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## Evolution of an Artist: Expansion of Me

### Fearless Expression

Her name? Regularly mispronounced. Her music? Impossible to categorize. Her avant-garde visual artistry? Often misunderstood. Her voice? So matchless, many refer to it as being from another world. Björk, a brilliant vocalist from Iceland, has transcended her early origins as an eclectic dance and pop star and evolved into an international superstar who gained critical acclaim as a composer, musician, and songstress entirely untouched by conformity.

Björk Gumundsdottir is the full name given to her at birth. Most English-speaking people, including myself, have incorrectly assumed it is pronounced (Bee-york). Björk, herself clears up the common confusion by stating in an NPR interview, “(BE-yerk) I usually say it rhymes with jerk. You know if someone is a real jerk.”

Throughout her career, she has delved into an eclectic blend of genres, combining an innovative mix of folk, punk rock, collegiate rock, alternative, electronica, pop, trip-hop, jazz, experimental, and folk, just to name a few. As Björk matures, she expands our perception of what is, and what creates, musical sounds. She combines volcanic beats—yes...literally gathered by engineers from a volcano—with classical orchestral strings, to bring amazing songs to life.

Björk was classically trained in piano and voice as a child and recorded her first album when she was 11 years old. It was a compilation of Icelandic folk cover songs that she was not particularly fond of. In the documentary film, *Inside Björk*, she admits, “I felt funny about

having an album out that said Björk on it, but it wasn't my work. I sort of promised to myself that I would never do that again unless I thought it was my album." Later, as a teenager, Björk entered the punk scene in Iceland and formed a few punk bands, including Tappi Tikarrass and Kukl, released a few albums, and toured in Iceland.

It was within the punk culture, where bold rejection of all things mainstream was revered, that Björk was free to express herself without constraint. She often performed in costume. One show, a white wedding gown and veil, another, a simple dress, her cheeks highlighted with large red circles, resembling a Raggedy Ann doll, bare feet, holding a small, white badminton racquet in hand. This, combined with her unearthly vocal abilities, gleaned a cult following.

In the late 80's, she joined the Icelandic alternative rock band, The Sugarcubes, and gained international recognition. Their second album titled *Stick Around for Joy*, was my introduction to Björk, although, at the time, I had no idea who this singer was. In reality, I was the furthest anyone could be from international exposure, locked in an insignificant Midwestern town with little hope of freeing myself from the small minded and suffocating environment I was raised in.

I was barely out of high school, wondering around, trying to figure out what to do with my life. My only escape from the mind-numbing boredom was music. I listened to everything from Johnny Cash to The Ramones. I loved the GoGo's when I was ten and AC/DC when I was sixteen. My taste in music changed frequently to fit my moods. I longed to hear new artists and expand my horizons, but exposure was limited until I was introduced to college radio.

I'd met a guy who was much older than I, and considered taboo by my father. I was utterly captivated by the intoxicating blend of sexual attraction, mixed with the unsettling fear of my father's wrath I felt when I was with him. I simply could not resist his charms and

fell completely head over heels in lust/love with him. One night, after a rather sweaty make-out session, he was driving me home. He tuned his car's radio to a college station. The song "Hit" danced out of the speakers and jolted my heart.

The song starts off with a brief DJ scratch, followed by a short intro that leads into strings. The lyrics follow and I am instantly linked to the words. "I lie in my bed totally still, my eyes wide open, I'm in *rapture*, I don't believe this I'm in love again! This wasn't supposed to happen." The music was an unusual combination of funkish and repetitive percussives, classical, high-pitched strings, and DJ scratching mixed with rap. Björk's amazingly clear, and at the same time throaty voice, was unlike anything I had heard before. "Hit" resonated with me as it spoke directly to my anti-conformist soul. I felt at home in the unconventionality of the music, seemingly justifying my exceptional choice to break free from my father's controlling rule. I had just found my idol.

After a few years, Björk outgrows The Sugarcubes, and moves on to explore her solo career. She begins a lifelong pattern of collaboration and seeks out other artists to enhance her songs. The album *Debut* is created and emerges on the dance and club scene in the UK and abroad, as one of the most progressive trip-hop releases of all time. She is thrust back into international celebrity again.

