

'Too Good to Be Dutch'

Blaudzun

In 2012 Dutch television viewers made their acquaintance with the singer-songwriter Johannes Sigmund, alias Blaudzun (° 1974), through the popular programme *De Wereld Draait Door* (literally The World Goes On or, metaphorically, The World's Going Crazy). He was singing a cover of *Shout*, a 1985 world hit from Tears for Fears, in which he accompanied himself on the banjo. Blaudzun seemed to come from nowhere, but actually he was on his third CD, *Heavy Flowers*. He had already outgrown the alternative club circuit. In the Netherlands *Heavy Flowers* was in the lists of bestselling albums for 63 weeks, 45 weeks in Flanders. Later the remarkable new performer made a fresh impression in *De Wereld Draait Door* with *Waterfall* by Wendy and Lisa, former musical partners of Prince. In the same programme he compiled his ideal TV music evening, spotlighting John Jacob Niles and praising Kurt Cobain as a master song-writer who was as impressive unplugged as on full volume.

Blaudzun owes his importance, among other things, to his original output and presence. He had a definitive breakthrough in 2014, when Dutch public broadcasting used a pregnant passage from his *Promises of No Man's Land* (the text of the chorus: The Heat Is on ...) for the Winter Olympic Games summaries. In the meantime he was willing to co-operate in podia and media events only if their quality was guaranteed.

Johannes Sigmund grew up in a musical family with a variety of instruments in the home. The children were allowed to play them to their heart's content. The Sigmonds were practising members of the Pentecostal Church. In that church the music does not consist of organ tones and solemn hymns in crochets only, but of the modern sound of guitars, drums and whatever resounds and swings to praise the Lord. At an early age Johannes played every possible style of pop music with his brother, at home and in bands. Johannes wrote the songs himself. After studying audiovisual journalism, he

invented media formats, produced pilots and made a film about the classic Tour of Lombardy cycle race. It was no accident that he took his artistic name from the sport of cycling: Blaudzun alludes to the Danish racing cyclist, Verner Blaudzun, who was a member of the professional peloton in the 60s and 70s. In 2006 Johannes opted for music. After six years of trial and error he could call himself a professional.

Brother Jacob made a radical break from the Pentecostal Church at an early age, and to this very day is still making music with Johannes. It was only later that the latter cut free from the religious community, and he did so more gradually. The interpretation of his work gains from a knowledge of his background. *Flame on my Head*, for instance, refers to the 'tongues of fire' of the Pentecostal or Whitsun metaphor. But even without this knowledge one can hear that his music strives to go beyond the earthly, with a passionate singing style, inspired texts and equally inspired instrumentation. Moreover, his English sounds as if he is a native speaker. In that respect his music knows no bounds.

Blaudzun's talent was quickly recognized. He won prestigious prizes and became the darling of the Dutch pop critics who showed off their good taste. They gave him the highest compliment possible: 'too good to be Dutch'. By his own admission, he gradually felt the need for more venom in his songs. He also began to devote more space to his autumnal, melancholy side. His music always sounds inspired, whether the lyrics can be understood or not. The gentle warmth and the intelligence that emanate from his stage appearances is partly down to the members of his band, all of them outstanding musicians. They add creative colour to the basic rock sound with violin, accordion, plucked instruments and percussion.

Big words are used for Blaudzun's music, such as stirring, bombastic, euphoric, unruly, ecstatic, but he can also make 'small' music, that makes your flesh creep in a different kind of way. His lyrics are free from romantic clichés and easy doggerel. Although his presentation is somewhat distant,



and at times positively static, the sparks always fly. He is most frequently likened to Arcade Fire and the late Jeff Buckley but, despite this, Blaudzun's music remains distinctive thanks to the individuality of his numbers and his emotionally charged voice. The contrast between the richness of the melodic ideas and arrangements on the one side and, on the other, the relatively boring rhythms (a single pattern is set for each number and is mostly steadfastly adhered to), could be considered as a characteristic of individual style, were it not for the fact that grooves and beats are not usually the forte of Dutch bands in a comparable idiom. In live performances, moreover, what is striking is that many Blaudzun numbers are given a forced ending. As far as form and length go the pop song straitjacket is Sigmond's concession to the conventions. With an interesting originator such as Blaudzun one is naturally curious about his ideas with regard to less predictable forms and tensions.

As a fan of cycle racing, Johannes Sigmond was the obvious choice to write the theme number for the *Grand Départ* of the 2015 Tour de France in Utrecht. That was *Bon Voyage*. The Utrecht animation studio Job, Joris en Marieke - Job Roggeveen, Joris Oprins and Marieke Blaauw, who got to know each other at the Design Academy in Eindhoven and

have worked together since - made a clip to go with it. The official première took place on 22 October 2014 in Paris, during the presentation of the circuit for the 2015 Tour de France.

During the 2014-2015 season Blaudzun toured throughout Continental Europe with success. In his own country he was already a universally-known phenomenon, mainly due to the talk-show mentioned earlier on which he was a guest on more than one occasion, but also due to the satirical TV programme *Koefnoen* that honoured Blaudzun with a priceless parody. In Belgium he has already appeared at large events such as the Pukkelpop Festival and in the Ancienne Belgique in Brussels, the Valhalla for alternative bands that take inspiration from a critical and curious public. The German-speaking countries and Scandinavia also regard Blaudzun as a genuine artist. 'Through the Fire I Will Return', he sings, and he promises once more to continue his mature and beautiful interpretation of the art of song writing.

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<http://blaudzun.com>