

Music

Belgian Designer Pop Charming Chameleon Daan Stuyven

A child that quickly gets bored with its toys and is forever in need of new stimuli – that's the picture that's left in the mind whenever one considers the multi-faceted career of Daan Stuyven (b. 1969). The uninitiated would never suspect that one and the same person are behind the euphoric dance of 'Swedish Designer Drugs', the shadowy country of 'Icon', the scissors-and-paste rock of 'Woods', the crooner jazz of 'The Player' (piano version) and the soundtrack of films such as *Verboden te zuchten* (*I Know I'll See Your Face Again*, 2001) and *Meisje* (*Girl*, 2002) – to name just a few of Daan Stuyven's songs.

Nevertheless initially his career followed a fairly unambiguous path – indeed an almost stereotypical one according to the 'handbook for would-be musicians'. At the end of the eighties, with his group Citizen Kane, he took part in Humo's Rock Rally (*the springboard for Flemish musicians*), and nudged open the door to success with bands such as Volt and Running Cow, whose 'Gasoline on Fire' was a hit on radio. But Stuyven only really began to attract attention in 1996 with Dead Man Ray, an avant-gardist rock group that was perfectly attuned to the Flemish musical landscape at that time. Shortly before this, after years of worthy efforts doing the circuits in the shadow of the cathedral tower, this scene was finally deflowered once and for all by the Antwerp band dEUS, whose ex-guitarist Rudy Trouvé, moreover, was Daan's sparring partner in Dead Man Ray.

In the light of how he was to develop later this would seem to have been a bad move on Stuyven's part: what was this pop fanatic doing in such strange company as Dead Man Ray? But if you listened carefully you could hear clear pop melodies behind the noise of the guitar and the clipped computer sounds. The taut design and the exaggerated allusion to pop kitsch in 'Bee Gee' were also writing on the wall that Stuyven was after more than success in a cult. However it was with Dead man Ray that he made a first attempt to break out of the alternative circles: in 1999 this group was responsible for the making of a new soundtrack for the

comedy of the absurd *At the Drop of a Head*, dating from 1962. That project brought together a whole spectrum of things that fascinated Daan Stuyven – you can trace lines from it that criss-cross his whole artistic career.

Firstly, Daan Stuyven as man of the image. Not only is he a film fan who has composed soundtracks for diverse films (of which a selection is brought together on the CD *Cinema*), but for a long time he worked mainly as a designer. His background in graphics works its way through into more or less everything Stuyven does, most obviously in his immediately recognizable self-designed CD cases with the characteristic block capitals. But Daan also makes stylized images of himself, of his music and of his lyrics too. Whatever he creates always benefits from this clarity, the fact that it can be recognized immediately. To illustrate this: for virtually every new phase of his musical career he comes up, chameleon-like, with a new look, frequently a variant on that old classic, the gentleman's suit – which earned him the official title of 'the best dressed artist in Belgium' in the Flemish musical press. On his solo records (released under his first name 'Daan') many of his hits seem to be style practices, almost a pastiche (the electro-fiddling in 'Housewife'). His lyrics reverberate from the florid images, such as 'they liked the sting but not the cactus' in *Exes*, about the women in his life who seem unable to stay with him for long.

Daan's second great fascination is Bobbejaan Schoepen (1925-2010), a remarkable figure who owes his legendary status in Flanders to a long career in the ballad circuit, variety, film (among others *At the Drop of a Head*, mentioned above), and also the business world, with the Bobbejaanland amusement park as his best-known creation. It's probably Schoepen's combination of artistic and commercial talent, his gift for making a business success of his ideas, that appeals so much to Daan, because actually he is doing exactly the same thing, so many years later, as a solo artist: turning mad ideas into products in a way that means they are appreciated by a broad public.

Daan's obsession with Schoepen – occasionally he has even been called Bobbedaan – reached its peak in 2007-2008, when he was one of the people working on the Bobbejaan Schoepen come-back record (that

Daan Stuyven (1969-).



would also seem to be the latter's testament) and he won a popular competition on national television with a cover for Schoepen's *De lichtjes van de Schelde*.

