



All By Myself

Björk has just released *Medúlla*, an album before – with frequently startling results.

Given that Björk's sixth album is the bravest of her pioneering career, it comes as no surprise to learn that *Medúlla* is also the least radio-friendly music she has ever created. And, as anyone who has been listening in on her weird world since she arrived with The Sugarcubes at the end of 1987 will know, that's really saying something.

Björk has redrawn the boundaries of what one woman can accomplish simply by mixing pop and art. Of course, if it were actually that simple, then everybody would be doing it. But as it is, the only major star producing music with this little regard for convention is Björk. Her music is proof that pop can transcend its influences at a time when we are in desperate need of someone who dares to be different and fly the flag for artistic freedom.

"At first I was recording the album with all sorts of instruments, but it just wasn't working," Björk explains, sitting in a private dining room of a favourite restaurant near Reykjavik's main square. "I was trying to figure out why, thinking, 'Where are the songs in all this mess?' Then I sat down at the mixing desk and started muting the instruments, and it was like, Oh, there they are. I figured out that if I removed everything, that was OK. The only other rule was for it not to sound like Bobby McFerrin. It really just happened by itself. After that, it became a very spontaneous, carefree album to make. It really wasn't planned."

Medúlla means 'marrow' in Latin. "Not just your bone marrow," she says, "but marrow in the kidneys and marrow in your hair, too. It's about getting to the essence of something, and with this album being all vocals, that made sense."

A creative life

What do you get up to on an average day at home? "I think about music a lot. Actually, when I was just recording, I'd be with my daughter and my friends and my family. A lot of my friends make things – whether it's furniture or magazines, quilts or music – so a lot of the time, we end up talking about making things. To be honest, I don't see much difference between cooking a meal and writing a song."

These days, she spends half the year here with her boyfriend, American artist Matthew Barney, and their two-year-old daughter, Isadora, in their new place round the corner from the city centre. The rest of the time they spend in their house, once owned by Noel Coward, across the Hudson River from Manhattan.

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cappella album that sees the singer's fascinating voyage of discovery taking her further away from mainstream music than ever "Instruments are so over," she informs Jonathan Wingate

Björk is rarely to be found in the Maida Vale property she lived in during her much publicised love affair with London clubland, until forced to up sticks and relocate to New York's Meatpacking District in 1996.

"I still feel like I have a certain love affair with England," she says. "They were the ones who discovered me. Here in Iceland, people couldn't handle my singing style. They thought I was really weird and just...rubbish. But it was the English appetite for eccentricity that meant they actually had some understanding of me. It was definitely their confidence in me that helped me to become me. It shouldn't matter who I'm dating. I just want to make music. I feel more like a craftsman that just wants to be left alone to do my job."

When did you last meet someone who didn't know who you were? "It happens to me a lot, actually. Maybe not much here in Iceland. It's just so small here, everybody is famous anyway," she giggles. "You know, 'He was a politician', 'Her sister reads the news on TV'. That's kinda nice."

Björk is besotted with Barney and their little girl, and despite her palpable nervousness when the tape recorder is switched on and we begin the interview proper, she is obviously more at ease here than she was the last time we met in London three years ago.

"It's surprising how exhausting talking about yourself is," she says. "I probably do it totally wrong. For some reason, it sort of feels like I've done a four-hour show or something really physical. I'm just wrecked afterwards. It's just really extreme, that's what it is. I mean, I probably won't sleep tonight and I'll be going over all the stuff I've said in my head."

Would you say you work on music most days? "Um, usually there are things going 'round in my head, but I wouldn't call that working," Björk grins. "I'll sort of be working, but I mean, every day? It's not every day. Anyway, it doesn't feel like work, really."

"I think people like me who make music have always sort of stayed the same, but in the meantime, the music industry has grown from zero to nine hundred billion trillion million billion and then collapsed. The monster just got bigger and bigger, but at the end of the day, it's no big deal putting a record out. It's so easy," she shrugs. "We started doing it here in Iceland when I was 14. You just record a song, you make a poster, glue the poster up and then you sell it."

All stripped down

Much of *Medúlla* was recorded on Dictaphones with Björk and her buddies singing their hearts out as they walked over mountains and through caves. The album was made in 18 different locations including New York, Iceland, Venice, the Canary Islands and Lincolnshire.

