

BJÖRK

DJ LYNNÉE DENISE

ILLUSTRATION BY WINNIE T. FRICK

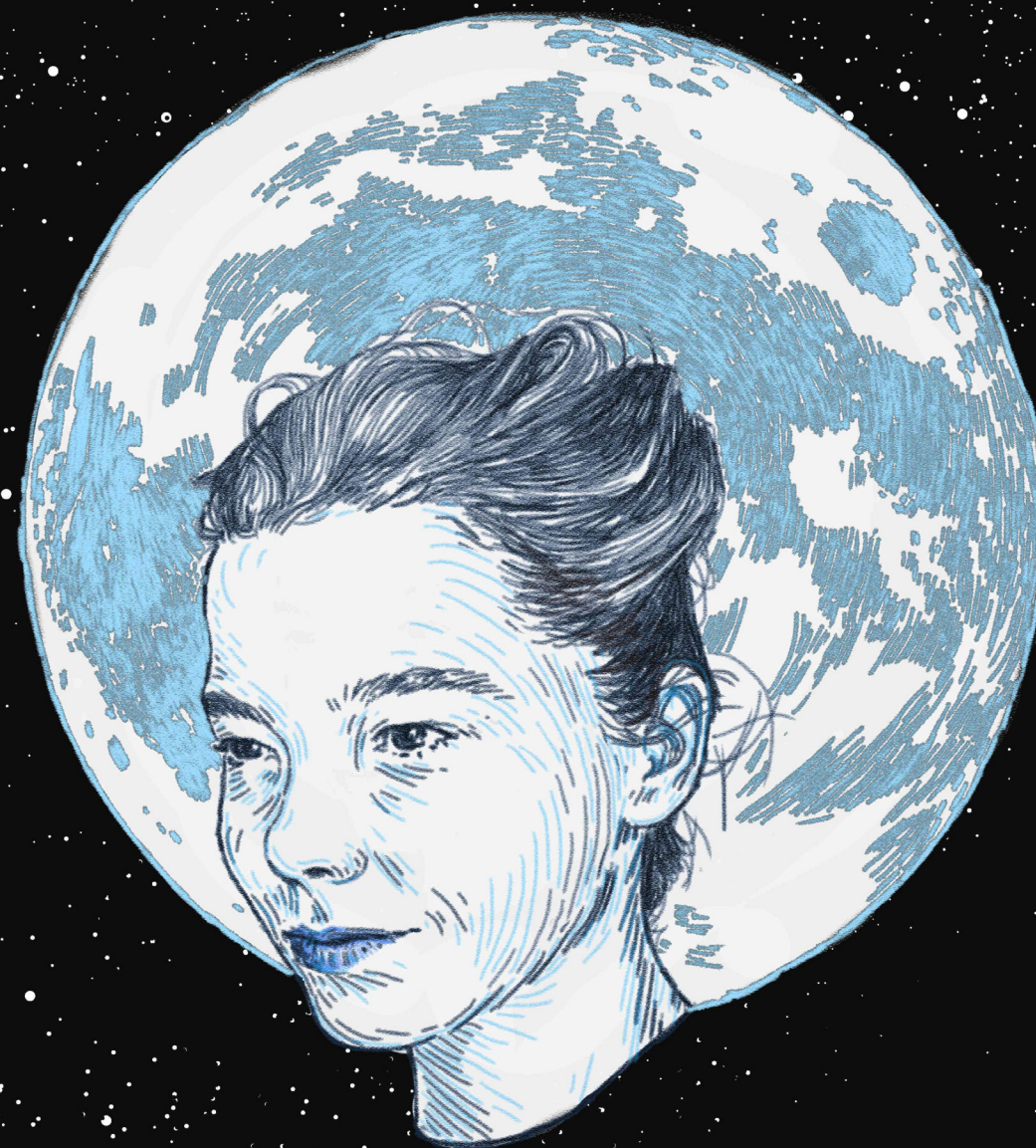
Iceland is one of the most volatile places in the world, a hyper-monitored geological hotspot. On November 21, 1965, in one of the least populated countries on earth, Björk Guðmundsdóttir was born. Björk is a musicological hotspot—an uncategorizable triple Scorpio with an otherworldly understanding of the acoustics of ecology and the value of transdisciplinary art.

