

'We're not cool, we're about fun'

The lead singer of Kovak likes well crafted pop and holidaying in the nude. She bares — her soul — to Robert Crampton

Annelies van de Velde is on the verge of making it big. Her band, Kovak, whose catchy brand of electro-pop has drawn comparisons with the Scissor Sisters, are finishing their first album in Spain. Their first single *Killer Boots* was a rare instance of a track by an unsigned, essentially self-funded band being playlisted on Radio 2. With their echoes of vintage Blondie disco, Van de Velde's line-up not only looks similar to Debbie Harry's outfit, they sound like them too.

That ought to be a winning combination and, in the band's home town of Brighton, where we meet and where Kovak have built a considerable live reputation, it already is. "First the gays, then the girls, then the industry," laughs Van de Velde, quoting Samantha from *Sex in the City*. "It worked for Kylie." On Brighton's lesbian scene, Van de Velde is known as Hottie Band Girl.

And yet (again, like Harry, who was in her mid-thirties when Blondie were at their peak), Van de Velde is taking her time about becoming a star. She won't reveal her age — "I might not be a lady, but you don't ask that" — but given other dates and events she mentions she must be 30 or thereabouts. Not lacking in talent or looks or effort (so driven was she as a child that a teacher had to tell her to chill out, aged 6) her progress has been hampered instead by a couple of false starts, bad luck and bad timing, and perhaps also by a commendably wide array of other interests, snowboarding and naturism among them. Although not, presumably, at the same time.

Also, Van de Velde explains, as we sit outside a pub in The Lanes, she is Belgian. Not that being Belgian is necessarily any impediment to gaining fame and fortune (Eddie Merckx, Audrey Hepburn, er, Hercule Poirot), but it probably delays the process. Her family lived in Keerbergen, a small town an hour from Brussels. She denies

that Belgians are as uptight and conservative as stereotypes suggest — "If you dig down, we're pretty cool" — but admits that, as a teenager "every time I met up with English people I just had loads of fun". She moved to Brighton, to study for a degree in product design, at the age of 19.

Prior to that, Van de Velde had spent several years first in the US and then in Milton Keynes, where her father worked for IBM. (Hence her flawless, accentless English, although her first language is Flemish.) Her dad doubled up as a DJ, which sparked his daughter's interest in music. "I just soaked up loads of stuff from the Fifties and Sixties. I was always standing in the lounge singing songs. I've always had massive support from my parents." Contemporary influences — "I'm a child of the Nineties" — included Nirvana, Skunk Anansi, Alanis Morissette and Republica.

And Madonna. "I did a Madonna tribute act for a while, it was cheesy but it was good money. That's what got me into hot pants and gyrating my crotch around on stage. I would never naturally be writhing around on the floor on stage. I respect Madonna and I do find her quite funny, the way she overdoes it all the time but with conviction."

Thus, Kovak are unashamedly pop rock, keen to put on an extravagant, energetic old-fashioned show. "Visually, we make an effort. We don't just turn up in jeans and a T-shirt. The best gig I ever went to was Muse at Glastonbury in 2004. I was blown away. And my favourite Glastonbury was the one with all the dad rock, Neil Young and Status Quo, I love all that."

So, no hang-ups about being seen as uncool, then? "No, we're not cool, we're about having fun, making fun, danceable music, having a laugh." No message then? "No. We write what makes us feel happy, we're not pretentious people and that comes across in our music." Her tastes have always been very mainstream. "Oasis, U2, I saw the Cult the other day. I love a well-crafted, melodic song, it doesn't have to be mega-highbrow."

Mainstream, and yet, as with Scissor Sisters, as with Blondie, also knowing, a little ironic, free of the bluster and false emoting that has become the *X Factor* standard. "People are getting tired of that," Van de Velde says. "It's become a bit homogenous, all the same producers. We're a proper band."

Before joining Kovak Van de Velde was in a band called Silvermaker with her boyfriend, now husband, Ben Simon, an Englishman originally from Walton-on-Thames. "We were on the verge of a breakthrough for a while, but then indie happened and we missed the

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boat. Smelly guys were in and I was this shiny pop girl. It didn't fit."

At the same time, she had to have an operation to remove a cyst on her vocal cords. "It was the same operation Adele had recently but whereas she sprang back I lost confidence in my voice, even though the operation went well."

Although a visit to Mary Hammond, the celebrated voice coach at the Royal College of Music, got Van de Velde back on stage, Silvermaker fizzled out. "It wasn't the easiest thing for Ben [when she joined another band], but he's been really supportive and he's involved again now doing our videos."

The couple met while windsurfing in Greece. He was her instructor. They also share a passion for snowboarding and kitesurfing. "I love all that extreme stuff," she says. Ben draws the line, however, at sharing his wife's

enthusiasm for naturism. "He doesn't mind me doing it but it's just not for him. He came on one holiday with me but kept his clothes on."

Brighton has a naturist beach but she prefers the full-on (or rather, full-off) experience of a whole dedicated resort. "It's not exhibitionism and nobody has ever been pervy. We're all born naturists, then we start to cover up, but why?" In these resorts, I ask, do they really play volleyball? "Yeah, absolutely," she laughs.

Her ambition, she says, is to get her husband and the band to come on a naturist holiday. "That, and the main stage at Glastonbury. Then I'll have reached my goals in life." I don't know if the nudity goal will work out. I'd be surprised if the musical one didn't. **Kovak's new single *Living the Dream* is available on iTunes**

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