

“This is top-class sport”

The Zurich singer Sabina Leone is back behind the drums after a long break and is now on the road as the one-woman band Héloïse. With a cassette EP in her luggage.

Her career path is long and runs through various areas. In the mid-1990s she played drums with the attention-grabbing women's band Wemean, then she dedicated herself to Italian songs with her sister Patrizia in the duo Sorelle Leone and finally released her solo album "Mancare" in autumn 2007. Now, after a long break, she returns under the name Héloïse with mischievous LoFi electronica.

Sabina, there are big time gaps between your different projects. Is that a coincidence – or did you just get fed up with music from time to time?

No, it was more of a coincidence that it didn't go in a straight line. After the solo album, I received a request for the musical “Eusi chlii Stadt” at the Hechtplatz Theater, and I really wanted to do that. And so it continued, with various side projects. I took part in a dance theater piece on Gessnerallee, the duo with my sister also continued, and I gave singing lessons. But then I had tinnitus – and had to take a break. The two children were born later, so I did smaller things, like putting music to silent films or providing musical accompaniment to a comic book reading at the Cabaret Voltaire.

There was a one-off Wemean reunion almost exactly 20 years ago, but the band has been on hiatus ever since. But it's already haunting you... How do you look back on it today?

It was an advantage for us that there were very few female bands back then, but at the same time it was difficult. Maybe we were just lucky that we hit the nerve of the times, even if unconsciously. Our music was simply a mixture of what interested us at the time. It was a cool time too, the 1990s. There was no social media, everything was very physical, you had to go into the squats, meet the people. It wasn't that fast-paced, so we had time to build it up.

Do younger people still talk to you about it today?

Barely. They don't actually know who we were anymore. But when I tell them a little about the past, they're happy to listen.

First as a foursome, then as a pair, then solo with a band – and now you are traveling alone.

Exactly, all alone (laughs). That was somehow the logical development. Since the late 1990s I have worked primarily with my voice, including with Sorelle Leone and on the solo album. Héloïse is now the return to drums, now I'm bringing everything together. I have a loop device on stage, an effects device and a Casio SA-11, this great children's keyboard. When you have a family, you're happy when you don't have to organize a lot, like with a band or just would already be the case with a duo. But it also took courage to step on stage alone.

You learned to sing from scratch. The drums?

I took the one from Pierre Favre – because I just wanted to meet him. Back then I actually planned to sing along with the drums. He was like, Hey, just do it! We then sat at our drums and drummed in question-answer mode. That was totally encouraging.

Playing drums and singing at the same time – Was that a major exercise?

It works. Since I work a lot with my body anyway, this was easy to reconcile. When I played the drums, I noticed that if I moved all four ends of my body, my voice became much more relaxed. And I don't do any complicated rhythms - the bottom drums, the top sings. It's very intuitive and it's fun on stage.

The EP “One Click One Scroll” only contains three pieces - that's not really full-length.

I actually have a whole album together. But first I want to find out how this is received. For the EP, I spent two days in the studio with Daniel Hobi from The Legendary Lightness, where we recorded six songs, of which I then took the three best. Everything was recorded live, about three takes of each piece. That was a great experience - I hadn't been in the studio for a long time, after having children and stuff like that. Concentrated work: bringing equipment, playing, sleep, play again, dismantle and bring the clutter back to the studio. That's how it was.

What is your working mode like?

I have to plan and organize well in advance. With children you can no longer just play music throughout the day. I have time from eight to eleven, then I cook, the children come for lunch, and later I have some time again.

Creativity according to a timetable?

That's right, yes. But it works surprisingly well. I always have the same routine, go to the studio and do my exercises there. This attunement takes approximately an hour, then I'm absolutely ready and could actually write a new song every day. But it is work, not just inspiration. For me, making music is like elite sport.

A quick word about the name of your project, Héloïse. It's a bit difficult: you can't get the trema on the iPhone keyboard. But what does that mean?

The name goes back to the Patricia Highsmith crime novels, all of which I have read. Tom Ripley is the main character, a hedonistic murderer who is actually gay, but then married this woman from a good family, Héloïse. She is the supporting character - like the women in society, although we are actually the main protagonists too. The trema, on the other hand, has something like musical notes and brings in a certain liveliness. And the o in the middle looks like a bass drum.

Interview Philippe Amrein

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