For most Americans, Björk surfaces in the collective national memory as the woman who wore the swan dress to the Academy Awards. Her appeal to the cohort of black women who follow her life may be influenced in part by our witnessing her objectification. She was read by the average consumer of popular culture as a freak of nature, and her place of origin was exoticized enough to be offensive—a phenomenon with which we are well familiar. And what do we make of the othering of her musicality as opposed to naming it as genius, a status historically reserved for men?

Björk is the product of parents who saw their voices as tools for social change. Her mother worked as an activist and a fortune teller, while her father organized as a union leader and wrote textbooks for fellow electricians. Her politicization and punk roots were informed by their social resistance and ferocious commitment to craft. Music and activism, as well as technology and mystical reflection, were very much

part of her development as a creative being. Perhaps this explains why Björk has been at the cutting age of technology, as indicated by the multimedia project *Biophilia* (2011), which was billed as the first interactive app album.

Although the point of entry to Björk's sorcery for most begins with the Sugarcubes, between 1977 and 1987, she established a rhythmic foundation and cultivated her identity as a singer. At the urging of her mother, Björk became a public figure and child celebrity at the age of twelve, releasing a self-titled record consisting mostly of covers. The experience left her with the desire to reclaim her privacy and produce music with her peers, leading to a series of collaborations with groups like the all-girl band Spit and Snot and the experimental post-punk bands Tappi Tíkarrass and Kukl. In 1988, she and other musicians frustrated by Iceland's obsession with British and American music and keen on pulling from traditional Icelandic sound modals gave birth to the Sugarcubes—a poet collective-turned-pop band. The Sugarcubes' rise to fame was ironic and met with suspicion about celebrity culture from its members. Björk and the Sugarcubes were pioneers of the Icelandic punk movement, and, impressively, this resistance to eminence remains a big part of Björk's personality, even as she's gone on to become the most successful solo artist in Iceland's history. The interna-



tional attention received with the Sugarcubes solidified her clarity around privacy as a nonnegotiable element in her career. And yes, while there have been a few outlandish moments (the physical assault of a journalist) and public breakups during her tenure as an artist, Björk buffs understand that most of what she's given us over the years—eleven superior studio albums, film appearances, magical live performances, music videos, and interviews about the artistic process—is nothing short of generous and intimate.

Björk never intended to use her voice as the leading instrument in her musical practice. Instead, she understood her voice as a necessary tool to further embody her compositions. But what comes out of her mouth cannot be detached from the spectrum of characters it offers. In one album she'll move from a guttural Viking sound to an ethereal viciousness. She screams, yells, whispers, and hollers, unearthing distant emotions few of us knew we had. Most impressive is the control she exerts over the wildness of her range. Björk's standout vocal performance on the Sugarcubes' first hit single, "Birthday," caught the attention of an audience who would follow her every move and secretly await her solo moment. The anticipation is comparable to the pre-solo careers of Michael Jackson or Lauryn Hill: you loved the Jacks-sons and the Fugees, but you also waited patiently for the "featured" artist to break out. It was Björk's quiet and, dare I say, visible boredom with the status of the Sugarcubes that signaled to fans that a volcanic energy was bubbling—we were sitting on the verge of an eruption. By 1992, the Sugarcubes disbanded, partly to save their friendship and partly to explore individual pursuits. During their run, Björk entered a one-year marriage and had her first child with the Sugarcubes' guitarist, Þór Eldon.

