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Sophie Hunger: Versatile, inventive and highly acclaimed

In the space of six years, Sophie Hunger has established an international reputation. The folk-pop-blues singer has just completed a year-long European tour, performing around 150 concerts. An artist who flouts styles and stereotypes, she is surrounded by virtuoso musicians on stage.

By Alain Wey

Paléo Festival, Nyon, July 2013 – wearing an elegant black dress, Sophie Hunger appears on the Grande Scène to light up the famous festival on Lake Geneva. She sits down at the grand piano and has the audience enraptured with her voice from the very first notes. She is surrounded by four seasoned musicians providing the perfect accompaniment to her songs. A trumpet, clarinet and trombone lend her pop music a sound bordering on jazz. Her music has been honed by thousands of miles on the road. The vibrant thirty-something is very much at home on stage. The audience goes wild. Having released four albums, in December the Zurich-based performer completed a 150-date tour from Canada to Europe which began in October 2012. This musical odyssey produced a live double album, a film and a book entitled “Rules of Fire”. Where will she be in 2014? Wherever her next songs take her. She will return to a path inspired by her love of music.

A diplomat's daughter on a journey of self-discovery

It is not by chance that Sophie Hunger has an almost perfect command of English. The daughter of the diplomat Philippe Welti and the politician Myrtha Welti (née Hunger), Emilie Jeanne-Sophie grew up between Berne, London (1985–1989), Bonn (1996–1998) and finally Zurich. Artistic talent is in her genes. Her grandfather Arthur Welti was a radio broadcaster, actor and author, her great-great-uncle Albert Welti (1862–1912) was a painter and an engraver, and her great-uncle Albert J. Welti (1894–1965) a writer and painter. Has she rekindled a flame by launching herself body and soul into music? Her family history is a source of inspiration. After studying literary subjects for her school-leaving diploma, she began a degree course in German and English. It was the age when



On stage at the Schüür concert hall in Lucerne in 2011

the great questions of youth arise. What was she going to do with her life?

“I’ve always loved music but I held back from pursuing it. I kept my distance. There was so much going on in my mind, I’d analyse everything. I had to quell my conscience and almost forget my own identity. It was when I became nothing that I was finally able to open myself up to music.”

She has played the piano from the age of nine and began the guitar at 19. She has taken part as a singer in various musical projects since 2002 under the name she is known by, Emilie Welti. She was also part of the rock trio Fisher. Her cited influences include the greats of folk music, Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash, whose songs she does not hesitate to re-interpret on stage. In 2006, she showed great audacity home-producing her debut album “Sketches on Sea” in her Zurich apartment. It was a smash hit. The critics raved about it and her musical peers took her under their wings. Stephan Eicher opened the door to France for her in 2007 (they sing “Spiegelbild” together), Young Gods invited her on stage and eventually asked her to join the first leg of their acoustic tour in 2008, and the jazz trumpeter Erik Truffaz requested her vocal skills. She has been surrounded by accomplished musicians from the outset. Her second album “Monday’s Ghost” came out in May 2008 under the Lausanne label “Two Gentlemen” with production by Erik Truffaz’ bassist, Marcello Giuliani. This was her consecration. Rolling Stone Magazine included her in the “10 newcomers” of the year. The album easily topped the Swiss charts. She signed with Universal Music Jazz in Paris in June. This first studio album has been available in France, Germany and Austria since 2009.

