

Agnes Obel 'Aventine'

Has it really been almost three years since *Philharmonics*? Agnes Obel's debut album still sounds as fresh as a daisy. A delicate flower which became a quiet phenomenon, selling almost half a million copies to date. *Philharmonics* received a gold award in Holland, platinum awards in Belgium and France, and went quintuple platinum in her native state of Denmark, where Agnes won five Danish Music Awards (the Danish Brits) in 2011.

They say the sophomore album is the most difficult of all. You spend your whole life preparing the debut LP, but as soon as it's out there, the clock starts ticking for the follow-up. So how did Agnes Obel, European Border Breakers prizewinner in 2012, succeed in avoiding the traditional pitfalls of album 2?

Aventine is Agnes Obel putting things into perspective. A second album adds depth to the picture, otherwise the first record stands alone as a snapshot of brilliance without any real indication of where the journey is heading.

Now we know.

Aventine is a beautiful record, intriguingly unhurried. If the first record was a wander through the forest, this one takes the time to see the beauty and feel the texture in a single leaf. It is at once microcosmic and universal.

All of the songs on *Aventine* were written (music and lyrics), recorded, produced and arranged by Agnes Obel roughly from the beginning of 2012 until late spring 2013, at home in Berlin and in a rented drum studio in the Kreuzberg district. Afficionados may recognize *Fuel to Fire* and *Smoke & Mirrors* from her 2011 shows.

When Bowie came to Berlin, he wrote the city into the very fabric of his songs. It was his producer Tony Visconti "standing by the wall" on *Heroes*.

Agnes, however, creates her own world, or as she calls it, a bubble or bell jar, to make her music.

It's strange, like I have to escape the city's mood to do any music (even though I really love living here).

Once inside (or should that be outside?), she's no longer conscious of what's going on. This is the mystery of her *modus operandi*, something she cannot explain. Which simply adds to the ethereal quality of her music.

It is testimony to her clarity of vision and confidence in her craft that she has sought to recreate the framework of her first LP. Having established the parameters, the magic can begin.

Aventine consists mainly of piano, vocal (played and sung by Agnes Obel) and cello (Anne Müller also played on *Philharmonics* and has been a member of the live band

since 2009). Three tracks feature violin and viola by Mika Posen from Canadian band Timber Timbre. Pass Them By features guitar by Robert Kondorossi, who also played on Philharmonics, and Fuel to Fire introduces the Scottish harp (played by Gillian Fleetwood).

Agnes performs the marvellous balancing act of painting with bolder brushstrokes and more intricate patterns without sacrificing any of the lightness of her being.

The album opens with Chord Left - an inviting bridge over the water to Philharmonics – and leads into Fuel to Fire, which sets the filmic tone, zooming in close to the snap and crackle of the flames, then retreating into long shot until the fire is a tiny bright dot in a dark and indistinguishable landscape.

Aventine is a wonderfully melodic opus (even if Agnes claims to find melodies difficult to write), enchanting, haunting, playful.

The Curse will be the first single, released prior to the Aventine album itself. Think of it as a trailer for your favourite film of the year. Any year.

Marquez wrote about an entire village cursed with amnesia in 100 Years of Solitude. One of the characters carries around a bag of her parents' bones wherever she goes. She forgets what is in the bag, she just knows that she always has it. Sometimes memory is a curse and forgetfulness is a blessing in disguise.

The Curse and Run Cried the Crawling are the songs Agnes sees as best defining Aventine as a whole.

To me, they are the two songs where i think i got closest to the initial idea i had when i started making the album. Both very different from what i've done before but, at the same time, very much related to it.

Run Cried the Crawling maintains the cinematographic feel to the record. It was always going to be a tall order to go without mentioning Twin Peaks, but if there's one song which evokes a beautiful lakeside corpse swathed in stories, this is the one. I'm alright in your arms darling.

The second album, then, allows us to plot an upward curve in Agnes Obel's trajectory. A timeless debut is joined by a second album rich in historical references. We see now that Agnes, or rather her music, would be at home in any era – crackling on a fifties jukebox in the diner, soothing the sixties souls at Woodstock, shining like silver spurs in seventies Nashville. Pick any decade. The eighties? She would have made the acoustic stage her own while new wave burned itself out. Trace a line from Bela Bartok to Sandy Denny, from Satie to Lurie (imagine her scoring early Jim Jarmusch movies).

I was seeing and hearing more and more links in the music to all sorts of genres from different times, also outside of the genres that I normally would think of in relation to my music.

The voice, of course, is at the heart of everything she does. It stays with us long after the needle has lifted from the record.

To me, sounds have always been more interesting than words. I love it when the voice becomes an instrument and you almost forget it's a human voice. At the same time I knew I wanted to get closer to something I could regard as my own "speaking" voice in the songs, getting close to something that felt like my own state of mind, story and / or voice.

We could talk about unusual classical string techniques, col legno and flageolet, how the cello takes on a central role together with the voice and the piano (often an upright piano, recorded with felt), look for clues in the title (Aventine, the southernmost of Rome's seven hills?), but maybe there is no need to explain.

The music speaks for itself.

Words are Dead.

Smoke and Mirrors restores serenity with a contemplative ripple across the lake.

Gareth Davies – July 2013

