

THE SAATCHI GALLERY MAGAZINE

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ART & MUSIC

FREE



Andy Warhol

His art, music and a new show at the Hayward Gallery

also inside...


Le Volume Courbe Iphgenia Baal finds an indie band with curve appeal

Serafina Steer Keiron Phelan meets a singular singer-songwriter – with strings attached

plus... **Lou Reed, Leonard Cohen and more...**

Curve Your Enthusiasm

The story of Franco-British ensemble Le Volume Courbe is one of indie rock entente cordiale. Iphgenia Baal gets the measure of their *esprit de corps*



You wouldn't necessarily know it when you hear them, but Le Volume Courbe is a punk band. Created by a woman barely able to pluck out a melody on a guitar, Charlotte Marionneau's fond embracing of her French chanteuse roots has nonetheless resulted in a uniquely simple, saccharine sound. Writing what she calls "limited songs," her beguiling, lullaby-like ditties disguise more unruly sentiments in a way which is so charming and impressive that she has attracted a battalion of revered musical minds to help her make LVC a going concern.

On Le Volume Courbe's first album *Please Kill Me* – released by Honest Jon's in 2005 – Marionneau co-wrote songs with My Bloody Valentine's Kevin Shields, resulting in thick, dreamy guitar intonations. Primal Scream's Martin Duffy popped down to lend his talents to a cover version of Nina Simone's 'Ain't Got No', to a sampled backing track of the errant offerings of Moondog. Mazzy Star's Hope Sandoval tapped away on glockenspiel; Two Lone Swordsmen's Keith Tenniswood lent Charlotte his electronic ears. How on earth did some squeaky French upstart inspire all this without ever having got onstage?

"I never even meant to start a band," Charlotte lolls after apologising for her almost caricature French accent. After leaving her Pays de la Loire birthplace, Charlotte came to London via Glasgow thirteen years ago. "I was studying film but feeling so trapped in France. As soon as they offered me a chance to get out, I took it." She loved the boisterous Scottish city immediately. "No one cares!" she shrieks. "In France everyone looks at each

other all the time but here no one cared. Everyone was dancing and drinking and, it sounds silly, but I felt so free!" Moving to London a year later, Charlotte slowly started assembling a group of musicians "...for no particular reason. I was writing songs but they were never meant for anything."

Charlotte grew up with a sworn allegiance to musical oddballs: David Bowie, Dinosaur Jr., The Pixies, Sonic Youth... "If I knew how to play even one instrument properly I would have mimicked them as best I could. Instead what I ended up with are very simple, almost limited versions of songs." Her first finished effort was 'Harmony', a repetitive, sleepily muttered song – like a subdued version of the clapping game little girls chant in playgrounds, starting and stopping as it pleases. "I like short songs," she shrugs. Though today 'Harmony' is a highlight of Le Volume Courbe's set, Charlotte didn't hear anything special in it. What everyone else (including sharp-eared ex-Creation Records svengali Alan McGee) heard was the first efforts of a songwriter harking back to a time when "bedroom recording" was a genuinely maverick business, when "indie" didn't mean boarding school brats or generic landfill boy rock, and when collaborations between bands were not a Radio 1-sanctioned publicity sop. "Alan offered me a record deal when I only had three or four songs," Charlotte reveals, wrinkling up her face. "I only played him one or two, so when he offered me a record deal I was a bit, um, nervous."

McGee released 'Harmony' as a single on his Poptones label in 2001, "but even then I didn't take being a musician seriously. I just didn't think

Theo Hall and Charlotte Marionneau
© Sophie Louise

BOADES MEWS

TO FLASK W



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it was something I could do," admits Charlotte. What changed her mind was encouragement from her "professional musician" friends. "I met Hope [Sandoval] eleven years ago," Charlotte explains. "She said to me, 'you should play music.' I already was, but she meant professionally. Coming from a woman I respect, one who makes music I love, I couldn't really not." And so the album got made during long afternoons in her north London flat ("I have never been comfortable working in studios...too cold.") An almost hilariously stellar array of alternative indie pals swung by to help lay down tracks. Still Charlotte would not play live. "How could I?" she demurs.

Charlotte *had* already sung in public – the first time when she was just seven. "I was on a coach trip with my school and everyone was yelling for each other to get up and sing a song through the microphone at the front." Somehow, the bemused Mademoiselle Marionneau found herself up at the front crooning Françoise Hardy's 'Tous le Garçons'. "I was so embarrassed, I sung it so fast everyone just laughed." It would be two decades before she tried it again. "I got an email from Sonic Cathedral who were putting on a Nico tribute night. They asked me if I would just sing one or two songs. I certainly couldn't get on stage for a whole set, but one or two songs I thought, maybe I could do." She enlisted the efforts of Melanie Draisey, a violinist who had lent her classical training to the likes of the Clientele, the Television Personalities and Primal Scream. "It seemed like everyone I met wanted a violinist," she shrugs.

Melanie joined Le Volume Courbe eighteen months ago. "I went to Charlotte's house with my violin. She played the album and without listening to what was already there I just played along." Sadly, it didn't work at all. Charlotte couldn't handle her meticulously crafted album having Melanie's strings let loose over it. "She was saying, 'no! You can't

play over that bit. Or that bit or that bit'", Melanie remembers. However, Charlotte became less precious over time and realised the recordings were just a blueprint. "From then on we started coming together as a band." Now, Charlotte lets her lyrics trip lightly over a steady backline, delicately strummed guitar and the eeks and squeaks of the violin.

Eventually Le Volume Courbe ("volume curve") would become a fully-fledged live ensemble. Behind Charlotte and Melanie lurk the somewhat reticent Phillip Smiley on guitar and bass, the exotically monikered Wild Cat on drums and 18 year-old Theodore (son of Terry) Hall on rhythm guitar. I watch them as they soundcheck in Highbury's murky, scarlet-lit Buffalo Bar. Despite having the songs' chords written out on a piece of paper on the floor in front of him ("we have only had about five rehearsals," Theo says with a raised eyebrow), the band seems like, well, *a band*. They fiddle with arrangements and query over who does what where. "We are all people who 'get each other' and could write music together," Charlotte says. Looking at her track record, don't expect the second album to come anytime soon, "but it won't take another eight years," she jokes.

They may not be "punk" in execution, but witnessing Le Volume Courbe navigate through their murderous, melodious ballads – one minute sweet and lilting, the next shadowy and bleak – leaves you with the feeling that punk rock was originally destined to inspire. Like someone, somewhere, is doing something right.