

'In the Silence between Words Hides a Little Poem'

The Fascinating Sound Universe of Spinvis

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[DIRK STEENHAUT]

In the past decade, Spinvis has stood out as one of the most original musical voices in the Low Countries. The songwriter and musician, born Erik de Jong, was 41 when he made his debut in 2002 with an untitled album that fused lo-fi, experimental indietronica and well-crafted pop tunes, accompanied by wistful, often melancholy lyrics.

Spinvis lives in Nieuwegein, a town just south of the Dutch city of Utrecht. His stirring first album was a distillation of hundreds of cassette tapes he had recorded over the years, by himself, in the attic of his family home. His off-kilter yet familiar sounding songs, created on a computer using a copy-paste technique, struck a chord with the public right away. The collection of songs found some twenty thousand buyers overnight, and within a few months it was featured on numerous 'best of 2002' year-end lists.

Why did it take Spinvis more than forty years to rise to the surface? 'Some people are fast, others slow. Apparently I belong to the latter category', the singer offers. 'I needed time to develop my technical skills and to carve my own path. I would have preferred to remain anonymous. Like *'Here is the record; beyond it I do not exist'*. Unfortunately I had underestimated the power of the media. I'm as vain as the next man, but all I really want to do is to bring comfort by creating something beautiful.'

The wheat and the chaff

Spinvis is more than just a musician. He is a collage artist who constructs his multi-layered songs by manipulating loops and samples. This process makes him a kindred spirit of indietronica artists such as Air, Beck, Granddaddy and The Notwist. To him his studio is a laboratory where, like some sort of alchemist, he can mix up ingredients that seem unlikely or impossible to combine. That does not necessarily mean Erik de Jong is bored with traditional ways of making music. 'The adrenaline rush you get from a real band is unbeatable. But making music with other people always demands compromise. The discipline I have attained is comparable to a writer's: every day you add something or cut something out. The whole thing primarily takes place in my head. Working on

your own, you tend to have more doubts, but that's fine: an artist who ceases to doubt is creatively dead.'

Around the time of his debut, Spinvis decided it was important for the sound and feel of his original demos, with all their faults and shortcomings, to be preserved. The album sounds like an aural diary in which his family life is deeply embedded. The careful listener can pick up the sound of a vacuum cleaner in the house, a moped driving by or De Jong's bickering children. It gives his work an almost documentary feel. 'These elements crept in purely by coincidence, but they made the music sound vulnerable and authentic. So yeah, that record is me, albeit in a carefully distilled form. Emotions are bottled up and deliberately moulded into a particular shape. On a computer, you can change things up until the very last minute, so there's the danger that a song will never be finished. I can spend ages fiddling around with details. You can only be sure that all the parts are in the right place if you rely on your instincts. There are no certainties.'



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Although Spinvis always uses laptops and samplers, his records (three studio albums, half a live CD and a collection of rarities) also feature guitar, bass, drums, keyboards and flute. 'I can play a little bit of everything, but I'm not especially good at anything,' he explains modestly. 'I guess my "punk attitude" is to blame for that. Virtuosity or technique is not that important to me. Even if you can only play four notes on a single string, what matters is you can come up with them at the right moment. I am not a musician per se. I paint with sounds and always think of the whole picture. Minimalism breaks things open. Even the things you might miss out on the first time you listen are in there somehow.'

It may come as a surprise, but Spinvis insists that his music has been shaped partly by chart friendly acts like ABBA and The Bee Gees. 'You might really hate a particular song, but the next day you find yourself in your car, the sun is shining, and all of a sudden you're hooked. Anyone not open to this sort of experience, for example because he is hiding behind his good taste, narrows his own world. Sometimes you just need to look beyond the packaging. What I love about pop music is that no one can expropriate it. Every morning, when you get up, you will notice the rules have changed. Yesterday's chaff is tomorrow's wheat. This endless succession of tastes, fashions and opinions is quite appealing to me.'

Spinvis has never regarded himself as a performer and readily admits that he is a mediocre singer. But following the success of his first CD, the demand for concerts became so overwhelming that this DIY merchant ultimately decided to trade in his safe domesticity for a place in the spotlight. As there is

nothing duller than watching a figure fiddling around with knobs all evening, he decided to re-shape his songs entirely. On the album he had used samples from different genres, cultures and periods, so he developed the concept of the 'time machine', where he surrounded himself with musicians from different generations and with widely divergent backgrounds. The nine-strong Spinvis Orchestra consisted entirely of seventy-somethings from the worlds of classical music or jazz, and the songs were re-arranged for harp, vibraphone, Turkish saz and accordion. 'The book has already been written, so this is the film adaptation,' the singer would mumble during every concert. The metamorphosis was drastic, the difference between the live versions and the recorded ones spectacular. But Spinvis was not afraid of taking risks and proved that a great song can assume many different guises. Some of the reinvented live versions would find their way onto the 2003 album *Nieuwegeinaan Zee*.

