

## Otha

Katie Beswick

To date, Otha has self-released two singles. These introspective, propelling tracks ('One of the Girls' and 'I'm On Top') have a strange, listless energy — they've been described as 'club music for the introverted' — and have received word-of-mouth critical acclaim, with attention from *Pitchfork*, Radio 1, Beats 1 and numerous European radio stations. This small body of work has established the emerging musician as a distinctive voice on the international scene and positioned her as an artist to watch in 2019, when she's planning more releases and a series of live shows.

"It was really surprising." Otha, whose full name is Othalie Husøy, says of the response to the releases. She had not anticipated much of a reaction. "With 'One of the Girls', we just contacted *Gorilla vs. Bear* and asked if they wanted to premier this song. And then we got on *Pitchfork*." She laughs, as she does often throughout the interview, in a languid but weirdly nervous way. I can't tell if it's because she's actually nervous, or if she's smoked something before I called. Either way, her demeanour is very much in keeping with the music she's released so far: a kind of laid-back, horizontal charm that you might mistake for maudlin if it weren't for the occasional bursts of genuinely joyful laughter. "And that's, like, one of my favourite blogs. I always read that, so we were really pleased to be on there. It was kind of a surreal experience."

The 'we' refers to Otha and her collaborator, romantic partner Tyler, a folk-music producer who is based in Vancouver. Otha is in Norway, talking to me over Skype from a room that is constructed — at least from the angle that I'm seeing it — entirely of wood, like a sauna. (With her long red hair and elfish face, the scene on the screen in front of me is so entirely fairy-tale Scandinavian stereotype that I half-wonder if she's set it up deliberately, just to see if I'd notice the joke.) After a year in Canada Otha has come home to finish her degree in economics, working on her relationship and music part-time in three-month bursts between studying while the couple figure out their visa situation, and decide where they want to live.

The music project emerged as a natural extension of their shared interests, rather than from any existing ambition on Otha's part to launch a professional career as a musician. In fact, other than singing for a few bands, and harmonising with her family around the piano, the collaboration with Tyler marks Otha's first attempt at writing music of her own. "We were really having fun, just being a couple. There was no pressure. No 'we're gonna do this, we're gonna do it really good,'" Otha tells me. "We were just having fun. Trying to figure out the sound and stuff. And then it sort of kind of clicked with ['One of The Girls'] and we kinda found our sound. And after that people were just into it, so we were like 'cool, we can make more music.' So we made 'I'm On Top' in like, October-ish. The plan is just to develop the project together and yeah, to make more music." She moves her eyebrows, in a 'we'll see how it goes' gesture.

The challenge of making music in the relationship — notwithstanding the inevitable tensions thrown up by keeping it together long-distance — has been in navigating Otha's own self-confessed introversion, and need to be alone for long periods of time. "I *have* to spend time on my own. So, sometimes I'm really bad at group projects." She laughs again. "Because I need to have the control. I'm not easy to work with probably, I would assume. We just had to be pretty open and get used to working together. Just know each other's boundaries. Just be open to any idea — that any idea is a good idea, even if it might not be good, the end result. But it's a process to be comfortable with somebody, for sure."

Her introversion can't help but seep into the music, of course. The tracks are both stylistically introverted — with that oxymoronic listless propulsion that I describe above — and mediations on introversion. 'I'm On Top', for example narrates that peculiarly contemporary feeling of forcing yourself into a picture-perfect social life dictated by images of other people on social media — images that probably bear very little resemblance to the reality lived by the people posting them — even when you aren't in the mood. "Especially now with the insta stories," Otha says, "You can probably watch them for an hour. People update and update what they're doing all the time. And it's so easy to get caught up in what they are doing — not necessarily what you are doing. And it shouldn't really be like that. It just becomes this whole process of, you think so much about — for example, if you have some friends and they're out and they're having fun and you sit at home, because you have something else to do, or because you can't be there. You get jealous. And really you shouldn't

know. Because what they're doing, that's their business. And you're not really there.”

In the PR blurb sent over by her publicity people before we chat, Otha's work is described as being an evolution of a rich Scandinavian-pop tradition — but really, although there are some electronica sounds that are distinctively European, I can't detect much that's typically Scandinavian about the sound (if there's even any such thing as a Scandinavian sound). Perhaps what her PR are getting at is Otha's obvious adoration of the Swedish pop-sensation Robyn, whose *Body Talk* she describes as “the ultimate album” (and it's hard to disagree).

“I just love it because I feel like every song on the album is a hit. It's so catchy, and its so *driving*. And also the lyrics. Robyn, when she writes lyrics — it's something anyone can relate to. I don't know how to explain it. I've listened to that album more than any other album. It's so driving, and every song makes you happy and sad. You could feel anything, and it would be ok to listen to it.”

In general though, it isn't a particular strand of music that makes Otha tick — she joined a classical choir as a child, and at home her father would play what she describes as ‘rhythmic piano’. In general, she's into people that invent their own genre. “And they don't, for example, they don't write a verse-chorus, verse-chorus kind of song. That really inspires me. Like, they're just creative and they do whatever comes up in their mind.”

All she really wants, as she and Tyler work to polish enough songs for a live 30-minute set this year, is to make music that people can relate to in their own lives. Music that expresses a politics of connection paradoxically disabled by a social media culture where we are more connected than ever, but mostly made to feel all alone. “I had a person write to me on Instagram. And she said – I forget which song it was, maybe it was both – but she said it helped her to get out of a bad relationship. And I was like ‘oh wow.’ It’s cool that it can speak to people like that. Or speak to people that way. So I’m kind of not trying to change the world in the broader sense, but to speak to people more. More of a personal thing, through the music.”