**NOGA EREZ: THE VANDALIST**

Taking a sometimes satirical, sometimes confessional look at the contemporary complexity of real and online life, **NOGA EREZ**’ third album, ***THE VANDALIST***, arrives brimful of monster tunes, intricate production, wit, charm and attitude. It also represents a significant leap from 2021’s trailblazing *KIDS*, which saw her profile rise on the back of an outpouring of critical praise and widespread touring, not to mention, among many TV appearances, a stunning, brass-fuelled performance on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* This time, she’s expanded her emotional range, shifting effortlessly from sultry to savage, while demonstrating an arguably even greater ambition, whether in her quickfire lyrics, the astonishing broadening of her vocal styles, or the elaborate backing she crafts with partner and producer **ORI ROUSSO**. If *KIDS*’ crossover appeal was best summarised by the late Neil Kulkarni, who described it in The Quietus as “*emblematic of how rap has now swallowed pop whole*”, it’s a real shame he’s not here to hear this follow-up.

Naturally, such artistic ascents always sound appetising, even thrilling, and in Noga’s case, certainly, she’s won fans in the likes of Billie Eilish, Britney Spears, Marion Cotillard, Gal Gadot, Katy Perry and Paramore’s Hayley Williams, not to mention a feature on 2022 single ‘Nails’ by Missy Elliott, who proclaimed “*Noga owns her own lane*”. Success’ capricious nature, however, can often make the reality otherwise, and so it was for her. “Within the context of everything I’ve been going through,” Noga warns,“***THE VANDALIST*** is a last resort, a big ‘*Fuck You!*’ I’ve had it with the world’s hypocrisy. I need to protect myself. It’s an attempt not to take it all so seriously, whether the devastating state of the world around me, social media, my own work or relationships. I have to make all of it not mean so much. So that's ***THE VANDALIST***: the swan song of a desperately sensitive human.”

In other words, ***THE VANDALIST***’s frequently sophisticated character belies the profound experiences which moulded it. “I don’t know if it was because of the process, or because of *when* the process happened,” she continues, “but this album was the hardest so far. I had a lot of trouble with becoming better known, more visible. It didn’t fit right with me. I was exposed to hate online and people trying to use my name for clickbait, plus we became people who tour the world most of the year and don’t have enough time to make music. So I found myself surrounded by people I love 24/7, but feeling extremely isolated and lonely. This led me ultimately to some pretty dark places, and then, while we were in the last stages of working on the record, the entire experience started to sink in.”

***THE VANDALIST*** opens with a “revenge song”, “Vandalist’, whose staccato rhythms and minimalist arrangement can’t disguise the tension in Noga’s juggling of paranoia, unhappiness and absolute fury at a world that’s slow to acknowledge inconvenient truths but quick to judge all the same. The unexpectedly philosophical ‘Dumb’, too, trips along in a mocking fashion Sparks would doubtless applaud. “*I overthink everything,”* the track concedes, “*then I think some more*,” but in person Noga admits, “Sometimes I think it’s smart to be in your own little world and not worry about anything. This is a reflection on who the dumb one actually is. It must be *one* of us.” She asks further uncomfortable questions, too, on the in-yer-face ‘PC People’, which addresses ‘woke’ culture’s drift towards hypocrisy. “*I’m pissing on your PC/ Cancel me or diss me/ PC People piss me off*,” she and ROUSSO announce provocatively from its swinging start, “*I’m pissing on your PC/ This isn’t fucking Disney/ Pissing on your peace and love”.*

Despite its confrontational nature, ‘PC People’ is characteristically nuanced, as illustrated by a question towards its end: *“What you gonna say when you can’t say anything you wanna say?”* “I consider myself part of the liberal, ‘woke’ side of society,” Noga explains, “but this phenomenon has crossed the line so artists – and people generally – can’t express themselves, or are too afraid even to think a certain way. I think it’s misused, abused, and people also use it as a way to hurt other people.” Taking these ideas to their logical conclusion, an alternative version features another fan of hers, controversial American comedian Tony Hinchcliff. “I tend to be very openminded when it comes to how far people can go,” she continues. “I’ve seen with my own eyes how broken people can benefit from being able to laugh about shitty situations. We all have different ways of healing”

Elsewhere, A+’’s old school hip hop finds her flipping the script of a self-destructive lifestyle before, on the loping, menacing ‘Nogastein’, another “revenge song”, she introduces a “murderous alter ego” as though they’re merely a cartoon character. There’s also ‘Sad Generation’ featuring Flyana Boss, a percussive, acidic skewering of online culture’s vanity – “I’m a phony on social media too,” she chuckles, “like the rest of us” – not to mention multiple ventures into hitherto untrodden territory: ‘P.L.E.A.S.E.’’s 80s era disco soul, ‘Police’’s waltzing cabaret flourishes, which owe an unspoken debt to Portishead, The Beatles and Nirvana – it was also the first song written for the album – as well as the Latin flavours of ‘AyAyAy (Papi Azúcar)’, featuring Argentinian rap star Dillom.

