

LAMB  
IN WOLF'S  
CLOTHING?



**I**t's been a decade since Shetland-born singer-songwriter Astrid Williamson struck out from the confines of cult (as in largely ignored) indie duo Goya Dress to embark on a solo career. Her first bite of the cherry was a bitter one, however, and her album sank without a trace despite an enviable clutch of quirky, offbeat songs that others would have sold their grans for.

As a result, she lost her deal and a second solo album later materialised on her own label, Incarnation Records, though it barely even registered on the radar and sold modestly. Well, they say that the third time's a charm, and while no one is realistically expecting her to become the next million-selling Dido-like, Astrid's latest album *Day Of The Lone Wolf* is receiving some of the best reviews of her career and things are looking very much skywards. In fact, so busy has her schedule been that tracking her down for an interview turned out to be a miniature nightmare.

After supporting Bic Runga on her recent UK tour and on a rare break between a bewildering number of festival appearances all over Europe, TREVOR RAGGATT eventually caught up with Ms Williamson and posed only the most pressing questions about life, the universe and, um, pitch 'n' putt.

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It never fails to make an impression in this line of work when you meet someone who is pleasantly at odds with their projected persona, and Astrid Williamson is no exception. Not because she's famed for any diva-like behaviour – quite the opposite in fact – but because her songs can often feel rather dark and introspective. So to find that she is anything but hyper-intense, that she's easy to talk to and open from the get go, is a relief and a pleasure. For all the brooding intensity that inhabits her music, she is candid and passionate about living life to the full and coasting any waves of opportunity that might come along.

It's a restless muse that does it, and she's already thinking ahead. "I've started to get that sort of quiver of anticipation when you start thinking you almost have enough songs for a new record," she says slightly starry-eyed. "It's like a relationship you haven't had yet, a little bit like falling in love. And even though I shouldn't be doing that now 'cos I'm bang in the middle of promoting *Day Of The Lone Wolf*, it's like a pendulum and I'll just think, 'OK, let's do something completely different' and just hole up at

home with my piano...particularly when it's a balmy night, I'll open the window and play."

She laughs, acknowledging a minor idiosyncrasy, and leans in slightly to make a further admission: "I'm the eternal buffet person, I just want to pick at something."

Having just watched her and her band cooking up a storm on a stage so tiny that the bassist was practically among the audience of diners in the little subterranean café, it's clear that the musicians are used to operating in a cosy manner, up close and personal with Astrid and everyone else. I ask whether having bandmates who are also really good friends is an important touchstone for her. "Oh god yes! Sometimes I feel sorry for profoundly, extremely successful people because they must be cast into an arena with people they don't know and have no control over whether they like them or not...they'll get a stylist that they may not like!" she chuckles. "Mind you, I'm sure that Jennifer Lopez isn't stuck with people she doesn't like, but nevertheless!"

"I was brought up in Shetland and was, for most of the time, at the end of the road in a tiny little valley with nobody else. And even though I had family I was very isolated so I'm not easy with people quickly, I tend to find my society in where I work. I think it would be very hard for me to have a session band because it's the intimacy, the sharing, the respect...I don't really just want to be the boss, *per se*."

The reference to her early years gets me wondering about the other ways in which growing up as part of an island community might have had a formative effect. "The other day, some friends were going out and rang me to ask if I wanted to come. They were going to play pitch 'n' putt and I suddenly wondered...where was my pitch 'n' putt in Shetland?!"

A broad smile lightens her features as she suddenly realises the apparent inanity of this supposedly profound statement. She laughs again. "My point being...in some ways Shetland can be a bit raw and I was really a country girl. It's odd what becomes normal in life...I mean, until I was twelve, I went to a school with twenty-six people, and I think that something like that really colours how you look at things. You know, when I was at secondary school there was always lots to do, clubs and stuff but not when you're out in the county.

