



The Big Interview Anna Calvi

A classical Calvi

The singer/songwriter speaks to Arwa Haider about rave reviews from Brian Eno, her love of vinyl and past obsessions with Ravi Shankar

Anna Calvi would be the first to admit she has a vivid imagination. 'I try to imagine my guitar as a huge, expansive orchestra,' says the singer/songwriter and musician from South

London. She definitely channels it into the heady, evocative melodies of her eponymous debut LP, which has garnered praise including an early rave review from legendary producer/ambient dude Brian Eno, who rated Calvi's music as 'phenomenal'. At the same time, this 28-year-old responds with a delicate, girlish politeness that contrasts with the usual music industry bluster and even belies the boldness of her performance and flamenco-inspired visuals.

'Making this album was quite a solitary experience and now the idea that people can hear my songs is quite bizarre,' muses Calvi. She actually appears wide-eyed in the spotlight of attention, though it's quickly clear she's curious rather than cowed. 'Being on my own for hours every day worked really well for me. I wanted to make something really honest and passionate, without distractions of what's hot or fashionable.'

Indeed, ask what's 'hot' in Calvi's world and she starts genuinely swooning over old Cocteau Twins records ('on vinyl - I like having a physical, complete album in my hands').

Her own album, recorded with PJ Harvey collaborator Rob Ellis, sets its scene with the luxuriously brooding instrumental *Rider To The Sea* and continues in fluid style. 'I'm not sure if my music is about tradition as much as

wide tastes,' she says. 'My biggest influence is probably classical music - Debussy, Messiaen... there's a sense of

tension, twists and turns and release in classical music that I find really exciting; the way an orchestra builds to a natural climax with beautiful, sweeping strings. I try to recreate that atmosphere.'

Strictly speaking, Calvi isn't a solo performer - although she does keep things intensely stripped down, with co-instrumentalists/confidants Daniel Maiden-Wood and long-time friend/multi-instrumentalist Mally Harpaz. 'Having just the three of us means I have to work a lot harder,' she enthuses. 'I really like creating from restrictions. I only started singing about five years ago, which was a big deal for me.'

'I'm quite shy, so finding my voice was the biggest challenge. But it felt right. I feel a lot stronger and more fearless on stage; I can get in touch with a part of me that I can't in any other situation.'

Having Eno's endorsement must have boosted her confidence, surely. Calvi can't suppress a bashful grin. 'I do feel

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pretty lucky having someone like him supporting my work,' she replies.

'Brian Eno said he wanted to be my protector - that's pretty special. He was even texting Nick Cave and saying "treat her well" when we supported Grinderman on tour. And they were all really lovely gentlemen.'

As well as holding her own with Cave's dirty bluesmen, Calvi had a positive experience supporting her label mates the Arctic Monkeys live last year. 'They're a great band; we're very different musically but we went down surprisingly well,' says Calvi. She demonstrates with an impression of a rowdily approving indie rock fan: 'Woooargh, Anna Calvi!'

You get the impression she could have created numerous records in a variety of completely different genres. 'Well, this album is a culmination of all my musical endeavours,' says Calvi. 'I've always been happy to experiment; as a



twist

www.myspace.com/annacalvi

teenager, I was obsessed with Ravi Shankar and tried to tune my guitar like a sitar.

'Maybe I'll put out my choral pieces one day. Making music feels like setting off on my next expedition in the mountains – and I know I'm not a one-trick pony.'

Calvi does seem to be attracted to alluringly murky sentiments on numbers such as I'll Be Your Man. 'I think it's more romantic than dark,' she smiles. 'Although I'm not afraid of anything that comes out of my head.'

Before her next musical expedition, Calvi is making the journey home from her label office; she mentions a gang who have been rampaging around her neighbourhood, and again she just seems intrigued by the commotion. Calvi appears ready to handle anything. And she could always set Brian Eno on them.

Anna Calvi (Domino) is out now. She plays The Workman's Club on Feb 23.



Picture: Maisie Cousins