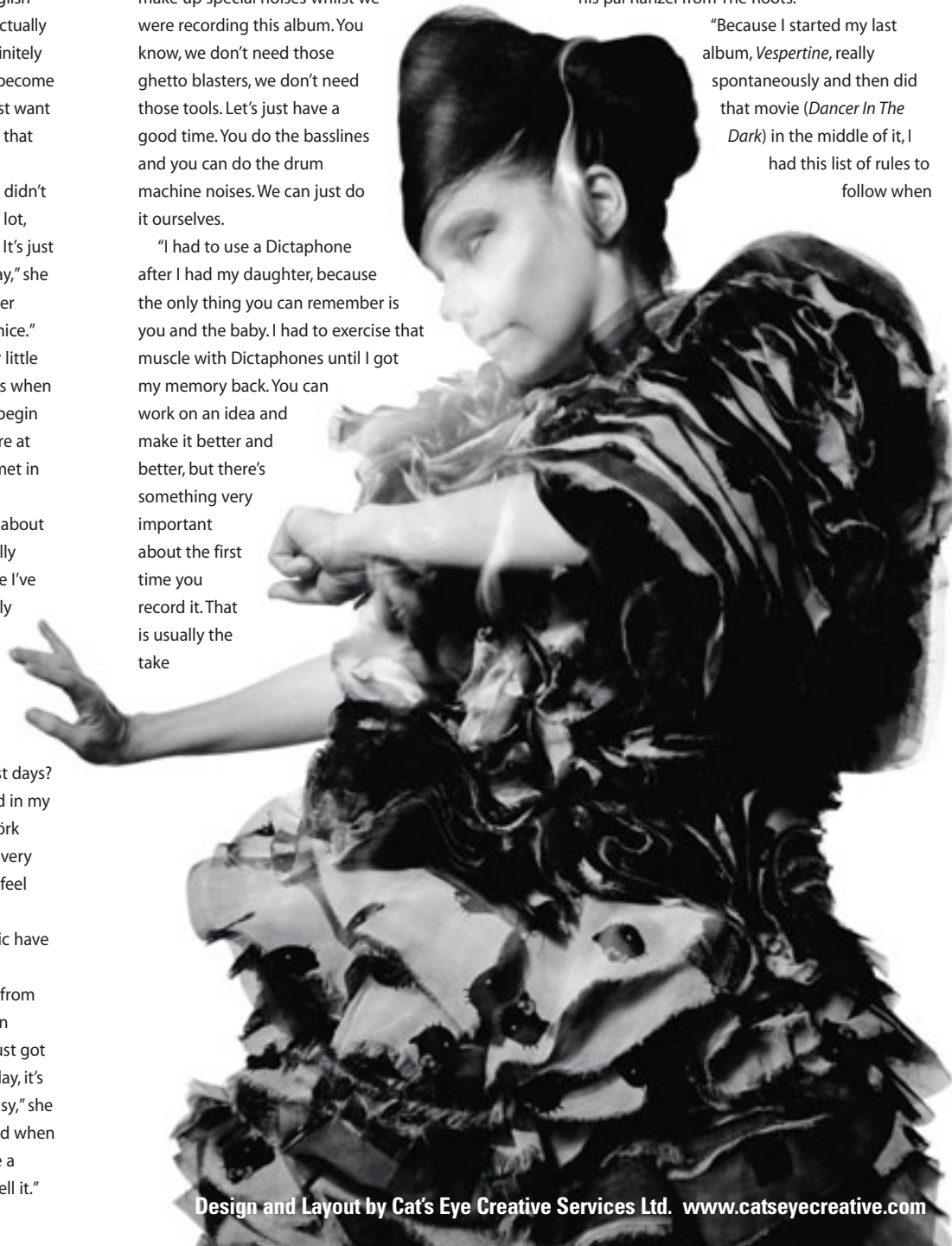
"I ended up in a cave somewhere, just going out singing," she explains. "I liked all of us to make up special noises whilst we were recording this album. You know, we don't need those ghetto blasters, we don't need those tools. Let's just have a good time. You do the basslines and you can do the drum machine noises. We can just do it ourselves."

