

ROBERT ROTIFER ON ELOUI'S ALBUM "TANGLES AND LOOSE ENDS"

"This is a song for all choices that have not been taken / This is a song for all tangles and loose ends."

Eloui, née Franziska Abgottspon, is an inescapable, ubiquitous figure in Vienna's lively music scene, cropping up in bands and projects all over town, be it shouldering a bass, clutching a ukulele or singing in the back- or foreground, from her involvement with post rockers Thalija via occasionally fronting techno punk act Gudrun von Laxenburg to her engagement in the singer-songwriter rock band Ernesty International. You can just picture her writing lines like these while busily flitting between rehearsals, day job and gigs.

"Tangles and loose ends" is not just the last phrase she sings on her second solo effort after 2011's impressive debut "Chasing Atoms", but also its title. As such, however, it is something of an absurd understatement, because while Eloui's everyday life, like yours or mine, may be an endless mess of unfinished business, her musical montages are crafted with incredible attention to detail, lots of patience and thought (hence the long gap between albums). Her songs are only declared finished and ready for release once every minute aspect has been exhaustively "elouised" (her own word), i.e. electronically manipulated, and put into its right place within a highly organised whole.

On "Chasing Atoms", this obscenely talented singer, bassist, ukulele player and electronic all-rounder already wove a multitude of wholly non-coincidental splashes of sound into a rich tapestry of semi-abstract, impressionistic textures to support her equally arresting vocal melodies, but now on "Tangles & Loose Ends" she has extended that playground by seamlessly blending her mobile home recording set-up (between Vienna, Austria, and Zermatt, Switzerland) with added live drums, violins, cellos, trumpet, baritone and tenor sax.

As before, Eloui's soundscapes seem to float past our ears at intimately close range, but suddenly they are all teeming with life in Technicolor and Cinemascope. You wouldn't be able to guess, but the rhythm track for opening song "These Are My Hands" was processed from the noises that come out of baritone sax player Thomas Weber's instrument whenever he is not playing. Eloui asked him to her studio to record "the clicking of keys and all sorts of other strange sounds, everything that isn't a 'proper' note," she says.

"These are my hands / These are my bones and tendons and veins," the song goes, and later, in the last but one verse, "These are my toys / These are my scissors and papers and rocks."

It is impossible to differentiate between metaphor, a blunt description of her working method and the existential core subject of the song: "As a child I always had this nagging thought. Isn't it utterly strange that I of all people should be caught inside this out of all human bodies?," Eloui explains, "This thought occupied me deeply. And later on I hit upon the idea that the person that I think I am may actually be rather coincidental and a loose concept."

Admittedly, though, the last quote actually refers to less straight-forward songs such as "Steal My Jewellery" and "Leaves on Trees" that deal with the same childhood dilemma of questioning one's identity, the latter countering the seemingly confident chorus of "These Are My Hands" with its insecure flip side: "If this is an empty canvas / If these really are my strokes / This I do not know"

The idea of "elouising" her sounds may bring to mind the likes of Matthew Herbert, but the painterly metaphors Eloui uses give away the fact that she, like so many of the most interesting musicians, has actually learned her trade at an art rather than a music school.

In fact that was why she originally moved from her native Wallis, Switzerland, to Vienna (incidentally, one of her new songs "Eppis Chliis" marks the first time she sings in her own Swiss dialect).

She then stayed in the Austrian capital for reasons that we won't go into, but in spite of the natural lightness of her voice you can tell that she has been having quite a life.

Not least when she intones the ominous line "You only hear fear" in "In the Night", a song that, in its Velvetsy two-chord structure, layered strings and heavily filtered beats recalls the later works of John Cale.

It is a fleeting moment to discover on an eventful album next to more obvious ones such as "Ego Super Nova", a veritable dance-floor hit that breezes in unexpectedly (but not unfittingly) during the last third of the album. The inevitable catch is hidden in the lyrics "Being a sun doesn't make you the center of my universe." And yes, the ambiguity caused by the homophone of "sun" and "son" is quite deliberate.

Typically, this sprinkle of pop magic is followed by the most challenging listen of the album:

"Temporary Static Noise", a tune buried in the white noise emitted by a damaged CD Eloui keeps as a memento of a deceased friend – one of those tangles and loose ends of a life that cannot possibly ever be as well organised as the arrangement of an Eloui song.

Eventually, all those who keep listening intently all the way until the end of the title track, will be rewarded with just a glimpse of two disoriented bass notes stumbling through the fade-out, like a last small tribute to the power of coincidence which, according to Eloui, "actually plays a really big part" in her music. "But my decisions to leave in the coincidences and then to work with them are taken very consciously indeed."

What could be a more paradoxically fitting way to make songs for "all choices that have not been taken"?

Robert Rotifer, Canterbury, November 2015