Mother tongue

To Spinvis it seemed self-evident he was going to sing in his mother tongue. 'If I were to use English, it would be artificial, it wouldn't be me. I'd have to sing in a language I know exclusively from films and TV. Luckily, in Dutch, you can only imitate yourself,' he explains. Writers and poets from his own country, like Gerard Reve and Gerrit Achterberg, are every bit as important to him as The Beatles or The Beach Boys. 'I've always been interested in literature, but I certainly don't claim to write poetry. If a particular word perfectly expresses what

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I want to say, but it doesn't fit into the flow of the music, I will definitely take the scissors to it. Lyrics and music must combine to create perfect harmony. I guess you could say I'm operating an audio typewriter: I'm typing with sound.'

Spinvis almost always uses colloquial speech in his lyrics. Back in the days when he still worked in factories, he would patiently observe the way his colleagues interacted and would pay attention to the things they said – or didn't say – to one another. Their unspoken thoughts, unfinished sentences, pauses and hesitations eventually found their way into his songs. 'I always carry a notebook and write down things I hear other people say. If you gather up all these unconnected sentences into a kind of bouquet, they start to spontaneously suggest a story. It'll be a plotless one, of course, but that's what life is like. It's all about context. At least, until we manage for ourselves to make some sense out of it.'

In 'Smalfilm', one of the five protagonists says: *'When I go out, I become a photographer / When I visit some friends, I turn into a writer.'* The latter is also true of Spinvis. If anyone around him says something he can use, he absorbs it like a sponge and eventually it pops up in his writing. As he's not a fan of one-way traffic, listeners are given plenty of space to infuse his lyrics with their own meaning.

De Jong deliberately keeps things mysterious. 'Blurred photographs are often the most beautiful, because they seldom show what you think you see. I love that ambiguity, that sense of suggestion.' Furthermore, he manages to conjure up a whole world in a few pithy words: *'The city is undressing / It's drinking like*

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a bride’, he sings in ‘Ik wil alleen maar zwemmen’. ‘Herfst en Nieuwegein’ has a lot in common with a subtly impressionistic painting, in which time seems to have frozen and everything is standing still. And in ‘Club Insomnia’ the lyrical and the prosaic flow into one another almost seamlessly: ‘*In the silence between words hides a little poem / About now and never, about dream and death / About you and I, about cunt and prick.*’

Spinvis’s lyrics, usually written using a stream of consciousness technique, have a highly sensory quality, even though the artist will sometimes turn things on their heads. He ‘breathes with his eyes’, describes planets that ‘sing’ and a motorway that ‘rustles’. The singer views the world with a childlike naiveté, but discovers that he doesn’t actually see things any differently from anyone else. ‘There are many who silence the child within them, because they are convinced that naïve astonishment is no longer appropriate at their age. Me, I’m just less embarrassed about writing what I think. As a schoolboy, I gave free rein to my imagination. Until I discovered that reality doesn’t easily allow itself to be moulded. Becoming aware of that really hurt.’

Occasionally, in songs like ‘Smalfilm’ and ‘Astronaut’, you will find a science fiction component; a vision of the future straight out of boy’s fiction. In their teens, Erik de Jong and his older brother would read cheap fifties pulp fiction, by writers like Jack Vance. The singer still has pangs for the romantic futurism and unconditional belief in the future that emanated from those books at the time. Even to the extent that the title of his album *Dagen van gras, dagen van stro* (2005), was taken from the Dutch translation of *Ringing Changes*, a volume of short stories by science fiction author R.A. Lafferty.

This second record sounded more organic than his first. Spinvis was intelligent enough not to make a carbon copy of his successful debut album. This time around he was inspired by the dynamic of his live band and he carefully allowed his songs to find their own direction. Judging by the long-drawn-out spoken word piece ‘Lotus Europa’, De Jong’s literary aspirations had evolved as well. The track was somewhere between a fever-induced dream and the absurdist interior monologue of a man in a swimming pool who, to his horror, discovers that his limbs are dying off and disappearing one by one. At the same time, he is witness to a cruel game in which one of the bathers is constantly having someone push his head under water. Some see this as a metaphor for the old Europe which, due to the economic rise of Asia, is being slowly but surely suppressed. Here, the words take precedence; the music does little more than set the tone.

