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CHINAWOMAN

With influences from Soviet cabaret, Chinawoman brings sentimentality straight from the bedroom. This interview is published in Weekday Magazine #7.





“IF IT WASN'T FOR THE INTERNET I WOULDN'T HAVE BECOME A MUSICIAN.”

Michelle Gurevich's Skype name is incomprehensible and has absolutely nothing to do with her real name, or her stage name for that matter. And her avatar portrays a dark man with a beard. Baffling seems to be her thing. She adopted the stage name Chinawoman because people often take her for being Asian, which is a bit odd. Michelle, you see, grew up in Toronto and her parents are immigrants from the former Soviet Union – traces of which you can find in her music. Her homespun lo-fi ballads have clear influences of Soviet cabaret and European 70s pop. In 2007, she released her debut album *Partygirl* – a melancholic and cinematic story with lyrics about casual encounters, Friday nights and women. Her second album, *Show Me The Face*, was released three years later, showcasing a more varied side of Michelle. When we talk she happened to be in Toronto, but otherwise lives in Berlin, where she's currently working on her third album.

What kind of city is Toronto?

– It's a comfortable place. It's a new city. Pretty much everyone here is an immigrant, who came to give their children a peaceful new life. So it doesn't have much history, nor that many reasons for people to hate each other. There is a lot of nature and the cost of living is reasonable.

And why did you start making music?

– I was hanging out with a lot of musicians, this was in 2005, and I was curious. How did they do it? How do you go about writing a song? And I was looking at Myspace with my best friend who said “You should make a page for yourself. It will force you to write a song.”

Beginning the other way around is more common...

– Yeah, exactly. I made a page and gave myself one week to make a song. I played it for my friends, and they liked the song more than any film or anything else I've ever done. And they encouraged me to write more songs. And that first song – called ‘I Kiss The Hand of My Destroyer’ – actually ended up on the album. If it wasn't for the internet I wouldn't have become a musician. It's the sound of the bedrooms right now. People can find an audience online. I'm Canadian, but most of my audience is in eastern Europe, which I think is great.

You didn't sing or perform as a child?

– No, nothing like that at all. I played trumpet in high school, but I wasn't interested in being a musician.

So your first time on stage must have been a live show as Chinawoman?

– Yes, It was in Toronto. In a small place in a neighbourhood called Kensington Market. Actually it went very well. I had a lot to drink before. I played three songs. It was a good beginning. Starting out it's important to have a lot of encouragement. It can make a big difference.

You released your first album Partygirl in 2007. Looking back at it today – how do you feel about it?

– Well, it doesn't feel old yet. I'm amazed how fast time has flown since then. Five years! But I still love it and I still perform it. I have gotten used to performing the same old songs over and over (laughs).

Are you a different songwriter today?

– I think I've lost some innocence. I try to get it back though (laughs). It's good to maintain a certain innocence and freshness so I have to trick myself into being that way. Everything I do is done by myself at home. I've got my toys and I record by myself.

So the tracks are actually made in your bedroom?

– Yeah, everything I've recorded is made in my bedroom. Different bedrooms though, with different closets. But I would say the second album *Show me the face* is more classical. It sounds a little less like Depeche Mode and a little more like something European from the 70s. But the process was the same. And I'm still resisting upgrading. I don't want to change the sound, so I'm still using the same shitty microphone.

Your parents are Russian immigrants. What kind of music did you listen to growing up?

– I pretty much grew up listening to what they brought with them. There was a lot of Soviet music. They immigrated through Italy so they also brought a lot of Italian music from the 70s. And a lot of French stuff as well. And of course I got in to what everyone else was listening to as a teenager, like Nirvana and Tori Amos. But my foundation is the old European stuff.

And now you live here, in Berlin right?

– Yeah, I moved to Berlin because there's a lot more interest in my music in Europe. Canada wasn't offering me that much. I felt I should go where I already had an audience. Within a few months I went from playing for 30 people to playing for 800 people. Pretty big jump. The people in Europe knew the words and were singing along. I see people in their early twenties at my shows, but then I also see people 40, 50 and up. My favourite moment from touring was seeing this 80 year old woman going up to the box office asking for two tickets to *Chinawoman*. Maybe the older people recognise an older style of song writing. I like that.

There is a lot of sentimentality in your song writing and in your art work – is that an essential emotion for you in your work?

– Definitely. Nine out of ten times the word sentimentality is used in a negative way. I want to bring it back. I've always been looking for it in art and music.

Like the homespun-style video for your song 'Lovers are Strangers', with footage of an old folks party.

– Yes. That was my grandmother's birthday, like, fifteen years ago. I was walking around with a home video camera on her birthday. I've always loved that footage and had it in storage. So I got that VHS tape and edited it to make the video. I love it because you can't recreate that. It's authentic. And sentimental.

So has living in Berlin influenced you in any way?

– Unfortunately, yes (laughs). I've noticed my BPM has slowly increased. And some friends have showed me some techno stuff. Some of the new stuff I've recorded is a little bit more upbeat. I guess it's a phase. But with the live shows, a kick and a drive adds some variety which is nice.

People love the kick drum...

– Yeah, suddenly when there's a kick people will start jumping. But I think people come to my show mostly for the melancholy.

So, how do you spend your days?

– I've been touring a lot lately. And because I'm my own label and my own everything, I always have a thousand things to do. It's a mix between recording and paperwork. I'm trying to learn to ignore everything and just record.

What does your live show look like?

– There's me and two musicians and a sound engineer, so there are four of us traveling. It sounds different from the recordings. I keep my recordings in an intimate style, and the live shows come a bit more alive with drums and electric guitar. I go for a kind of sentimental vibe. I want the crowd to feel nostalgia and warmth, sorrow and celebration of life. I have this one song *God Bless My Socially Retarded Friends* with a line that goes "a gang of loners is the only gang for me." My show is a place for loners to unite.

Tour dates and more on chinawoman.ca

Photo: Iztok Vidmar