

interview

Ozark Henry

Known to most by his stage name Ozark Henry, Piet Goddaer has come a long way since rapping in Belgium's underground music scene. His music, a fusion of art-rock and electrosonic shimmer, has been used as a backdrop for Parisian fashion shows, film, and club nights worldwide. **Anna Elicaño** learns about the composer-songwriter's travels and his latest record



A bird in the hand: Piet Goddaer is enjoying success as alter ego Ozark Henry

I thought it would be cool if I had an artist's name that would be easier to pronounce than my own name – especially in other languages. I saw an old picture of two children from the Ozark mountain range [in the US]. The angle of the photo focuses on the kitten they're holding, so you can't see their heads. I chose the word 'Ozark' because, like the picture, my music is about a different way of looking at something that is common. 'Henry' is the name of several characters in William Burroughs' books, which I read. He also uses it to refer to heroin – but that's not my intention, of course.

What I love about where I live, Kortrijk, is that it's near everywhere. It may be a small Belgian town, but it's just one hour away from Paris by train, and an hour and 20 minutes to London by plane.

I'm interested in architecture, and find Berlin fascinating. It's fantastic how they work with spaces. When they have to bring a massive building down they still manage to maintain a sense of openness; it doesn't eat the landscape as much as it does in other cities. Opera singers and string quartets play at Alexanderplatz – a wide space with good acoustics. It's weird, because sound normally gets lost in a square that big.

In Nairobi, I ate at a famous restaurant that used to serve zebra. I was travelling with a good friend, who was there to train Kenyan athletes. As such, I was able to visit Iten, Eldoret, Kilimanjaro and the Masai Mara.

Fashion designer Dries Van Noten has used my music for fashion shows in Paris. What I find fascinating about these big shows is that you have to present an entire collection in just 12-15 minutes, and knock people out with it. That kind of tension is fantastic, and it's great to be part of it.

Shoe designer Floris van Bommel and I collaborated to design flip-flops. I love plastic arts, design and fashion.

Although I don't usually get attached to objects, I take my iPhone everywhere. I like having my music with me when I travel, it helps me to reflect on where I came from and where I am. Also, it has a recorder, so whenever I get inspired and think of a song in my head, I can record it right away.

Music that influences me isn't necessarily similar to the music I make. I'm a big Radiohead fan. I also like The National and Frank Zappa.

I look up to an 88-year-old Belgian jazz legend. Toots Thielemans, the world-famous harmonica player who played with the likes of Quincy Jones, told me last summer: "You are just starting – so you have to keep it up and continue living for the music." It's fantastic to meet people like that. He talks like he's just 18 years old and ready to see the world.



Clockwise: Goddaer flies Brussels Airlines; The TV Tower in Alexanderplatz; Ozark Henry's music is a hit with Dries Van Noten

Hvelreki, my latest album, means 'good luck.' It's an Icelandic phrase that translates as: 'May a whole whale wash up on your beach.' The album is based in a time when there were many environmental changes, and when the world financial crisis came to a head.

I wrote Hvelreki while travelling the globe. At that time, I noticed how people in India were worried about how Europe was suffering from the economic crisis, while in Europe we were hearing about how the US was the hardest hit, and how farmers in India were committing suicide to pay off debts. It seems that no one was willing to see the trouble at his or her own doorstep. Everyone kept referring to how it was worse elsewhere as a way of getting through. At the same time, we were also having a great time everywhere. My album is my



way of wishing everybody the best, and hoping that things will work out.

Working with [acclaimed British producer] Youth was inspiring. It was my first time working with a producer, and the experience was all about trusting someone else, giving him responsibility for the album, letting go... and feeling good about it.

I travel often, to co-write with international artists, attend song-writing camps and perform. I'll be at the Melkweg (melkweg.nl) in Amsterdam on 20 December and AB (abconcerts.be) in Brussels 21-22 December.



Ozark Henry's sixth studio album, Hvelreki, was released at the end of October