

Anouk - To Get Her Together (2011)

Radio deejay Erik de Zwart put it succinctly. 'The record and its story.' With a well-placed pause after 'the record'. In a special feature of his Top 40 show Erik explained the finer points of a song on the hit parade. That is to say, he translated the lyrics into Dutch. That is different from explaining its 'finer points'.

To Get Her Together is a record with a story. It contains songs dealing with the break-up of a relationship. About doubts, sorrow and anger. You don't need Erik de Zwart to understand the way in which Anouk sings 'Cheater' on her single *Down and Dirty*. By now, everybody knows the story behind that. That story is clear-cut. Painfully clear.

But *To Get Her Together* contains another story. It's a story Anouk finds hard to explain. She needs everything she has to do so. She has to hum and babble nonsense. And when she does, she faces up to her renowned producers. Take Ryan Leslie, for example. Apart from being a singer himself, he also works as producer for the likes of Mary J. Blige. Then there's Reggie 'Syience' Perry, a Grammy-Award winning songwriter and producer who worked with John Legend and Jay-Z. These two introduce beats to a blond singer from Holland. She is a credits spotter, living and breathing music. Somebody who can tell you straight away if a beat is cool or not. And if she can do anything with it. Anouk tells of how guys like Leslie and Perry are 'in shock' when the blond storm rages in a chair right next to them.

But there's more. Anouk does not just want to use a beat, she wants to be inspired by it. She picks up the beat and starts working with it. She adds lyrics. Sometimes she has already thought of a word for a specific spot and then embroiders the rest of the lyrics around it. The beat gets the Anouk treatment. And then she returns the song with the question: 'What do you think? Do you feel it?' To which Ryan Leslie answers: 'Is this my song?! Unbelievable!'

Many of Anouk's songs have started on piano or guitar. Thanks to her ex-husband, Remon 'The Anonymous Mis' Stotijn, she later heard beats 'I could sing a tune to. That's how I discovered a different side of myself. With this new album I wanted to revisit that side. Writing songs with people who are not used to this way of writing. With Ryan and Reggie but also with Reverse, a Dutch hip-hop producer. Guys that write fantastic songs but sometimes may need a little help with the chord progressions. All of those beat makers were excited to create songs in this unusual way. They wanted to understand what I was trying to tell them, they wanted to hear what I was hearing in my head.'

By now, the Swedish producers Tore Johansson and Martin Gjerstad fully understand Anouk's intentions. That is why she wanted them to be a part of the new album, after the successful cooperation for the album *For Bitter or Worse*. 'I prodded them to start making beats as well. At first they hesitated, thinking they couldn't do it. But I knew they could do it.' Just listen to the intro of *To Get Her Together*. Listen to *Any Younger*. No doubt, these Swedes know how to make beats.

Listen again to *Any Younger*. Yes, that is hardcore funk. Then listen to the lyrics! This is someone taking the Mickey out of herself. 'After Tore came up with the title I wrote the lyrics in two minutes flat. It is mocking the cliché you've become. You get older, that is something you notice about yourself. And you have to see the funny side of that.'

It is one of Anouk's songs that has the potential of becoming a real rallying cry. One about which the fans will say: that's me! Anouk has written similar material before, such as *One Word*: 'I close my eyes/And imagine you're here. Did it all seem so hopeless?/Given the chance/I would ask/Forgive me.' This song has become a standard at funerals. A song that makes people think and remember, pushing back the tears.

Lost is another song like that. It no longer matters who it is about. It has become the property of others. Anouk has also appropriated a song: *Onderweg* (Along the Way), by Abel. It was released in 2000, together with a video clip about a girl on a bus. The song is sung by a boy (Joris Rasenberg) with a southern Dutch accent. It is a song without a refrain. 'One of the finest Dutch language songs ever written,' Anouk says. 'An incredible melody. A beautiful vocal. Magical lyrics. When I first heard that song on the radio I was immediately taken by it. Such a shame it only became a hit in Holland. That is why I want to help it get international recognition. Translating it is impossible, it is perfect the way it is. I turned *What Have You Done* into my own story, my version.'

Her story. There are moments Anouk cannot bear to listen to her own album. Moments when the story becomes too grim. 'I can express it better in writing than in conversation. Sometimes I hear myself sing something and think: wow where did that come from? The songs on this album do not only deal with the last one and a half years. They are about things and feelings of many previous years. I am absolutely not woolly. But songs do have a therapeutic effect.' She jokes about it: 'It changes from day to day if I can listen to this album. It depends on my hormone level.'

For each listener *To Get Her Together* will become an album with its own story. About that crazy little dance on *Any Younger*. About the tears during *What Have You Done*, the clenched fists of *Better Off Alone* and the insights offered by *I'm a Cliché*. Or about that one time it really got nasty during *Down and Dirty*. With you taking a photograph of it and sharing it on Twitter.

But that's another story altogether.

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