

Emotion yes, drama no

Lhasa de sela discovers her natural voice: 'Musically anti-social' ways abandoned on new album

BY JUAN RODRIGUEZ, FREELANCE APRIL 23, 2009

Change and simplicity were the bywords behind the production of Lhasa De Sela's new album, Lhasa, the first entirely in English for the U.S.-born singer who carved a niche on the world-music scene by singing in Spanish and French. It's only the third album she's released in the last 11 years, after La Llorona (1998) and The Living Road (2003), and it breaks her so-called "brand," she says mockingly at a café near her apartment in Mile End.

"I wanted it to feel as effortless as possible, without pushing," she explains. "It's not theatrical the way my other albums were. The songs are strong enough without needing to emphasize anything."

The pure vocal approach had its roots in the singers she was studying, such as Sam Cooke, Al Green and Marvin Gaye, who imbue their sound with "so much emotion but very little drama." But, perhaps more importantly, her change had to do with discovering on her last tour that she had cysts on her vocal chords, due to forcing matters.

"I realized that the way I sang wasn't quite my true natural voice. For aesthetic reasons I was choosing to push my voice in a direction that wasn't totally natural. The more I'd sing the more tired and frustrated I'd feel. It was a physical struggle, and it made me feel insecure to use so much energy to get this singing out.

"During the last tour I was in this difficult situation where I knew I had to make a change, but I wasn't ready to make it yet. It became very hard physically. Off-stage I lived like a monk. I couldn't go out after the show and talk to people; I had to shelter my voice.

"Over the 200 shows of that tour I had the time to get thoroughly sick of it. Now I get high from singing in a totally natural way.

"That whole process happened over four years, and my tastes kind of shifted towards a simpler way of singing. I didn't enjoy listening to music that was full of effort anymore. For example, Tom Waits apparently can't perform three nights in a row because his way of singing is very harmful to his vocal chords. It's an aesthetic choice, a cool way of singing, but Tom Waits has a really beautiful voice that we don't get to hear very often. I started to see everybody that way. Kurt Cobain - before he committed suicide, he was killing his voice. You can't do that for very long. But people fall in love with that (aesthetic choice) and they expect you to keep on doing it."

Another reason for the change is that she abandoned her "musically anti-

social" ways and sat in with other performers in the neighbourhood, such as Patrick Watson, Sam Shalabi, and former Godspeed member Thierry Amar (who co-produced with Lhasa), all pillars of the fertile Mile End musical scene.

"Montreal isn't gimmicky about music. One of the reasons there's so much interesting music here is the same reason I ended up with this band - it's just musical friendship. It's so easy to try things and develop things here.

"I didn't set out to have a harp on the album (played delicately by Sarah Pagé), but then this friendship happened. I started thinking: 'Wow, I wouldn't have thought of this if I tried.' Friendship can do things that intelligence can't. Sometimes with this band we're like one animal breathing together, everybody has such an incredible instinctive capacity to listen, and you react almost before something happens."

The instrumental fills - by Pagé, acoustic bassist Miles Perkins, guitarists Joe Grass and Freddy Koella and drummer Andrew Barr - are subtle and understated. "I know they'll be right with me whatever way I turn."

Recording direct-to-tape in analog in the Hotel2Tango studio was a new experience for Lhasa, and now she swears by it.

"Technically I didn't know that much about production. At first I was quite shy but as things went along I got more confident. It was about time for me to step up a little more. I just wanted to find out what I could do myself, and what my limits are.

"If we didn't get the song in a couple of takes we knew the arrangement wasn't working, then try something else. That's the great thing about working direct to analog tape - it's expensive! We couldn't afford to do eight takes of every song. There were no computers in the studio, which I loved. I'm really sold on analog now, and playing live (in studio) with a band. You're hanging out with people making music, instead of staring at this machine and saying, 'We have to re-do that word or phrase.' We didn't get obsessed about details; either it was working, or not.

"I got curious: 'Hmm, what does my natural voice sound like, and what feels good?' There's nothing strange or jarring or weird or odd about this album, it just feels super comfortable. It's got a kind of feminine feeling to it, a luminous quality. It felt really good physically to sing."

A late summer, early autumn tour is in the works. I asked her how her new way of singing would affect the older songs in her repertoire: "I was listening to La Frontera from the last album and I was really shocked by the way I was singing because I found it quite ugly.

"And I thought: 'Wow, I'm going to sing that so much better now.' It's going to be really fun to make it fly with a much simpler way of singing."

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