

# review the music

this week's essential reading

'Electronic warfare: the political legacy of Detroit techno' by Andy Beta, [www.pitchfork.com](http://www.pitchfork.com)

The luminous, jazz-inflected Next Step 4wrd on the B-side opens with a sampled sales pitch: There is a renaissance, a rebirth in the city. There's a newness in Detroit'

## Healing process

The Icelandic singer and artist Björk has used the everyday heartache of a failed relationship as the inspiration for her new album, writes Andy Battaglia



Björk is strange, supernatural, not of this Earth. That is what convention suggests. Whatever mysterious form of being she is, it is something other than human.

But then, as her voice makes so plainly, searingly clear, she is as human as human can be – maybe even more. In one pained yelp or ecstatic vocal cackle, she can translate the whole of being human into a wordless language with a syntax and grammar all its own. She can sing the body electric, as the line from the old poem goes, and she can sing electricity itself, channeling elements of the ether unaffiliated with mortal forces. In any case, even agnostics and detractors must concede: she can really, really sing.

There's no mistaking the subject matter of the singing on Björk's new album *Vulnicura*, which is both a blessing and a curse. "A complete heartbreak album" is how Björk herself describes it, in a web post that comes clean about the aching simplicity of the source material and marvels at "how biological this process is: the wound and the healing of the wound". The songs follow the arc of deso-

**Part of me just wants to hide it, and part of me is going: 'No – this could be a document of the heartbreak of the species'**

Björk

lation and despair that followed her split with the artist Matthew Barney, who had been her partner for 13 years. They conceived a child together, a daughter named Isadora. They collaborated on art projects, including a film that featured a 25-tonne petroleum-jelly sculpture and lots of live whales. As a couple, they embodied an ever-intriguing mix of mindful wildness and elusive cool. Then they broke up.

Break-up albums abound. No subject governs the practice of writing songs as much as love and its inverse: love lost. But Björk's break-up album seizes at a distance from the canon on the strength – and, to a certain extent, the weakness – of its specificity. It couldn't be more pointed and direct. There couldn't be less of a question as to what emotional state is on display. Indeed, there is very little artifice or, depending on one's definition, even art to obscure the intensity of the subject of nine songs that write and brood with focus and determination.

To say there is no art to it is not a slight. Just the opposite: it is to acknowledge how unmediated the songs are, how unshuffled by adornment and artistic choices that often just get in the way. Of course, minimising artistic choices is itself an artistic choice – and more mindful of the ends than the less-important means.

Björk has spoken openly about dealing with doubt during the writing of the album. "When I started writing, I fought against it," she told the music website *Pitchfork*. "I thought it was way too boring and predictable." She called the lyrics "so teenage, so simple" and, in a different interview with *The New York Times*, she said: "Part of me just wants to hide it, and part of me is going: 'No – this could be a document of the heartbreak of the species.'"

The source of her anxiety is not unfounded. In *Vulnicura*'s first song, *Stonemilker*, she invokes the immensity and immediacy of heartbreak – the feeling that the impact of a split will never diminish, no matter how fleeting we know such feelings to typically be. "Moments of clarity are so rare / I better document this," she sings. Who has not written something like that in a diary at some point? It's a pure, visceral, uncomplicated feeling – an intense need to pin feelings down – and Björk does it justice by making it plain.



**Vulnicura**  
Björk  
(One Little Indian)  
Dh66

There is not so much poetry in lyrics as plain-spoken as those, but there is poetry in the voice and the sound of a swell of strings, which wallow and rise to a momentous dramatic pitch. The strings reportedly comprise 30 different parts that are going to be separated and played through a 30-channel sound system at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which is presenting a retrospective of Björk's career starting in March. *Vulnicura* was supposed to come out at the same time but got a rush release after it was leaked online. It was a good fate, too: unlike Björk's last album *Biophilia*, which was a distractingly elaborate affair involving online components and cryptic phone apps, *Vulnicura* has a chance to exist on its own on the simplest of terms: as an album, no more, no less.