Eye contact of the loneliest kind

In recent years, Spinvis has significantly expanded his artistic vocabulary. He has created theatre performances, worked on a radio musical and came up with music for radio plays and the TV series *Najib & Julia* and *Medea* by the Dutch film producer Theo Van Gogh, who was murdered on the street in Amsterdam by a Muslim terrorist in November 2004. Furthermore, he has written soundtracks for Belgian films like Miel Van Hoogenbemt’s *A Perfect Match* and Hans van Nuffel’s *Oxigen*. A few of his side projects were compiled on the 2007 album *Goochelaars en geesten*. A year later, Spinvis made another EP with the



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poet Simon Vinkenoog, while in 2010 he formed the Dorléac duo along with singer Geike Arnaert from the popular Belgian triphop band Hooverphonic.

De Jong was so busy with various kinds of commissioned projects that it took him more than six years to come up with a new Spinvis record. On *Tot ziens, Justine Keller* (2011), his most straightforward piece of work to date, he chose a middle path between catchy synthpop, intoxicating Krautrock and subdued acoustic ballads where the proportion of electronica had been reduced to near nonexistence. The narrative voice on the album is that of an adult man who continues to long for the illusion/fantasy of the woman with whom he was in love as a twelve year old boy. He is obsessed with an ideal that does not exist and therefore seeks solace in nightlife. A second central theme on the album is the role of alcohol in our society. Spinvis calls it a substance which is both good and bad: it detaches, anesthetizes and makes people happy, but also brings out the worst in them. Hanco Kolk has produced a graphic novel version of the album, having previously created a cartoon based on the song 'Voor ik vergeet'.

What is also striking is the re-appearance of a character called Ronnie, who featured for the first time on Spinvis's debut album. In his songs, the singer often portrays fragile, damaged characters who struggle to fit into mainstream society: a boy in a psychiatric clinic, a lonely man in an old people's home, dreamers too fragile for this world. 'Voor ik vergeet' articulates a fear of dementia. 'There's no doubt that Alzheimer's is everybody's nightmare', Spinvis says. 'But that particular song is also about the transitory nature of happiness. For example, you might go for a bike ride on a beautiful day and realize that there will come a time when you'll no longer remember it. That's okay. Some things are just pre-destined to evaporate. But that doesn't change the fact that they are significant in the course of a human life.'

Although in Spinvis's universe the role of reminiscence should not be underestimated, the artist is all too aware that memory cannot always be relied upon. '*Those were good times, if I'm not mistaken*', he sings at one point. 'Isn't it strange that you keep on changing your interpretation of particular moments in your life? Autobiography is fiction, while what is intended as fiction often

betrays a whole host of autobiographical elements. At the end of the day, you can only make up what's already inside you.'

Despite his understanding that he is only a speck of dust in history, the idea of 'back then' has an irresistible allure for Spinvis. And one way or another, he experiences his own transience as a relief: '*I was waiting on the edge / On the banks of time / And everything passed me by / Lost its name / And drifted ashore*'.

Spinvis does not really write protest songs as such, yet for those who can read between the lines there is a thread of social commentary running through his work. He has criticized vivisection, irresponsible parenthood, people devoid of civic responsibility, a society that carelessly shoves older people aside, and television game shows that play on the lowest and greediest of human impulses. 'Het voordeel van video' is about the media's voyeurism and the ubiquitous cameras that invade our privacy on a daily basis. Such a far-reaching indiscretion is symptomatic of the loneliness in our society: we think we know all there is to know about someone else, but actually we know nothing. Even parties rarely succeed in cheering Spinvis up. Because: '*The last thing you get / The best you can score / Is eye contact of the loneliest kind*'.

The singer stresses that, unlike politicians, he does not have an all-embracing vision. 'I am a kind of filter. I write about small things, about subjects that everyone knows and understands.' If there is any sense of outrage in his work at all, it is expressed in a poetic or surrealist manner. No one is interested in a run-of-the-mill pamphlet anyway. Or as Spinvis likes to remind us: 'If it's not beautiful, there's no point at all.' ■

Translated by Gregory Ball

DISCOGRAPHY

Spinvis (2002)

Nieuwegeinaan Zee (2003)

Dagen van gras, dagen van stro (2005)

Goochelaars en geesten (2007)

Tot ziens, Justine Keller (2011)

All these albums were released by Excelsior Recordings.