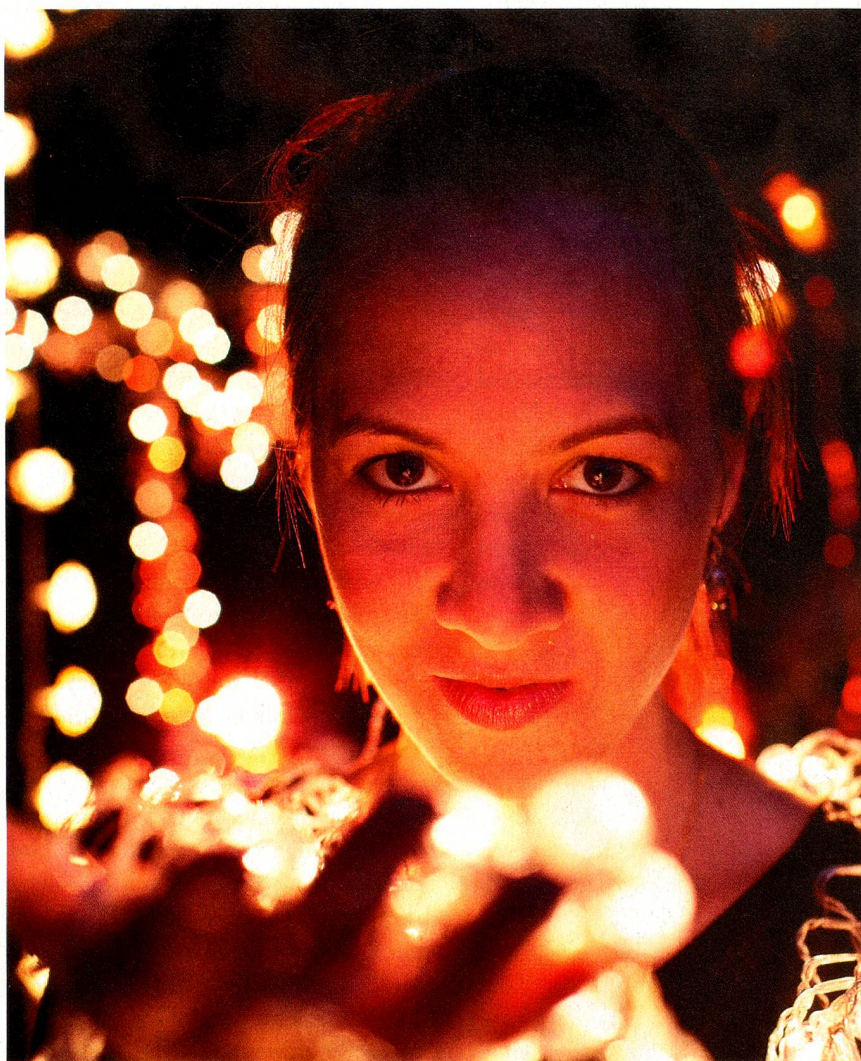
Being on stage: her inspiration and her raison d’être

“You learn things when you’re touring and performing every evening. That’s where you completely bare your soul. A musician’s work becomes increasingly clear and the music evolves with the audience.” Since 2009, Sophie Hunger and her band have played over 100 concerts a year on average. She performed at the Montreux Jazz Festival in 2007, 2008 and 2010. She often plays to packed venues in Switzerland. France and Germany remain the countries where she appears most often

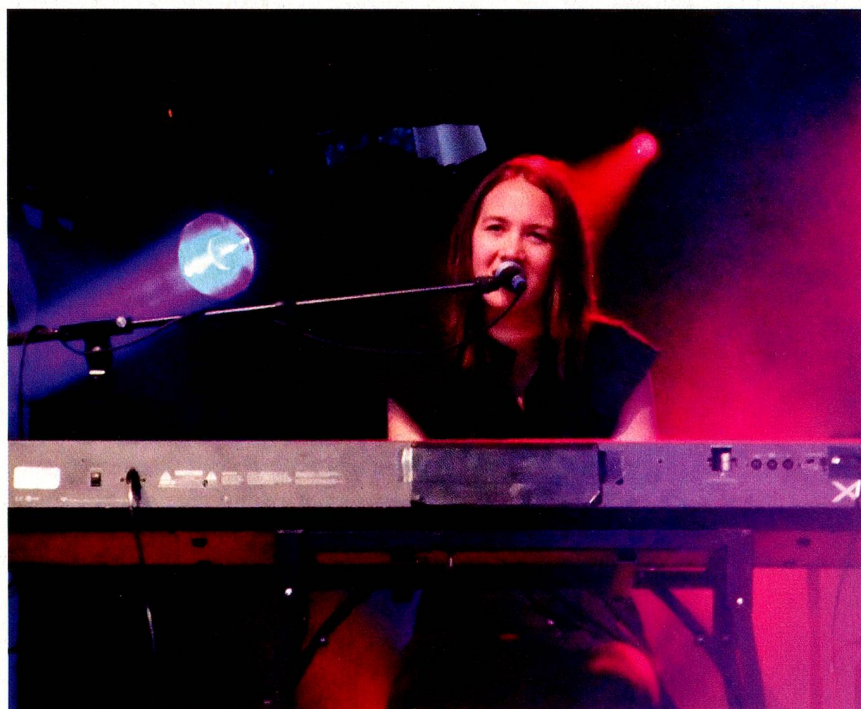
and she crossed the Atlantic in 2010. Her desire to learn led her to produce her own album “1983” in collaboration with the sound engineer Stéphane Alf Briat (Air, Phoenix). On an enigmatic cover, Sophie Hunger holds two fingers in the form of a revolver to her head while pointing another at the onlooker. She was directly inspired by the self-portrait by the painter Maria Lassnig entitled “You or Me” and revealed that she believes suicidal behaviour stems from individualism. “The harm I do to you, I do to myself”. The album contains her rendition of the Noir Désir track “Le vent nous portera” in a punchy, purified rock version. This featured on the soundtrack of two films, “Terraferma” in 2011 and “Les Beaux Jours” in 2013, and went straight to the top of the Swiss charts. The subsequent tour saw her take to the legendary stage at the Glastonbury Festival in the UK, the first time a Swiss artist has ever performed there. 2011 was the year she went global. Sophie Hunger played concerts in Canada in June and then in the US in November with the Tuareg band Tinariwen. In March 2012, she completed her long tour with a series of solo concerts in homage to one of her spiritual inspirations, “Bob Dylan – Be Part Of My Dream”, in Düringen, canton Fribourg, and then in Paris.