There was a period when my father had remarried and was living in England, my mum was working and my

sister was in high school when I'd get home extremely early and I'd get the house all perfect just for me. I'd sit in this perfect place I'd created and think 'I don't want anyone to come in now and ruin my perfect world.' I'm quite a quiet, private person. I never felt lonely because it was just like this unspoiled peace. So I wondered about the pitch 'n' putt thing...that was so much fun and I never really learned to have that sort of fun."

Crazy golf isn't exactly rock 'n' roll in itself, so with even that simple pleasure denied to the young Ms Williamson, she must have had plenty of time to play the piano and make up some childhood ditties. "Well, when I was little – nine or ten years old – I was composing, making tunes up. Now I recognise that it was a very feeling process; it would move me. I don't think it matters about the situation, I think that the music would have happened whatever. That whole nature/nurture thing...your nature's so important. Playing the piano and stuff. I was just good at it as well! You know, music was easy. And I think that's a good thing if you're good at something and you go after it."

This early start was helped along by a unique exposure to the music in her island community. "When my mum eventually remarried, my stepfather – sadly he's passed away now – was the founder of the Shetland folk festival so he introduced me to folk music. He loved Dick Gaughan, Pentangle, Steeleye Span, Fairport Convention...he was really great...from Liverpool and pure 1960s, all Dylan and The Beatles. He was also a Communist so he had this incredibly left-wing take on folk music – English folk music, very pure. So it was him who gave me a sense of the integrity of music. Not self-righteousness, but that music is amazing and should be upheld and maintained in society; it should be given a platform.

"So I'd go down to the Festival Club and hang out with Dave Swarbrick! Which was a huge privilege really. I remember he came up to me when I was about eleven and said 'you've got a beautiful voice'. I was really shy then, really shy of men, and I was all, like, 'leave me alone'...I just went all shy and couldn't take the compliment. I was too little to understand that he was trying to give me encouragement.

"Of course, that was a nice introduction to the stage and to stagecraft too, learning about an audience, learning about microphones...I went on to

study classical music and loved that. You know, every genre has got such purity, with people who've committed themselves to it completely. My teacher at the time was an Australian woman who'd been trained in Russia and she'd make me memorise all the music before I came to the lesson, before she'd begin. So she'd have me memorise 40 minutes of music – which is a great many black dots...believe me, millions of notes! For a while I thought, 'my god, what are you thinking? What a bloody waste of time!'; but now I think it's just such a privilege to be exposed to such purity. To have that education, such an amazing environment to be in! But by the end of it, I'd gotten involved in bands in Glasgow and had started writing songs. And I knew then – in fact it was quite hard to finish the course that last year – that this was just perfect. I felt free. Suddenly it wasn't quite so hard, unlike being in classes for four hours a day!"

Leaping forward a couple of decades, we start chatting about her latest opus – something of which she's clearly (and deservedly) proud. "The most important thing for me was that I was in charge of how I wanted it to go. Making a record is like an amalgam of a million little decisions and I made so many of those myself. It was really liberating! So a lot of summing up the album was that it achieved the sonic landscape that I wanted. I did a lot of the arranging; I get pleasure in it, I don't want to hand it over," she grins.

"Maybe it was sort of fear, too. Because I was thinking 'what if it's the last one?', it sorta had to be right. And I decided I was going to put it out on my own label so I didn't have anybody to answer too!"

Reckoning that we've had enough time to build up a rapport, I decide it's safe to ask the obvious, stupid question... what's the story behind the title? Her eyes gleam again, and it's actually difficult to tell at first whether her words are self-mocking or aimed at me. "Oh, that's really profound! I have a coffee table book with everybody's birthday in it, 365 days. It says who was born on your birthday. William Blake was born on mine! There just isn't anybody cooler than that. And every day has a title; the day of the lone wolf is my birthday. It says...well, a bunch of stuff, but a lot of it's bang on! Anyway, I thought 'how amazing!' because I think I am quite a loner. I don't have a problem being alone but this kinda let me off the hook actually," she laughs. "So I'm allowed to be like this. You don't want to run with the pack? That's OK!"