“Ori and I spent five months in Madrid writing,” Noga elaborates, “and every time we got in a taxi, this would be the beat, different versions of that reggaetón. I was trying to learn Spanish – very unsuccessfully! – but the music found its way in. Then an Argentinian dude introduced me to the incredible work of Dillom, and I’m really happy this worked out. It almost gave me permission to make this kind of music, because I feel like you kind of *have* to have permission.”

The couple’s Spanish sojourn also inspired them in other fortuitous fashions, with a series of increasingly widescreen epics partially provoked by the likes of Ennio Morricone. These also reveal breath-taking qualities to Noga’s voice previously only hinted at on the jazz album she began – but never finished – back in the early 2010s. “We would work in the morning,” she recalls of their process in the Spanish capital, “and then stop every day at 6pm so we didn’t force too many hours on ourselves. Afterwards we went home and watched movies, big classics, and a lot of the soundtracks became influences.” This certainly helps explain torch song ‘Come Back Home’ which, Noga acknowledges, was also shaped by Amy Winehouse, and there’s the sweeping extravagance of ‘Smiling Upside Down’, too – her favourite song on the album – while ‘Mindshow’ unites her and ROUSSO’s burgeoning Latin influences with a dreamy, summery arrangement.

On the dramatic ‘Godmother’, furthermore, Israeli vocal powerhouse Eden Ben Zaken helps her give ‘Diamonds Are Forever’ a run for its money. “She just opened her mouth and did it in one take,” Noga gasps, “then left us with our jaws hanging open!” Lest we forget, too, there’s the lavish ‘Danny’, on which, despite its bracing themes of a therapist’s inappropriate behaviour, none other than a sizzling Robbie Williams drops by for a feast of beats and strings evoking a glamourous take on David Axelrod and David McCallum’s ‘The Edge’. “I used to play Robbie’s music all the time when I was a little girl,” she recalls, “and then I found out he’s a fan. He’s such a brilliant human being and songwriter, a lovely man. I’m on a song of his and he’s on one of mine, both of us just saying a quick hello. That’s what I love about his feature: the superstar pops in, then leaves the room!”

In addition, ***THE VANDALIST*** finds Noga & ROUSSO working for the first time alongside other producers. Traditionally, Noga says, “Ori and I complete each other’s skills but overlap. I like words, but he’s improved things I say on many occasions, and I’ve made his production *soooo* slick!” She laughs before becoming serious again – a pattern, incidentally, one can frequently discern in her lyrics – then adds, “This time we needed a little help to kickstart our process.” So she and ROUSSO turned to Justin Raisen for ‘Vandalist’, ‘PC People’, ‘A+’ and ‘Nogastein’, while Mike Sabath joined them for ‘Dumb’, Alexander Izquierdo for ‘Police’, and CJ Baran for ‘Come Back Home’ and ‘AyAyAy (Papi Azúcar)’. “They brought a perspective we would never have brought ourselves,” Noga says. “I’m sure we’re going to work together in the future.”

In 2017, interviewed by the Guardian for the release of 2017’s *Off The Radar*, Noga said that she writes to “process the issues that bother me about the world”. ***THE VANDALIST*** maintains that tradition, albeit in equal parts irreverently and intensely, but it also provides recognition of how music has subsequently helped her. “The audience have saved me many times,” she admits. “I have many experiences of going to a show and not even knowing how the fuck I’m going to get through it because it felt like the last thing I wanted to do. But being there in front of so many people, having them sing along when I was too confused even to know the words, having them look at me in a way that is so compassionate...” She tails off. Enough said. This time there’s nothing to laugh about.

Edit Piaf once famously remarked that “People say that I could sing the phone book and make it sound good,” though there’s no proof she ever tried. Noga Erez, on the other hand? As ***THE VANDALIST*** concludes, and prompted by ROUSSO, she takes up a not dissimilar challenge. It’s not a phone directory, of course – though it’s a long list nevertheless – but on ‘Oh, Thank You’, to a cheeky piano riff and the occasional stab of stomach-punching bass, she delivers an appreciative, quickfire rollcall encompassing all those who helped inspire the record’s making in a revealing, compelling and fluid exhibition of her natural curiosity, sassy nature and playful imagination. Then, with an inevitably mischievous giggle, she teases a bold, valedictory, boast: *“Because of you and your work, we just made the best fucking album in the world!”*

So, does she *really* think that’s true of ***THE VANDALIST?***

“Yes!” she insists before, as always happens around her, the truth quickly emerges and Noga starts laughing again. “No, of course it’s not! *In Rainbows* is probably better.”

That’s at least until we hear her and ROUSSO put the phone book to music...