"I had to use a Dictaphone after I had my daughter, because the only thing you can remember is you and the baby. I had to exercise that muscle with Dictaphones until I got my memory back. You can work on an idea and make it better and better, but there's something very important about the first time you record it. That is usually the take

that stays. I can't record it again. I have to use the original recording."

Not surprisingly, *Medúlla* sees Björk enlisting an eclectic team of old friends such as mixer Mark 'Spike' Stent, programmer Mark Bell and engineer Valgeir Sigurdsson alongside fellow mavericks Inuit throat-singer Tanya Tagaq Gillis, Japanese a cappella artist, Dokaka, Robert Wyatt, erstwhile Faith No More singer Mike Patton and his pal Rahzel from The Roots.

"Because I started my last album, *Vespertine*, really spontaneously and then did that movie (*Dancer In The Dark*) in the middle of it, I had this list of rules to follow when



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I returned to it. By the time I made *Medúlla*, I was so excited about having no rules at all, I felt like everything was possible. Instruments are so over," Björk smirks. "If I wanted a choir of clowns or trombones or birds singing, I felt I could do whatever I wanted to. So I decided not to think about it at all when I was doing it. But looking back on it now that the album's ready, I guess you could argue there's a reason for it."

"It's partly being pregnant and getting really into physical things and the body, and partly also living in New York and the 9/11 thing, and just getting repulsed by civilisations and religions. I just wanted to go back before all of that and say, you know, What happened? Where did it all go wrong?"

As a resident of New York, were you shocked by America's reaction after 9/11? "Yeah, I thought I'd moved to a no-man's land where everybody could just be immigrants and eccentric, and everybody minds their own business. I was talking to a friend of mine the other day, and she described Manhattan like a ship that's outside the States. That's partly why I moved there, because I was getting tired of the tabloid thing in England, and it was getting tricky to be in Iceland for me, because there were a lot of expectations. Anyway, suddenly, this no man's land became the most patriotic place on earth. It felt like Nazi Germany or something. But it wore off, and it's much better now."

"[The press] was saying, 'America is great. Fuck the Arabs,' and I was just like, what? You think you're the only one who can see the wrong in all this. And everybody else was just going on about how Bush is great and everything. You know, what's going on? Now it feels totally different, and they might even vote Bush out. Anyway, let's not talk about politics. It's so depressing. I mean, part of this album was to prove that politics isn't important."

Heart of the matter

Medúlla is undoubtedly Björk's most adventurous album so far in a career that stretches back 27 years, yet however complex the arrangements it is essentially an album about getting back to what really matters to real people, not what they are told should matter to them.

"*Medúlla* is about hope and the fact that there's so much fun stuff out there that people tend to forget about, especially with this political situation today," Björk says, sitting up straight and licking her lips as lunch is served. "You don't mind me eating, do you?" she smirks, shovelling a generous forkful of monkfish into her mouth. "I'm terrible...always eating."

"People think that 90% of everything is to do with war and oil or something. It's actually more like 2%. There's so many other things out

there...like flowers growing, people breakdancing and playing chess. 98% of stuff out there has got nothing to do with politics, like the mountains or the discovery of a fish at the bottom of the ocean. You know, just emotional things that are happening everywhere."

How would you like to be remembered? "I guess having kids makes you think about stuff like that a little bit. I don't know why, but I've got some romantic idea that when I'm 70, my great granddaughter will look up to me and say, 'Yeah, she was brave, she tried and gave it her best and she didn't compromise.'"

Do you think you will always carry on making music whether people are interested or not? "I think so," she replies. "I think I'll be writing little songs in my house. I guess I kinda think about that when I'm learning my cooking. It's a lot

about being self-sufficient just in case I don't sell any records at some point."

Now Björk is really warming to her theme, smiling serenely. "A certain part of me kinda looks forward to that, which is probably when it would kick in and it wouldn't feel nice at all. You know how your mind plays games with itself? I could just write that song inside me that I still think is better than all the other stuff. Then I could just go totally self-indulgent."

"I just care a lot about music, you know. I'm just...a freak," Björk beams as our time together comes to a close. "I think music is more important than anything. I know it sounds ridiculous, but that's how I feel. But then again, I would like heart surgeons to feel that hearts are the most important thing in the world, too."

Medúlla is out now on One Little Indian.