Fresh off the heels of success with resources generated from the Sugarcubes' reign, Björk went to the UK and made musical hajj to London. This holy land was in the prime of its production of acid jazz, UK soul, trip hop, drum and bass, dance music, and experimental electronica, reflective of the African and Caribbean immigrant contribution to the cultural fabric of England. The sound was dominated by Bristol DJ culture, which gave the world Soul II Soul, Massive Attack, Portishead, Sinéad O'Connor, and producer Nellee Hooper. Björk found her new tribe by going straight to the source of this developing movement: the clubs, the dance halls, and the studio with Hooper, where she recorded her first album less than a year after leaving the Sugarcubes. She speaks about carrying the first two albums, *Debut* (1993) and *Post* (1995), in her head for at least a decade and having unmistakable clarity about her musical direction from that point forward.

Homogenic (1997) is the first album she produced that hadn't been pulled from the archive in her mind. In an interview Björk described *Homogenic* as the album where she needed to "firmly establish her sound as an organically Icelandic one." The album integrates her trademark industrial influences with lyrical lovesickness and the musical unpredictability of Iceland's seismology. The strings on the album, she says, were intensely patriotic, most apparent in the song "Bachelorette." Her feeling was that this was the album that caught up with her voice and holistic artistry in real time.

PLAYLIST

"Human Behavior," 1993, *Debut*

"One Day," 1993, *Debut*

"Isobel," 1995, *Post*

"Hunter," 1997, *Homogenic*

"Bachelorette," 1997, *Homogenic*

"Cvalda," 2000, *Selmasongs*

"Hidden Place," 2001, *Vespertine*

"Triumph of a Heart," 2004, *Medúlla*

"Wanderlust," 2007, *Volta*

"Atom Dance," 2015, *Vulnicura*

Even then, she was surprised to be asked to produce a soundtrack for director Lars von Trier, but excited by the opportunity to expand her creative palette. Von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* marked Björk's debut as an actress and as a film score composer. In many ways, this pivot to film was aligned with the cinematic component underlying her music videos. Pioneering directors like Michel Gondry and Spike Jonze were instrumental in helping to visualize Björk's music in a way that honored the integrity of her sonic force.

What can't get lost in understanding Björk's trajectory is her masterful ability to collaborate, something she describes as a "merging." Often, collaborations between men and women are mistaken for paternalistic relationships, with women being aided to reach their artistic goals. She dispels this myth. Her relationship with the late Mark Bell, long-time friend and producer, provides an example of Björk's belief that collaboration/merging is a "feminine quality" that is looked upon as a weakness but should be positioned as the next phase of feminism. For someone who appears so incredibly in control of her every musical move, her notion of surrendering, which is at the heart of collaboration, speaks to another angle of her brilliance.

The merging she describes also highlights a blurring of the line between the romantic and the professional. She partnered and produced work with visual and musical artists like Tricky and Goldie. This fruitful love life set the stage for her long-term

marriage to artist Matthew Barney, with whom she had her second child, and with whom she merged to co-star in and arrange and produce music for Barney's film project *Drawing Restraint 9* (2005). Traces of her falling in love with Barney can be found on *Vespertine* (2001) and tragically, markings of their separation embedded in her ninth album, *Vulnicura* (2015). There is little separation between the state of her heart and her emotionally coded body of work. Each *known* relationship has a musical location, and through the practice of excavation can be identified in her orchestral bibliography.

Björk is a classically trained punk rock jazz head and a dance club kid who, like a DJ, understands a good blend. And perhaps Björk is no more experimental than a DJ making the connection between Frank Sinatra and Biggie Smalls. Her discography is in fact a repository for sounds and words she's collected along the way. She refused to stand in the shadows of men otherwise seen as the "minds" behind her projects. Instead she's increased their cultural capital through their association with her name. At the core of her genius is a rageful creativity and furious innovation. Amid her defining decades, we are left with only leads to her never-ending metamorphosis. The Museum of Modern Art's 2015 retrospective exhibition of Björk's entire career speaks to the volume of history she's left for us to climb. Björk best describes her biography thus far: "I feel like I'm trying to put an ocean through a straw." ■