



Animal Instincts

Wolf, bear or mosquito, yoik practitioner **Ánde Somby** gives them all a voice

“The yoik itself, it’s a Stonehenge,” says Ánde Somby. “Not made of stone, but made of tones and poetry.” Yoiking is the ancient singing tradition of the Sámi people in the far north of Europe, and Somby is one of its most passionate practitioners. *Yoiking With The Winged Ones* is his new album on Ash International, recorded by Chris Watson in the open air of Norway’s Lofoten Islands. Migratory birds breeding in the Arctic sing a rich background for Somby’s vocal evocations of the wolf, mosquito and underworld fairies. “Yoiks are coming from time immemorial,” explains Somby. “Imagine all this energy that lies in the past. You can actually hear songs that people heard thousands of years ago, and through hearing them you get a connection with those people. Chris Watson and I agreed to go to Lofoten, one of the more and more scarce spots in the world where you don’t hear any planes or car traffic, any modern noise. It was such a delight to work there.”

This is a far from comforting or sentimental record; listening to Somby pushing his voice hard is at times an unsettling experience. He’s clear about what he’s doing: “In the shamanistic tradition you could travel from one world to the other, and yoik was one of the media that you could travel with. I had this as my

project, to yoik on the border of my voice. I consider my voice as a kind of space, and that space has some borders. Then I go there and explore what this border looks like. I do it with a mosquito yoik, a wolf yoik and a bear yoik. That’s the physical aspect, and the conceptual aspect is that you can actually change the place and the shape you have. I’m fascinated by squid, because some squid can do morphing. As humans we are bound to our form, but the squid is changing his shape, his colour, maybe his consistency. I’m thinking, what is the closest I can get to that?”

Somby grew up in a nomadic reindeer herding family in Finnmark, in the extreme north of Norway. Sent off to boarding school, as was the custom, he now combines a singing career with a post as a university law professor. Yoiking is conceptually distinct from other song forms, and Somby tries to articulate why: “It’s a multidimensional way of thinking. Often songs are representations: you sing about a beautiful girl or a beautiful star. But yoiking is multidimensional. As when you take a photo, you depict the wolf, but at the same time perhaps you become the wolf yourself. A photo is often taken from outside an object, but imagine a photo where at the same time you saw the surface and the atoms inside. You have a

multidimensional perspective. Though it’s hard to use the word perspective because that’s often perceived as one point, but here it’s more of a wave.”

During Somby’s lifetime, yoiks have struggled back from centuries of official condemnation to some degree of acceptance. His parents were careful to sing their songs only in private. Whereas in 2014 Jon Henrik Fjällgren’s yoik to his dead friend was tearfully welcomed on the TV show *Sweden’s Got Talent*. But inside a Norwegian church it’s still forbidden to yoik, as Somby tells it: “When I was growing up these songs were considered a religious sin, and also ugly, because they have another aesthetic. And many of our people used to yoik only when they were drunk. And that’s a very beautiful thing, because when you are drunk then you sing the song of your heart. But it damaged the mythology of yoiks, that they were the drunkard’s songs. It’s a very interesting thing that songs are so powerful that they can threaten even such a big, strong institution as the church. But the wolf is not questioning its place, or its permission to be in this world. The wolf is taking its spot and saying, ‘Well, here I am.’” □ Ánde Somby’s *Yoiking With The Winged Ones* is released by Ash International
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