The music tends towards plainness too. For all the size and scale of things like a 30-part string arrangement, the effects of the sounds on *Vulnicura* are more typically constrained and close-in. *Lionsong* follows the devastation of *Stonemilker* with a more twitchy and antic electronic sound made in collaboration between Björk and Arca, a young Venezuela-born producer now based in London. Arca's role in the album has garnered lots of attention (he worked as well on Kanye West's *Yeezus* and made a splashy full-length solo debut last year with an album titled *Xen*) but not of an entirely desired kind.

Wondering about so much emphasis on her interesting choices of collaborators over the years, Björk, in that same *Pitchfork* interview, said: "With the last album [Kanye West] did, he got all the best beat-makers on the planet at the time to make beats for him. A lot of the time, he wasn't even there. Yet no one would ques-

tion his authorship for a second."

Björk, for her part, is also very much the auteur, and one of *Vulnicura*'s most resounding qualities is the strength of her arrangements for strings. With tinges of similarities to past Björk albums like 1997's *Homogenic* and 2001's *Vespertine*, the new one finds space of its own with an air of ethereality. The strings swoop between fury and sadness in ways that evoke the 20th-century Polish composer Henryk Gorecki and then, in tracks like *Family*, the strange, spectral in-between sounds of the mystical curio Giacinto Scelsi.

It's distinguished company, to be sure, but the guiding force of *Vulnicura*, in the end, is of course Björk's voice. She sounds comparatively subdued most of the time, not in the realm of some her most notorious theatrical yowls, but she maintains a purposeful emotional register. In *Black Lake*, a 10-minute dirge, she stays quiet even as she rises in anger and sings: "I am bored of your apocalyptic obsessions" – a line held out for much comment for how specifically it signals Barney, famous on his own, on the other side.

Such specificity helps and, as *Vulnicura* continues on, a general lack of it otherwise raises certain questions. When, later in *Black Lake*, Björk sings "family was always our sacred mutual mission, which you abandoned", it would be illuminating to learn more than just that. Likewise, one can't help but wonder if the reality of the situation is so faithful to just the one-sided sense of betrayal that comes across.

The pain of breaking up, however, is not much interested in reason or rationality. So searing, aching simplicity is what we get, sustained from the beginning to the end. It will be interesting to see how *Vulnicura* ages as an album so invested in what truly is a one-track frame of mind. It's full of songs about pain and aloneness, and nothing else. Time will tell as regards the staying power of all that. As a document of what a broken heart needs to tell itself – to force itself to start talking and maybe, if all goes well, to start to open up once again – its claim to power is irrefutable.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Frieze*, *The Paris Review* and more.

### the playlist

Breaking up is hard to do – but it can mean great music



**Here, My Dear**  
Marvin Gaye  
(Tamla, 1978)

This 1978 classic has a special place in the canon of divorce albums, with the ever-soulful Gaye spilling a torrent of details and pain over his estrangement from his first wife, Anna Gordy Gaye (sister of Motown boss Berry Gordy).



**The Grand Tour**  
George Jones  
(Epic, 1974)

George Jones, perhaps the greatest country singer of all time, gives a guided tour of a divided house on the title track here. "This old house will never be the same," he sings, "without the love we once knew."



**D-I-V-O-R-C-E**  
Tammy Wynette  
(Epic, 1968)

Before she and George Jones split, Wynette had gone through another divorce – and made this album about it. On the title track she's spelling out the word to hide it from a child who doesn't know his parents are splitting up.



**Frank Sinatra Sings for Only the Lonely**  
Frank Sinatra  
(Capitol, 1958)

The peerless Sinatra had split with Ava Gardner, his wife of six years, before he made this 1958 classic, one of the most despairing and solitary albums ever. There's a lot of pain in it – and sublime beauty too.



Top, Björk performing at the Sydney Opera House in 2008. Above, Björk, *The Face* (1993) will be exhibited at the MoMA show about the artist. AP Photo/John Pryke; Courtesy Glen Luchford / MoMA Press