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JOHN ANGERSON FOR THE TIMES

## Swiss, but not cheesy

**Switzerland is hardly famed for sparkling pop; Lunik could change that, says Robert Crampton**

**W**e're standing in a vast disused railway station listening to Lunik soundcheck for their gig, band pumping out another top-quality melody, singer and songwriter Jaël Krebs belting out the lyrics, glorious voice, great stage presence. "Look at her," says the veteran American producer Bob Rose, one-time confidante of George Harrison, "she's gotta be a star. It should be a walk in the park."

And Rose is right. He likens Lunik to early Fleetwood Mac and Blondie, and neither comparison is absurd. There's just one tiny problem. The railway station is in Zurich. Krebs is Swiss. So are the rest of the band. In the pop world, if you're not British or Irish or North American, you can be Scandinavian, you can be German (at a push) or Antipodean (maybe), you can be African. But you can't be Swiss. Even a Swiss singing in English.

When Lunik received some press a while ago, the coverage — in the finest traditions of British journalism — centred on a picture of Krebs and the caption, "Fancy a Swiss roll? It's enough to drive you cuckoo!" Krebs, 30, gets the joke, but is also more than a little exasperated. "People think of Switzerland as some country where they do chocolate and cheese and maybe watches." And knives, I say. "No, let's not forget knives." Several radio stations, she says, in England and elsewhere, dismissed her songs on the basis of her nationality. "They said 'Swiss? Nah.'"

She can half-understand the reaction. "We don't really have a network here. We don't really have a music scene, compared with, say, Scandinavia, where all the bands are connected. After ten years being a musician in Switzerland, if you need a manager here you go, 'You know what, I know more than you do', because there's nobody here." (This isn't entirely fair on Yello and the Young Gods, long-established and well-respected bands, albeit in the electronic rather than pure pop genre.)

Krebs lives in Berne, where she was born. It's the capital, but by her own admission, it's also a "cosy" town of a mere 100,000 souls, even smaller, tidier, prettier and more provincial than Zurich or Geneva. Has nobody, I say as diplomatically as possible, ever suggested a move? To Berlin? To London? "I don't feel that this would be the right decision. I can write my songs anywhere in the world. I just want to do my music."

"I had the idea [of moving]," she says, "but I never really saw the point. Should I stand on the street saying, 'Hey I'm a great singer from Switzerland!' I would still be Swiss if I lived in London. I could lie about it but I don't know if that's the

right way. I feel if the music's good enough, keep working."

So not just Swiss, but uncompromisingly Swiss. (On the sleeve photo for the new album, *Small Lights in the Dark*, she wears traditional Alpine dress and a defiant expression.) Indeed, a band such as Lunik raises an interesting question. Undoubtedly, their music is, as she puts it, "good enough". Good enough, certainly, for Universal Records to invest \$3 million (a huge sum in the current climate) on plans to break the band in the US. But will their nationality, and the refusal by Jaël Krebs to leave her sleepy hometown, hold them back from international stardom? We shall see. They are already very big in Italy, and Germany, as well as at home.

They formed 11 years ago, originally as a trip-hop outfit, and the new album is their sixth. It has taken Lunik this long to graduate to their current pop sound. Krebs cites her influences as Nora Jones, Johnny Cash, Texas singer Sharleen Spiteri, the Cardigans singer Nina Persson and Danish star Tina Dico. Plus Coldplay. "I'm a big fan. I like to go fanning... can you say that?"

It has also taken Krebs a while to feel comfortable in the pop persona, both on stage and off. Even now, as a vegan, keen hiker and non-drinker, she makes an unlikely star. The daughter of an artist mother and dance-instructor father (both her parents were also teachers, and her father is now a psychotherapist), she exhibited youthful talent but lacked the confidence, despite parental encouragement, to be a full-time performer. Having trained as a primary school teacher, she only pursued a career as a full-time musician after the band's second album did well.

"I didn't really like to be out there on stage at the beginning. I was shy, hiding behind the mike, always wearing black." Not a natural show-off then? "I never thought I was attractive. I was always fighting with my figure. All of a sudden people were like 'We're going to do a photo shoot, move, do this.' I'm still not a person who is totally in love with her looks."

This attitude is reflected in her occasionally self-lacerating lyrics, a refreshing change from the "I'm so sexy" boasting of much current pop. "I was always interested in psychoanalysis. I visited a therapist. I'm so happy now, everything got better. I'm interested in social contacts, people hurting each other or doing good to each other."

Has she had a lot of bad relationships? Because her songs indicate she might have done. "There were years in my twenties when I had a good talent for always going for the wrong man. It's a common thing with girls, falling in love with the bad guy, the absent guy. In the last couple of years things changed, I thought, 'What is important in a relationship? What do I need?' It's other qualities, it doesn't necessarily have to be somebody I can idolise."

If the rest of the world can overcome its prejudices, it's Jaël Krebs who might have to get used to being idolised.

*Small Lights in the Dark* is released by F.O.D. on Monday



### Cool in the cantons

#### Yello

The quirky electronic ditties of mustachioed singer Dieter Meier and his production partner Boris Blank surfaced in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (Oh Yeah) and *Nuns on the Run* (The Race, also a staple of TV sporting montages).

#### The Young Gods

The post-industrial band from Geneva found critical acclaim in the early Nineties and were cited as an influence by David Bowie (see below), the Edge and Mike Patton of Faith No More.

#### Smoke on the Water

Deep Purple's Seventies standard was inspired by a fire at Montreux casino during a Frank Zappa gig, which the band saw from across Lake Geneva.

#### Great festivals

Montreux hosts one of the world's biggest jazz festivals, while this year's Paleo gathering features Klaxons and Iggy Pop.

#### David Bowie lived there...

From 1976-98, first in a chalet in Blonay and then a Lausanne chateau built by a Russian prince... and Phil Collins still does



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PHOTOGRAPH: ANNA NETREBKO AS MANON AND VITTORIO GRIGOLO AS CHEVALIER DES GRIEUX (BY BILL COOPER)

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