Between Europe and Los Angeles

After three European albums, the fourth, “The Danger of Light”, entered new stratospheres. Sophie Hunger called upon the Californian producer Adam Samuels (Stephan Eicher, Pearl Jam, John Frusciante, Daniel Lanois) and recorded live in Lausanne, Carpentras (France), Los Angeles and Montreal. In Los Angeles, she even engaged the services of Josh Klinghoffer, the current guitarist with the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Always very mysterious, the album title was thought-provoking. “I was walking down the street when I got a call from my agent. I had been putting off choosing the album title for weeks but he wanted it right there and then. I looked at the sun and said: “The Danger of Light”. It was completely instinctive. I later asked myself what I wanted to say. I’m still discovering new meanings today.” Starting with the mystical track “Rererevolution”, the album



Sophie Hunger on the album "The Danger Of Light"



At the Halden Pop Festival in 2010

touches upon current issues with "The Fallen", evoking the tragic fate of African immigrants, and "Heharun", exploring forbidden love in the Middle East, as well as the timeless subject of freedom with "Z'lied vor freiheitsstatue". In the video of the track "Likelikelike", Sophie Hunger plays football while passing through the streets of Paris. From the Luxembourg Gardens to the Eiffel Tower, she shows off her footballing skills in high heels and a black dress. She keeps up the ball, dribbles past passers-by, heads it and kicks it furiously. There is certainly a good deal of humour and a sense of irony.

The documentary "The Rules of Fire", which accompanies her recently released "live" double album, gives the audience an insight into some of the facets of the singer's complex personality - playful, modest, reverent and passionate. It also reveals the friendship and osmosis that create the bond with her backing musicians from French-speaking Switzerland. It is impossible to separate her from the band which complements her tracks: drummer and percussionist Alberto Malo, bassist, guitarist and clarinetist Simon Gerber, trumpeter and keyboard player Alexis Anérilles and violinist Sara Oswald.

Bob Dylan, Nina Simone, Jeff Buckley

Her world and her many inspirations are embodied by the evocation of her imaginary musical family. Bob Dylan is at once her father, brother and child. Nina Simone is her big sister. Thelonious Monk embodies the family spirit and the expression of freedom. Jeff Buckley is her sweetheart. She also likes hanging out with her neighbour Tom Waits. Sitting together on the porch of the house, they see Thom Yorke (Radiohead vocalist) pass by in a futuristic vehicle. As for her mother, that would be none other than Billie Holiday - and her father, Charlie Chaplin. Yes, Sophie Hunger's world is a place always full of creative exuberance where the artist's steps are guided by instinct.

www.sophiehunger.com