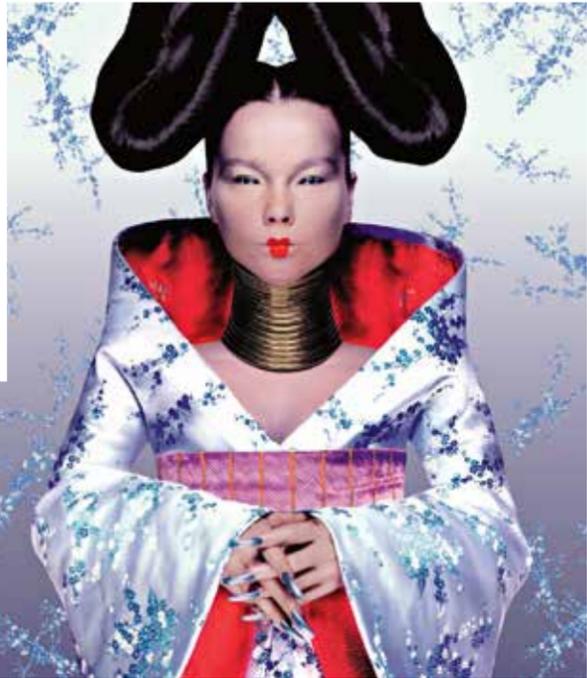
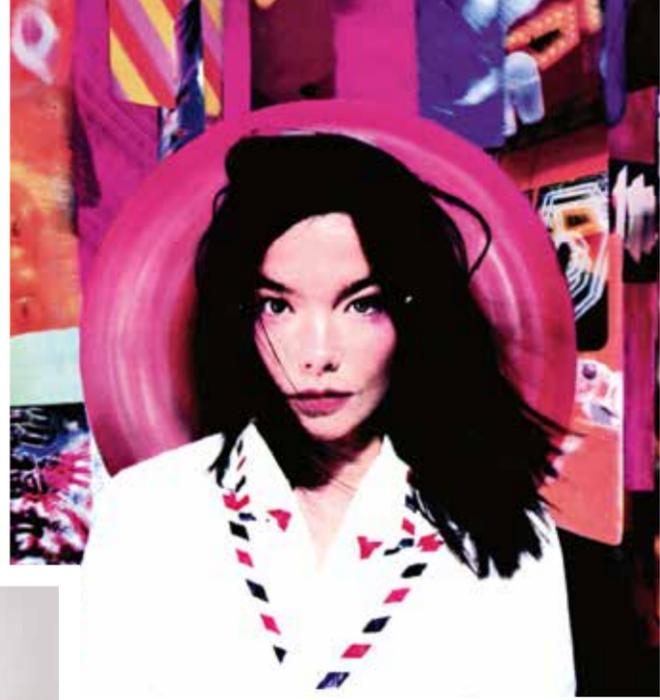


(profile)



THE MANY FACES of Björk

From pixie-like pop star to outspoken wronged woman, the Icelandic singer has trialled many selves, says *Hannah James*



It's hard to know, when placing a call to her New York home, which Björk will answer. The whimsical pop pixie? The tigress mother? The patient, puzzled anatomist of a dead relationship? The composer, 50, has been each persona and more, crafting a David Bowie-like character for each album that's expressed in its artwork and videos. Björk has always been almost as much a visual artist as a musical one, as her upcoming Carriageworks exhibition, *Björk Digital* (part of Vivid Sydney), can attest. The exhibition marks the global debut of several virtual-reality videos made to accompany her 2015 album, *Vulnicura*. Premiering them at Sydney's Carriageworks

appealed, she says, "because the people were collaborative and open-minded enough to give it a go". The venue worked, too: "It's a space where you have a punk, warehouse angle; a space that shows all different things, like music and dance and art."

As grandly epic in scale as its Latinesque title suggests, the album charts Björk's heartbreak after her split with her partner of 14 years (and father of her daughter Isadora, 13), artist Matthew Barney. Its lyrics are nakedly personal and its artwork hammers home the theme: she is shown with an open wound Photoshopped over her heart. How does it feel to still be talking about an album that was written during such a difficult time? I ask. She pauses, but answers with no trace of strain in her voice, "As time passed, it got easier – when the album came out, some of the songs were two years old. Now they're four years old. Obviously time is the best healer in those things."

Of her fascination with virtual reality, says Björk, "It's a natural continuity of music videos. With music, [when] you put your headphones on and listen to an album, you have that really private thing. Virtual reality is similar. It's that same concentration."

She has always been an early adopter of technology and recalls the first pocket-sized dictaphones. "I was like, 'It's about time,'" she says. "I've always wanted to write music on top of a mountain and now I can. Technology gives us the freedom to follow our imaginations and be in an environment that's inspiring."