At about the same time Daan took a shy at the Eurovision Song Contest, at which he wanted to represent Belgium. It turned out to be little more than a joke that got out of hand, but it might have succeeded all the same. With his songs and image tending to become more and more kitsch, as a somewhat louche but nonetheless charming singer, he certainly wasn't the odd one out at this high mass of camp. It was also the pinnacle of his obsession with pop culture, which was strongly geared to images, as well as of his third fascination, which is connected to this, Belgitude. This is an artistic attitude that rejects regionalism (in particular Flemish Nationalism) and takes the tradition of, among others, James Ensor and René Magritte and the musicians Jacques Brel and Toots Thielemans as its points of reference. Mockery, the grotesque, absurdism, surrealism and intractability are typical of artistic expression in Belgium. In imitation of Arno, Daan shows himself to be a true follower of Belgitude, witness his participation in the Belgavox-concerts, an initiative to promote 'solidarity, dialogue and respect between Flemings and Walloons.' We have already

discussed Daan's tendency towards visual and musical kitsch, but his lyrics also overflow with grotesque and surreal images. We cite the Scandinavian slapstick from one of his greatest hits, *Swedish Designer Drugs*: 'It's hard to be strong/depending on northern refineries, how deep is your fjord/how shallow thy watery eyes/how could I recupe/surrounded by 95 dogmas/like a reindeer I'm struck by Swedish designer drugs'.

Relatively speaking, Daan also includes rather a lot of French language numbers in his version of Belgitude – something that's unusual for a Flemish artist – and, when questioned by a newspaper about his favourite food, he even admitted that he can enjoy a *mitraillette*. That's Daan all over: when famous personalities being interviewed by the media constantly show off with refined dishes and fancy restaurants, he extols this greasy Brussels snack consisting of chips and a sausage and a piece of fried meat stuffed in a roll. Stuyven loves to play with people's expectations, enjoys wrong-footing them with music and things he says that you suspect are ironic, though you can never be sure. (Indeed a bit later Daan confessed to a newspaper that he loves raw fish.)

That game's amusing, but you can get tired of it. And Daan seems to have realised that himself. He

turned forty recently and is playing with words and images less and less. You can hear this on his CD *Manhay* from 2009. Gone are the campy electro and allusions to tacky hits from the eighties. Instead you get relatively simple pop with a traditional feel. There's no misunderstanding lyrics like those of *Icon* either: '(...) So don't try to be an icon/con the i inside of you/ that picture you've been painting/doesn't look a thing like you (...).' In interviews, too, Daan says that he has changed. 'I've come to terms with myself. I'm an idiot, but I can be satisfied with myself,' he said in a Belgian newspaper at the end of 2010.

You can get a foretaste of how this new Daan, without musical masquerades, sounds on his latest CD, from 2010, entitled (not insignificantly) *Simple*, where he's given old numbers a new jacket – and by no means always an expensive designer model. It seems we still haven't heard the last, and the best, from this charming chameleon.

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Netherlands Bach Society Celebrates its 90th Birthday

It was conductor Willem Mengelberg who in the early twentieth century established the Dutch tradition of annual performances of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. In his interpretations with the *Concertgebouw Orchestra* Mengelberg opted for richly scored choral and orchestral parts. He hardly used original instruments. Instead of the harpsichord, for example, he used a 'nail piano' which had thumb tacks in the felt of the hammers. Besides that, he employed all sorts of excessive romantic techniques to accentuate the dramatic impact of the music, like sudden changes of tempo and huge dynamic contrasts. A severe reduction of aria's and recitatives was considered necessary as a matter of course; otherwise the audience would not sit through the performance without falling asleep.

In the decades that followed, these ponderous productions caused more and more controversy. In 1921 the foundation of the Netherlands Bach Society was the most visible evidence of a tendency to revise the 'massive' performance practice with Mengelberg as its icon. The Netherlands Bach Society took a position that was diametrically opposed to Mengelberg's performance ideals and, as of 1922, performed its own annual production of the *St. Matthew Passion*.

The ambition was to move away from a lavish nineteenth century performance practice back to the 'concert style' of Bach's own era. As a rule the Bach Society performed the *St. Matthew Passion* not in a concert hall but in a church, the *Grote Kerk* in Naarden (a quaint moated city between Utrecht and Amsterdam). The performance of the sacred work in a church was welcomed by many and by opting for a performance on Good Friday instead of Palm Sunday - Mengelberg's preferred moment - the newcomer emphasized the difference with the Mengelberg tradition. In 2011 the Netherlands Bach Society celebrates its 90th anniversary. It is now the oldest early music ensemble in the Netherlands and perhaps even in the whole world. The fundamental principles referred to above are still intact, although the Society has gone through many changes. The musicians do not limit their performances to Bach, since the rep-