such an important element of my music. But now when I create my beats for albums, I always start with a drum and then move some ideas for other instruments. It's kind of the core of my sound.

Did you have to learn how to play it anyhow?

I don't know, I just played it (laughs)!

It's still used in shamanic and heathen rituals – what do you think made it so special and fascinating?

It's just that it's something in it (laughs). It's a hard beat somehow, it has a deep sound, but at the same time it's also a very fragile instrument. Every night when I play it I have to tune it with water, or, if it's too humid, I have to dry it again... It's not just an instrument that stands there. You have to take care of it all the time like if it was a child. And that somehow creates a very close connection with the instrument. Otherwise, it just won't sound right. I just think that some people, including me, have this thing for drums (laughs).

Thank you for your time!

Edited by: Marcel Szczepanik