Björk's visual artistry plays a leading role in providing insight into Björk herself and her emotional state during the creation of each album. The images on each cover depict the character Björk chooses to create the album. Every character represents Björk's view of herself at that given point in time. Each of the individual songs on the album are then created by smaller characters, which are seen in the video interpretations of her music. For *Debut* Björk selected a simple sepia-toned photo of a demure Björk, innocence depicted by her soft eyes and delicate hands pressed lightly against her lips. In the documentary film, *Inside Björk* Björk describes

this character as “sort of a very shy, slightly polite new comer.”

I attempted to take control of my destiny by moving to a large city on my own. I was thriving in the environment, lapping up each opportunity to meet diverse groups of people and expose myself to everything an international city has to offer. Yet from time to time, I felt paralyzed by a profound shyness that crept up from my inner child and held my confidence hostage. Echos of my father’s demoralizing ridicule swirled in the back of my mind and pierced my strength, attempting to keep my freedom hostage forever. This was the deepest secret I held, too ashamed to admit, too frozen to address.

While perusing a large record store in downtown Chicago, I experienced my idol again. Immediately drawn to Björk, not by the music, but by the photo on the cover of the *Debut* cd. I saw inside myself when I looked at it. The timid image, so powerful to me in that moment, made me realize I was not alone in my insecurity. A cathartic realization that my idol, the most self-assured individual I had ever perceived, is human, just like me. I need not hide my innermost self in shame any longer.

Björk’s experimental album *Homogenic* features beats gathered from the natural environment in Iceland. Lavafields, Earthquakes, and Volcanos, were recorded and combined with beautiful strings showcased in the song “All is Full of Love.”

The song begins with the beat in the background pulsing steadily, reminiscent of a natural heartbeat at rest, yet the sound that delivers this rhythm resembles one made by an artificial breathing apparatus, gently, yet mechanically, operating the beating. The beat is sharply interrupted in the first moments of the song with a high-pitched yet delicate sound resembling Asian-inspired strings. Björk’s voice gently caresses the ear and provides the warmth and comfort felt during deep sleep, eventually followed by a sudden, higher, vocal pitch that pierces the calm like an electrical shock, and within what seems an instant, the sweetness returns

and lulls one back into utter bliss. .

Like the music, the video experiments with a basic concept, sex in music videos. Pushing the limits, presenting erotica, in a way I have not experienced before. As the video opens, music plays, the camera glides over a twisted mess of thick black cables. A figure resembling the human form lies on sideways on a table. The lighting is dark as the camera slowly moves closer to the object. Two unidentifiable objects hover over the form and slowly begin to move into clear view. As the music rises, lights flash on the scene, showing that the object on the table is an android and the circles are machines, moving automatically, building the android piece by piece. The robot is still lying on its side and begins to sing. The camera shows the face of the android; it takes me just a moment to process the image. It's Björk's face, pure white, no color, she is the android. The entire scene is industrial. The machines continue to methodically twist and turn, screwing, welding, attaching parts, while Björk the robot sings. I get the sense that the machines are bringing this android to life. The lyrics are simple and sweet, gently reassuring, "You'll be given love, You'll be taken care of, You'll be given love, You have to trust it. Maybe not from the sources, You have poured yours, Maybe not from the directions, You are staring at. Twist your head, around, It's all around you, All is full of love, All around you." As a second voice enters the music, another android enters the scene singing. The machines disappear momentarily as the new android reaches its robotic hand towards android Björk. The scene cuts to both robots kneeling into each other, legs between one another's, entwined, kissing, and stroking each other's body's in a slow and loving way. My heartbeat quickens and my legs begin to tingle as Android Björk's hand gently slides down to caress her partner's bum as their kissing becomes more passionate. This scene continues as the music slows and the camera slowly pans down and scans the mess of twisted black cables. I am left breathless.

Björk has been on the cutting edge of since she began her career. The visual expression of her music has opened to my eyes not only to Björk's artistry and depth, but to my own personal journey of growth and expansion into maturity. Her artful approach to music continues to cross the lines of conventionality in a way few artists dare to attempt, drawing me in and accompanying me on my own path toward self- actualization.

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