

Minimalist Grandeur

The Paradoxical Pop Music of Balthazar

You could certainly call 2013 a great year for Flemish rock group Balthazar. They have played at pretty much every big Belgian summer festival and reviews have been unanimously full of praise. Since the summer they have also been on tour with the British band Editors, opening the way to performances in very large concert halls in certain European countries. 2012 was just as good: the entire Belgian musical press (and some of the Dutch) placed Balthazar's second album *Rats* high on their list of best albums of the year, and in France they were also predicting an international future for the band.

Balthazar is one of a handful of rock groups that have cropped up in recent years in the rich, almost oversaturated musical landscape of Flanders, with their eye on the international scene. Of all bands, how did they succeed in striking a sensitive chord?

Balthazar's story begins in 2004 in a shopping street in Kortrijk, where teenagers Maarten Devoldere and Patricia Vanneste busked together, and their contemporary Jinte Deprez did likewise but on his own. The trio joined forces, and from then on things moved quickly, with prominent participation in music competitions, including weekly magazine *Humo's* Rock Rally in 2006, the most important springboard for young rock musicians in Flanders.

They seemed ready to take the world by storm, but Balthazar deliberately stepped out of the fast lane: their debut album *Applause* only appeared in 2010. The five young people used those four years – an eternity in pop music – to gain stage experience and find their own sound. They have tried everything: folk, dance (such as their first single 'This Is a Flirt'), pop with an artistic twist (their second single 'Bathroom Lovin': Situation') and even hip hop. In the meantime their two front men, Devoldere and Deprez, have been studying music production, allowing them to present their

Balthazar



musical ideas in optimal form. Balthazar's first record *Applause*, produced by Devoldere and Deprez themselves, sounds unusually mature for a debut album. Typically for the idiosyncrasies and evolution of the group, their first two singles, mentioned above, are missing from *Applause* despite the fact that both have been radio hits and live favourites. "These tracks just don't reflect who we are anymore," was their simple explanation.

Applause doesn't contain the profusion of ideas many young bands use to make an impression; instead the songs are reduced to their bare essence. Clear melodies supported by minimalist, danceable rhythms, occasionally pleasantly interrupted by a rasping violin or clashing piano. This restraint of expression intrigues the listener and puts the musical press to the test: where reviews of young groups are generally teeming with references to other bands, they judged this debut album primarily on its own merits. People often talk about Balthazar in terms of oppositions: complicated songs that sound easy; a familiar sound that you cannot quite place; melodies simultaneously echoing euphoria and sadness; cool songs with a warm glow; music as charming as it is sombre. In short, from the outset Balthazar had found their own unique sound, moving to and fro between artistic pop and danceable rock, and well suited to live performance. On stage Balthazar emerges as a band with flare, a solid groove machine combining nonchalance with precision.

The CD entitled *Applause* also wins real applause from all quarters (a Music Industry Award in Belgium for best album and mentions in many end of year lists) and the group is gaining new momentum. Balthazar have signed a European record contract, which brings their debut album to French, German and Scandinavian shops, and more. In 2011 the band also performed in these countries, sometimes on their own, sometimes as a supporting act for Belgian's foremost rock export, dEUS, whose experienced manager also took them under his wing.

Expectations of Balthazar were sky high, but

the group fulfilled them completely in 2012 with their second album *Rats*. Their idiosyncrasies showed this time in unusual choices of location: recordings were made in cellars, bedrooms and on the Brussels metro. Anyone listening carefully – headphones bring more of the rich sound to the surface – will even hear birds chirping and a horse neighing.

Notably, where Balthazar's debut largely avoided comparisons, in *Rats* the influences emerge: Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen and Serge Gainsbourg, surprisingly classic for such a young band, who even claim not to listen to other people's music much, although it explains the timelessness of Balthazar. These three influences culminate in 'Sinking Ship' and 'The Man Who Owns the Place', the crowning glory of *Rats*. Devoldere sings emphatically, almost slurring the notes (Cohen); his texts are fascinating, if sometimes rather cryptic (Dylan); bass and drums provide an apparently rippling but eventually insistent rhythm (Gainsbourg).

In *Rats* Balthazar again excels in restraint: the songs sound even more Spartan than in their debut album, with more space for silence between the notes. Now restraints are even imposed on the rhythm, which went in all directions in *Applause*. They play slowly, sometimes almost coming to a halt, laying extra emphasis on melodies and established grooves. What at first sounds monotonous, turns out to be very subtle. It is precisely because *Rats* is stripped of all ballast that the album stays interesting after multiple listenings. Every touch of the guitar, melodic shift or tempo change takes on a special significance. It is a daring approach, but the good news is, it works. It gives Balthazar's tracks a nonchalant class and creates an effect which can only be described paradoxically as minimalist grandeur.

PIETER COUPÉ

Translated by Anna Asbury

www.balthazarband.be