

### An Alto under a Mop of Hair

#### The Success of Selah Sue

Her debut album has sold more than 200,000 copies already. She's had five gold records in Belgium, as well as gold in the Netherlands and platinum in France. In 2011 she received an EBBA, a prize which distinguishes her as one of the ten best European artists with cross-border success. Since then she has appeared at a great many summer festivals all over Europe, and the United States has also made her acquaintance. Selah Sue is her stage name and she boasts an imposing mop of hair piled up on top of her head. She was born Sanne Putseys in 1989 in the village of Leefdaal near Leuven. What is the secret of this young Flemish girl's success?

She's not yet 25, but has already been working with music for ten years. After a carefree childhood, Putseys' teenage years were emotionally turbulent, but in music she found a release. She started off strumming away at her guitar in her bedroom, venting her dark thoughts playing songs by - or influenced by - her idols, Erykah Badu, Lauryn Hill and Bob Marley. She then began to give sporadic performances in cafés and youth clubs in the Leuven area.

I saw Selah Sue give a concert in a café four years ago. She was nineteen then, and with a couple of her own numbers and a handful of covers of her favourite songs she had the rapt attention of the packed café. Along with the many other concertgoers, I heard and saw what Flemish singer-songwriter Milow (Jonathan Vandebroek) must have heard the year before when he "discovered" her at an open mic night in Leuven: "A girl, eighteen years old, a guitar and a voice. What a voice. I felt it immediately: this is huge."

It was lucky for Selah Sue that Milow crossed her path. He stood by her in word and deed. Not only was she his supporting act in Europe, he

also advised her against signing with a big record company that was already waving a contract under her nose. It wanted to make her a pop princess: record a few prefabricated songs, take some glamorous photos while she was still young and try to make as much money out of her as possible in a short period of time. Say no and find your own way - that was Milow's advice.

Music manager Christoffel Cocquyt saw the young Selah Sue as Milow's supporting act. He



Selah Sue © Jean-Baptiste Mondino

immediately decided to take her under his wing and continues to advise her today. Concert organiser Werner Dewachter followed Cocquyt's lead. Together they form the business tandem which supports Selah Sue's musical talent.

In 2008-2009 the Ancienne Belgique (AB) in Brussels, one of the most important concert halls in Belgium, offered her the opportunity to be artist in residence, putting its knowledge at Selah Sue's disposal to jump-start her music career. She was supporting act at a couple of gigs, had a photo session and recorded several songs in a professional studio.

When she put the recordings on her MySpace page, she joined hundreds of thousands of others sharing their music with the world online. But Selah Sue stands out from the crowd with her alto voice and the rhythmic cadences that so impressed Milow and Cocquyt. Her numbers have masses of online hits and her name can be heard far outside professional music circles. She has transformed from the umpteenth teenager with a guitar into the next big thing in the Flemish pop world.

Still, it took until the spring of 2011 for her debut album, simply titled *Selah Sue*, to appear. Before producing the album she took the opportunity to grow further, writing songs and performing a great deal, in Belgium and abroad. There were other activities that will carry her name and fame further, too: a number of well-chosen TV appearances; collaboration with international artists (Moby and Cee Lo Green) and providing the supporting act for the international star Prince in front of an audience of almost 20,000. She also went in search of the right musicians and technicians to make her debut as professional and successful an album as possible. Her entourage picked Because Music, a French record company which has made Selah Sue an international top priority.

Her debut album came out simultaneously in the Benelux, France, Germany, Switzerland and Austria in March 2011, and later in the rest of

Europe (except for the UK). You've already read the result in the first paragraph of this article: Europe has fallen for Selah Sue. The key factors are her voice, her songs (with their fluid mixing of black music genres such as soul and reggae) and her texts, in which she expresses her personal doubts and worries, always with an upbeat twist. Now Selah Sue is looking further afield, towards the United States. First a buzz was created around her name in the music world there. Perez Hilton's celebrity blog dropped her name a couple of times and then influential magazine *Rolling Stone* tipped her as one of the new faces of 2012. Selah Sue's debut album was officially launched in the States in 2012 by the renowned Columbia Records and received positive reviews. Her songs have been used in soundtracks for prominent TV series (including *Mad Men*) and in an advertisement for Yves Saint Laurent perfume, and she has appeared as the supporting act at a couple of concerts for other artists. But the US market is oversaturated and hard to penetrate, so it remains to be seen whether they will really be interested in a Belgian singer. Selah Sue and her entourage believe they can make it though, and are working hard. Her album is also set to go on sale in Japan, Australia and possibly in the UK.

Whatever her fate in the United States and further afield, Belgium and Europe are already eating out of young Sanne Putseys' hand. Perhaps the best indication of Selah Sue's success is this: a comedy sketch on Flemish TV recently parodied her characteristic voice, stuttering singing style and mop of hair. That kind of attention is generally reserved for politicians, media figures and members of the royal family.

PIETER COUPÉ

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