

A rising talent in British pop, with a new album out, a busy touring schedule, and an attitude. You'll be hearing a lot more from Pixx

↓ Words Alan Harper

Give me a smile

With her first album just out, a successful tour of Europe behind her and a clutch of festival bookings still to come, 22-year-old singer and songwriter Pixx is having a pretty good year. Signed to London record label 4AD and a fixture of the music scene in Brighton and the capital, the artist otherwise known as Hannah Rodgers has one quality in common with all great performers: when she is on stage you can't take your eyes off her.

Her album, *The Age of Anxiety*, is making its mark. *The Guardian* gave it five stars and pronounced it "a riveting and refreshing debut which balances weirdness with sweet and soothing electropop joy." The NME admired its "intriguing, uncharted sounds". The title caused some puzzlement among younger pop bloggers searching for parallels with the Auden poem, but they might just as well compare it to Bernstein's eponymous symphony.





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For it is appropriate to take the title at face value. If anxiety seems a rational response to much of modern life, for an artist making her way in the world it cannot be left unacknowledged. Rodgers has spoken of the pressures of social media on young people – "this weird expectation to be flawless and really cool" – and in the surreal dreamscape of her song 'Waterslides' she wonders, "Is it me who made this place?" which is as good an expression of alienation as you're likely to find in seven words. 'Your Delight' might be packaged as a blissful love song but is haunted by the line "You only love me when you're dreaming", and ends on a suspended note of longing.

Deeper themes run through the work. There is alienation, but there is also anger. "While I was writing the album I was going through a lot of changes," she told *Watermark*. "Sometimes I felt angry at the world and other times at myself. I became more aware of how much women have to suffer in silence just to avoid rupturing the peace and quiet we seem to be expected to suffocate under."

She talks of writing "with fire in my veins", channelling her anger and using the songs to regain a sense of self after the struggles of adolescence. "I realised I didn't have to look down at my feet if a man twice my age wolf-whistled in my direction – I could shout back and to let him know how unacceptable that is. It might seem petty and small, but it helped me feel stronger. I wanted those who listened and who have also struggled with similar things to relate to the album and to know that they are not alone."

Rodgers' songs mostly conform to conventional pop structures in having verses, choruses and 'middle eights', although they can seem complex. With their electronic soundscapes and unusual time signatures it might take them a little while to reveal themselves. Songs are not poems set to music, and ultimately their success can only be measured by how they sound. Rodgers has an astonishing gift for pop melody – or as one contemporary puts it, "She's got an amazing ear for a massive hook" – but for her it's words that matter most, not having been much of a pop fan when she was growing up and instead absorbing a more eclectic musical canon, even as she learned to be a performer.

"I think singing came naturally to me at a young age, probably from harmonising over my Dad's voice as he sang his own tunes or covers of old folk songs," she says. "Eventually my family and friends would ask me if I'd sing to them, and I started to get used to having an audience as I sang, in actually one of the loveliest ways I can imagine."





Hannah Rodgers pictured backstage during her recent European tour. Left: cover artwork from the Pixx album, *The Age of Anxiety*.

So, surprisingly, she is a Bob Dylan fan. “I’m enjoying ‘Positively 4th Street’ at the moment – it’s so good I can’t help grinning when I hear it,” she says. “I like to listen to lyrics. I spend a lot of time with my guitar, but I’d say lyrical inspiration comes first – I will have a phrase stuck in my head that I know I want to sing, and the guitar allows me to find the flow.”

Students of Dylan will know how, in the absence of any obvious clues, meaning often needs to be supplied by the listener. Rodgers has no problem with ambiguity: “People will take songs and lyrics and mould them to fit into whatever suits their mood or their situation. That’s what I believe to be the beauty of what music does to people. As long as it’s giving the listener something then that’s enough for me.”

The album took a year to write – the business of making a final selection of songs was “brutal”, according to Rodgers – and the writing continued during the recording sessions. “It’s about taking a song or an idea into the studio and dismantling it and reworking it with all the producer’s instruments and toys,” she says. “I worked with a fair few different people – knowing which producers suited the direction I was pushing the song in was important too. I made sure the overall sound wasn’t too dark, wanting it to fill people with hope and not dread.”

‘Mood Ring Eyes’, the final song, has the air of a lament addressed to a lover at the end of an affair. But it also seems to be about something else, as it drifts from the present back in time to a childhood troubled by nightmares, until Rodgers’ truly extraordinary voice, at once breathy and as clear as a bell, arrives at the final lines: “No need to cry – give me a smile”.

Who is saying that? Is it the lover? Or a parent comforting a tearful child? It’s whoever you want it to be – the song makes no demands. As Rodgers says, “We can only understand other people’s work as much as we allow ourselves to.”



LIAM COSFORD

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