

Alien

Languages



From folk guitar to anarchic piss-taking,

Joanne Robertson

brings improvisation and visceral play to a new collaboration.

By Claire Biddles

“It’s not just improvisation in a careless way, it’s a vocabulary that I tap into,” declares Joanne Robertson about her prolific practice as a singer, songwriter, guitarist and painter. “And when I collaborate, that’s when the vocabulary expands.”

For her latest project *Alien Baby: 0 Rules For Life*, Robertson partnered with artist Sidsel Meineche Hansen. Its 16 visceral, often humorous tracks extend beyond Robertson’s solo mode of dreamy folk to half-sung vignettes, piano improvisations and an absurd cover of “Anarchy In The UK” incorporating a field recording of urination. “They are experiments that we moulded afterwards, which is very similar to how I write my solo music,” she explains of the record. “It’s quite collage-y in a way, or like a happening.”

Robertson and Meineche Hansen have been friends for ten years, having met in the London art scene where they were both based before relocating to Glasgow and Copenhagen respectively. They first worked together – along with writer Reba Maybury – on Meineche Hansen’s 2020 film *Day Of Wrath*, a feminist rework of Jordan Peterson’s “obnoxious” book *12 Rules For Life*. When artists’ publishing imprint Tenderbooks commissioned Robertson to make a collaborative record, she knew she wanted to work with Meineche Hansen again. “We’re just naturally drawn to one another,” she says. “I’m attracted to people that have the ability to treat music as art.”

Robertson insists that the project came together with no agenda, but *Alien Baby* is effortlessly imbued with the pair’s shared concerns: spontaneity, feminism, the body and “a reciprocal sense of humour around being a woman”. The pair passed between them recordings made in isolation. On “Ew”, Robertson’s delicate vocals are pitched down to a “fucked up” degree by Meineche Hansen, resulting in a drone-like sludge. On “Kitchen Floor”,

Robertson improvises guitar over a recording of Meineche Hansen hovering, a callback to the latter’s video work *Maintenancer*, about cleaners in a sex doll brothel. “In part it was intuitive,” says Meineche Hansen of the recording, “but in another way, I was also thinking about the automation of sex work. I like how these things sit really closely together.”

The pair were in constant dialogue during the intensive month-long process of making the album, on which their conversational spirit and sense of trust are palpable, like a secret shared language.

Meineche Hansen is the latest in a series of key collaborators for Robertson, who writes poetry in the form of record reviews (or vice versa) with critic and *Wire* contributor Byron Coley, and records and performs with musician Dean Blunt. All of them stemming from friendships, these collaborations made Robertson feel emboldened. “Our relationship is quite spiritual,” she says of Blunt. “It’s a very deep connection through music, knowledge and life experiences. He’s good at encouraging me to do things, even though other people might think it’s embarrassing. He’s not scared, and that’s what you need as a friend.”

This close-knit trust extends to her solo work. Her 2020 album *Painting Stupid Girls* was assembled by Blunt from a cache of unreleased tracks entrusted to Coley over a number of years. “I’m deliberately bad at archiving my own work,” says Robertson, who considered rerecording the tracks, but was encouraged by Blunt and Coley to leave them in their original skeletal form. “It’s almost like a diary,” she says. “It’s like an unfolding of my thoughts, a lot of improvisational lyricism that doesn’t always make sense. I don’t always want a full word, I just want the feeling of a word. It’s the same with painting: I like a line that looks like part of something, but I don’t want the whole thing. Because that’s how you hear voices

in the street. That’s how I always wrote from about the age of 13.”

For Robertson, music and art have been intertwined since she was a teenager in Blackpool, where she learned to paint and play guitar. Her artistic proclivities weren’t formed in galleries – “it’s not something that you really grow up with in the North,” she says – but through her surroundings. “I went to a lot of clubs as a teenager. I basically grew up in a metal bar. The gang of people that I knew was really influential on me.” An idiosyncratic early influence was the Stuart Sutcliffe biopic *Backbeat*: “I loved the romanticism of being an artist, of being alone. I wanted to be like the girl in the film, and I literally dressed like her, although I didn’t look as good.”

The innate physicality of her practice stayed with her through art school in Glasgow and London, and improvisation remains central to her work today. “You’re touching things, you’re mixing things, but you are using your mind,” she says of painting and playing music. “It isn’t necessarily super academic. I’m interested in painting as an extension of the body, in the guitar as an extension of the body.” Her amalgamated knowledge – musical, emotional, historical – comes out through her improvisations: “I carry my history. It’s part of my attitude.”

This almost supernatural quality – of a lyric being charged with experience, or an improvisation channelling an emotion – is key to *Alien Baby*. Its layers of sound and meaning are there to be investigated simultaneously by the listener and by the artists themselves – almost like they are coming out of a filmed trance and analysing the footage. “It’s really hard to explain because there was no plan,” concludes Robertson. “It’s just about a friendship that makes sense, hanging out and being playful.” □ Joanne Robertson & Sidsel Meineche Hansen’s *Alien Baby: 0 Rules For Life* is released by Tenderbooks

Marianna Vlachopoulou