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I mention that despite the subtext of loneliness and isolation in a society lacking community that runs through the album, a lot of reviews have drawn a sexual predator simile from the title. Astrid pulls a face that clearly says 'I know! What's that all about?' and after a few moments' reflection she commits to a comment: "I think that it's a very seeking record. But there's more to it than that, not just seeking of another...seeking some peace, some answers...not even an identity, but more the questions of why, all of it. Maybe it's not about loneliness, maybe it's about the questions you can never get away from. Life seems to be filled with seeking. You can't be fulfilled outside yourself, you must be fulfilled from within – and that kind of seeking never leaves, never stops."

I asked whether that was a reflection of her personal beliefs. "Spirituality, yeah! I think there's more to life than just flesh and blood. I genuinely believe that humans have a higher and a lower self, and you know when you're answering to either, because of your emotional response and what you feel in your heart. As a species, we have a huge capacity for living above and beyond things like 'what do I eat? where do I sleep? what do I drink? who should I sleep with?...' it's massively more than that. Of course it is intellectually, but spiritually too!

"I wouldn't want to put a name to it, but clearly that's where spirituality and religion come in...that need in humanity to feel bigger than yourself. I think that every single person has an enormous capacity for growth – for good or bad – and for making choices about what kind of human they want to be. I think that's a really big deal."

That rather suggests that human beings are more than just random collection of chemicals, right? "I think that we're extraordinary, we're amazing,

I'm very fascinated by creatures! When I was little in Shetland, there was nothing more intriguing than, say, going past a little wall and hearing the chicks inside... there were animals and life everywhere. Nature's astonishing but humans... humans! If you wanted to be completely Biblical about it, we're the creation of god. That's mind-blowing. I always think that when, say, there's a war...every time someone dies it's a great loss. One human being is capable of such creation that when they're destroyed it's like the death of so much. As a species we're capable



of such things; amazing, amazing feats of bravery and kindness and, of course, cruelty and hideousness too. As a species we're an extraordinary creation!"

It's a safe assumption that she agrees that music taps into this higher being in some mysterious way – it can move in a way nothing else does. 'Yes, I think that's probably why in scripture there are nine realms of singers, of angels who sing... nine different types of singer! I mean, can you imagine? There'd be Whitney,

Aretha and all those gospel singers along with the seraphim and cherubim – nine different kinds! For that to actually get in there means that music is important. It's given an important place. You look at any church and there are all these angels and they've got a trumpet or a guitar...and this is in places a thousand years old. They're all playing something! Music is extremely powerful. This is the point, it *must* be given a platform!"

Having plumbed the depths of the human experience over a beer it is time to wind the interview to a close so I return to rather more mundane matters; what the future holds for Astrid Williamson. A familiar theme returns. "Well, August's quite quiet so I'm going to do some writing – I love it! I really don't want to write the same songs, the same record. I always seem to have all these piano songs that never seem to find their voice so I was thinking of maybe doing something with them. Something really sumptuous! Och, it'll turn into another record but there's still so much to write. Whatever anyone says, I'll always write! This is what I do."

Noticing that the time's a-fleeting as usual, I squeak in one more question – does she find that the songs have to come with a lot of effort or do they just flow out of her head like a fountain? This provokes another smile and a self-aware giggle: "If I sit down and make the room

for it, yeah! That can be pretty hard...it's like Graham Greene used to go and sit at the typewriter at 9am every day. I think I remember someone saying that if you're not out there waiting, the javelin of joy will land in Van Morrison's garden. You've got to be ready to grab it. Songs are like javelins going through the air; if you're not in your garden waiting to grab one, you'll miss it. That's nice that." ■

*Astrid's album is reviewed on page 65.*