**Soap&Skin**

TORSO

On the sleeve there’s a stone torso. Something’s bulging out of it, a muted black as if branded with fire. Or maybe it’s alive, emerging like spores of mould? Take a closer look, however, and you’ll discover a face gleaming from within the hollow figure like mother-of-pearl: Anja Plaschg's face.

According to Plaschg a.k.a. **Soap&Skin**, there have always been cover versions in her repertoire simply because *“it feels good to escape from myself”*. These songs are literally both disguise and hiding place. What was it Dylan said? “You only tell the truth when you're wearing a mask.” Plaschg's portrayal of Agnes, the central character in *Des Teufels Bad* (*The Devil’s Bath*, 2024) – set in 1750, produced by Ulrich Seidl, and honoured at the Berlin International Film Festival – reminded some long-time listeners of **Soap&Skin**'s first albums: the desire to break out of village confinement; the breakdown of sensitivity towards others; the earthy, the morbid and the mad.

Without it being immediately recognised as such, there’s been a cover on every **Soap&Skin** album since 2012’s *Narrow*, Plaschg’s tentacles extending through every piece until a radio hit like ‘Voyage, Voyage’ becomes a parable as deep as a well. She first recorded that song, originally by Desireless, in 2011 for the soundtrack to Sebastian Meise's *Still Life*, and it’s been part of her live repertoire ever since, metamorphosing with her over the years. Following 2018’s *From Gas To Solid*, nonetheless, rage and anguish have given way to more delicate arrangements, and in this new recording the development is layered, with the despair in her voice and the healing seemingly emanating from the brass resting on top of one other like transparencies. What results is a nuanced picture of then and now, and ***Torso***, if you like, is an exhibition of what lies behind the masks of others.

‘Mystery of Love’ reflects their presence. Sufjan Stevens' song, rearranged for French horn and trombone, admits us delicately into ***Torso***’s sound world, **Soap&Skin's** voice quickly penetrating with its hooks. “*I hear a song,”* she says, “*and feel there's something else I'd like to add. Then I don't listen to the original. Sometimes not for years. I record the songs from memory.*” She hasn't, for instance, heard old favourite The Doors' ‘The End’ for over seven years, a time capsule, much like Shirley Bassey's ‘Born To Lose’, about which she's almost embarrassed today, but in her recordings she broadens their perspective away from the ‘I’ towards a ‘We’ that’s *born to lose*, one way or another.

Known for her transformative power, **Soap&Skin** is frequently asked to reinterpret songs, so when Berlin’s Danube Festival invited her in 2022 to perform all the covers she’d accrued over the years in one single evening, she came up with the idea of a permanent collection. Thus we hear Cat Power's ‘Maybe Not’, once performed by Plaschg at Vienna’s Burgtheater for a benefit matinee to raise funds for Ukraine against the Russian offensive. It’s a song calling on us to let things go, to relinquish the desire for power, and she accompanies herself on piano, with ***Torso***’s vocal track taken from the live recording of that very matinee shortly after the start of the war. In 2018, meanwhile, alongside Anna Calvi and Laetitia Sadier, she performed David Bowie's *Blackstar* in full in Paris, Amsterdam and Hamburg. With its slightly yodelling, slippery vocal, ‘Girl Loves Me’, now available as a recording, seems to have been written for Plaschg.

***Torso*** was recorded in Vienna by an ensemble under her direction. “*For the first time,”* she adds. “*It's actually more my style to assemble the music in a safe space, alone at home, from previously recorded samples.*” Still, maybe what is created collaboratively must be recorded collaboratively too. She invited multi-instrumentalist David Coulter to let his singing saw fly through his associate Tom Waits’ ‘Johnsburg, Illinois’ in as straight a line as possible. “*It's such an incredible love song, made up of so many chords in such a short time,*” Plaschg comments. “*I think of my daughter when I sing it.”* She loves Waits' music, but less so the primal masculinity of his voice, and thus she transforms it into the very antithesis.

It's Plaschg's version of Lana Del Rey's ‘Gods & Monsters’, the bonus digital track, that’s undergone the severest makeover. Though its lyrics twist and turn, in Plaschg's version the lyrics are twisted. Does Lana Del Rey still want “*fame*” and “*liquor ... slowly*” in 2012? “*Fame and liquor?*” sings **Soap&Skin**. “*That is nothing holy.*” In Anja Plaschg’s reading, what was once desire has become an offender whose hands are unwanted on her waist, and, thanks to experimental Viennese electro musician Asfast’s beats, a topsy-turvy slow-core banger arises out of this sunny lethargy.

So there they are, all the strands of a transformation, and in ‘Stars’, a ballad she discovered through Nina Simone, **Soap&Skin** ties them together. “Stars”, it advises us, come and go: “*They live their lives in sad cafes and online halls/ And they always have a story.*” And the latter endure, always ready to be spun once more as a yarn in which one's own experience becomes accessible.