

# SOAP & SKIN

## BIOGRAPHY 2018

*"I wanted to create a world where I felt sheltered," says Anja Plaschg. "I was searching for something soothing. The album is about separation, forgiveness, states of healing and frightening throwbacks."*

'From Gas to Solid / you are my friend' is the third album from the woman known as Soap&Skin, and Anja's first in six years. There are reasons for her retreat, and search for a safer haven, given the preceding intense sequence of events – almost instantaneous acclaim and fame in her native Austria and across mainland Europe leading to intrusive media attention and battling expectations while protecting her integrity; then parenthood, and then beginning a new record, while the world outside continues to alienate and melt down. If Anja's search for shelter has created something of a restorative oasis, a more balanced adult view than the rawer, angrier aspects of her earlier work, the stunning, wide-reaching 'From Gas to Solid...' still reflects the struggle to find meaning, answers, and a place to survive.

The album follows a similar trajectory to her 2009 debut 'Lovetune For Vacuum' and 2012's 'Narrow' - both Top Ten albums in Austria, the latter topping the chart there. This was unexpected given the music's quietly devastating beauty, vivid poetry and compositional ambition, fusing classical, electronic, gothic, avant-rock, torch song and singer-songwriter traditions. Over the new album's opening five songs alone, she embraces becalmed, almost hymnal piano and vocal ('This Day'), spellbound, electronic-flecked tranquillity ('Athom'), 'Italy' coloured by organ and militaristic drums, the choral ambience of '(This Is) Water' and the tense grandeur of 'Surrounded', ethereal and earthy.

Similarly, 'From Gas to Solid...' moves to an end with 'Falling', its most dynamic, dizzy chapter; 'Palindrome', a more monastic choral arrangement with beguiling gamelan-style notes and the Latin words "in girum imus nocte et consumimur igni" ("we go into the circle by night and are consumed by fire"), a palindrome described as, "the devil's verse"; and lastly, a succinct, serene cover of Louis Armstrong's perennial 'What A Wonderful World'. This astonishing, undulating range of musical expression is self-produced and mostly self-played at Anja's home in a quiet, green corner of Vienna.

*"People tell me I work in an uncommon way," she says. "I sample everything, even when musicians are involved, like the drummer and horn player, and my own piano. I liken how I make my music to painting. It means I can get over my educated mood, and more trust what I hear. It gives me more freedom."*

Hailing from the village of Gnas, Anja started piano lessons at the age of six (later adding violin), but when she was nine, everything changed after her older brothers introduced Anja to Björk's album *Debut*. Anja's first song, 'Cynthia' (named after the Greek goddess of the moon, addressing "*my longing to escape my age, and my village*") was written when she was 14, and good enough to be recorded for her album debut. At 16, she was studying graphic design but dropped out to move to Vienna and study art, yet music won out, and in 2008 Anja released an untitled EP under the name Soap&Skin.

One EP cut, a cover of Nico's 'Janitor Of Lunacy' - preceded by a 2007 YouTube cover of Cat Power's 'Maybe Not' - indicated other sources of inspiration, though Anja also cites medieval composer Hildegard of Bingen and Bulgarian choral music. "*I'm influenced by women in general,*" she adds. "*And books, poetry and movies.*"

A broad appreciation of art led to Anja's stage debut in 2008, playing (and performing the songs of) the German icon in Nico - Sphinx Aus Eis, and her film debut in *Stilleben*. But music remained her main focus, and even in the six years since *Narrow*, Anja's been busy; collaborations with Apparat ('Goodbye', 2012) and Asfast ('Drag Shift', 2017), theatre and film scores (such as *Sicilian Ghost Story*, 2017) and two online releases of her own: 2013 EP 'Sugarbread' and a 2015 cover of Omar Souleyman's 'Mawal Jamar'. "*I was asked to do a remix for him, but I failed to make one I was happy with,*" she recalls. "*But his music kept popping into my head, so I felt I could interpret him instead. And I was happy to connect with a Syrian, and a Kurd, at that moment.*"

The lack of a new album since 'Narrow' could be down to one simple feeling: "*My music is so personal, it comes from experiencing life, so I always knew I'm not the kind to release an album every year,*" she admits. "*I need to collect and grow.*" At the same time, "*the music business is not my cup of tea. I can't really get used to the consequences of success and mentally preparation is almost impossible.*"

When the process of creativity and thought goes deep but critics skim the surface, the schism is hard to handle. Take *From Gas to Solid* – you are my friend, which operates on various levels. For example, 'gas' is "*the process of something surrounding but invisible, something unconscious, lost, forgotten or even unborn.*" The 'solid' is "*something visible, audible, perceptible and conscious, with consequences.*" The 'friend' element is, "*developing knowledge, awareness, alteration and its consequences. The conclusion is a vision, a view, a connection that includes failing.*" Anja also had to, "*let go of what I thought I loved and needed, which also meant bringing enormously painful things up from my subconscious – from gas to solid.*"

Anja's sampling process also meant creating, "*an imagined world [mirrored by her album artwork], click per click, painting the music on my screen – this was 'gas'. A real – solid - connection wasn't there.*" Similarly, the transition from thought and recording to a tangible album shifts from 'gas to solid'. Anja has been playing live again too, part of Andre de Ridders Stargaze ensemble (also including Anna Calvi and Laeticia Sadier) paying tribute to David Bowie's *Blackstar*, and her own shows will follow. Soap to Skin, gas to solid, absence to presence - Anja Plaschg has kept moving, working it out, and she's returned stronger than ever.