For the Iceland-born and raised Björk, nature is the ultimate inspiration. "I spend half my time in Iceland by the ocean," she says. "I like to spend a lot of time outdoors; it's important. After I've been outside for a bit I feel normal – I feel like myself." She also writes music as she walks. "It's something I started as a kid walking to school," she explains. "There's something about when you walk, especially after about 40 minutes. It's like the body, the spirit and the emotion synchronises automatically and you come out with a song."

I try to position Björk in the Romantic, 19th-century tradition of artists who wrote as they moved through the natural world – Wordsworth, Thoreau, Tchaikovsky – but she believes it's a more primal creative urge. "For me, it comes before that, because we

didn't really have the Industrial Revolution in Iceland so we're not informed by it, like the poets were," says Björk. "A lot of people say, 'You know what? I do the same thing,' even though they're not professional singers. I guess, in Australia, the Aboriginals had the songlines. It's a natural human thing."

So natural that making music is "not really a choice", she says. "If I say I'm not going to write this year, things just bottle up and you go insane until you write the song. Then you have that sensation of, 'Ah, I can be normal now.' Then, a few months later, you feel the same again. So it becomes a part of your life, like sleeping or eating. There's a certain rhythm, and if you don't do it, it's like sleep – you get into trouble."

This rhythm started young for Björk, who recorded her first album when she was aged just 11. She made music through her teens and had her first child, a son named Sindri, at the age of 20. She found fame as the singer

but morphed into a critical appreciation of her career. It contains what she describes as "one of my most favourite things I've done", an email exchange with philosopher Timothy Morton. "I was trying to define my philosophy," she explains. "You don't want to be too pretentious or defined. You just want to be an unwritten fog so you can make songs and find new stuff inside the fog."

"The fog" seems a suitably numinous concept for an artist who believes that "the majority of an album is something that's not intentional. It's stuff that happened to be the way it is because it's the only way it could be". Yet she's sharply self-aware, too: "I like to be a pioneer and to experiment. I get bored if I'm doing something other people have done before. It means I take a lot of risks and some of them fail, but when I get it right it's very satisfying."

One trail she's had to blaze is that of independent female musician. Would her career have been different if she was a man? "Some things would have been a lot easier," she says. "One of the most experimental things I do, actually, is doing things for the first time as a woman."

Björk also has to contend with the gradual erasure popular culture inflicts on women who dare to age unapologetically. Characteristically, she's responding by mapping this new terrain through her music. "Getting older is fascinating," she says. "It's like going to outer space, the fact that I want to document the music inside me, however old I get – 100 or whatever. That's pioneer work

ARMY OF ME (clockwise from far left) Videos and artwork from MoMA's Björk retrospective; with her ex, Matthew Barney, and their daughter Isadora.



"I TAKE A LOT OF RISKS AND SOME OF THEM FAIL, BUT WHEN I GET IT RIGHT IT'S VERY SATISFYING"

of alt rock band The Sugarcubes, then moved to London in 1992 where her first two solo albums were rapturously received. Amid the "Madchester" man-child vibes of Blur, Suede and Oasis, Björk stood out as a deliberately off-centre feminine presence whose unique virtuosity earned her both critical and popular acclaim.

She's now reached such iconic status that New York's Museum of Modern Art dedicated a retrospective show to her last year. It received poor reviews yet resulted in one perfect artefact: *Björk Archives*, the book that started life as the exhibition catalogue

there. Up to 40, I had a lot of ladies to look up to, but after 40 you can count them on one hand. So that's something I'm going to have to invent. That's gonna be an exciting process."

And that is the Björk who answers the phone. It's the Björk she's always been under the face paint and wigs that speak to her relentless reinvention of her public self. Driving it all is the fearless artist who looks with a keen, curious, creative eye towards her future – all 50 more years of it. **5**

Björk Digital opens on June 4; carriageworks.com.au
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PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES, SNAPPER MEDIA, DEBUT ALBUM COVER (1993) BY JEAN BAPTISTE-MONDINO/COURTESY OF WELLHEART LTD & ONE LITTLE INDIAN, SEZAMASONGS; MUSIC FROM THE MOTION PICTURE SOUNDTRACK "DANGER IN THE DARK" (2000), MEDULLA ALBUM COVER (2004) BY INEZ + VINOODH/COURTESY OF ONE LITTLE INDIAN, BIOPHILIA ALBUM COVER (2011), INEZ + VINOODH/COURTESY OF ONE LITTLE INDIAN, VULNICURA ALBUM COVER (2015), INEZ + VINOODH/COURTESY OF ONE LITTLE INDIAN