

Features

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Best of What's Next: La Roux



Since La Roux released its self-titled debut last summer, the British electropop duo of producer Ben Langmaid and lead singer Eleanor Jackson has managed a coup of Europe's current pop landscape, storming the charts with 80s-inspired, take-no-crap club thumpers like "Quicksand" and "In for the Kill." Langmaid refuses to do press or perform live, so Jackson has weathered the ensuing media crossfire alone. In the U.K., her urgent, piercing voice, boyish wave of reddish hair and purposefully androgynous outfits have propelled her to such fame at which debate has bubbled up over her sexuality (she's straight, for the record) and whether or not her pop

sensibilities somehow demean electronic music. Stateside, though, La Roux's faced a steeper climb to mass appeal—critics have lauded the music, but audiences have been slower to come around. With a brief North American tour kicking off in Boston on Jan. 31, maybe that's soon to change. Paste recently caught up with Jackson via email to talk about her image, childhood bullies and a recent run-in with fake snow.

Paste: You're coming back to the U.S. soon for a few dates. What sort of differences have you noticed between your U.S. and European audiences?

Eleanor Jackson: No difference really, aside from the three-year-old fashion blogger that came to the L.A. show and got on stage and danced to "Bulletproof"—that's an L.A. thing, though, I guess.

Paste: Do you not approach your shows differently here than back home?

Jackson: I approach all gigs the same. I love performing and the bigger the show the more I like it. I need a big stage.

Paste: In Europe, your music is considered to be part of the current broader pop landscape, but here it's considered to be more of a niche style, being labeled everything from dance to electronic to electropop. How would you label your music if given the choice?

Jackson: Labels are for you guys to make up, not me.

Paste: Is there anything you hate being called?

Jackson: I hate being lumped in with other female musicians just because of my gender.

Paste: Why do you think it's been more difficult for the U.S. to catch on to your style of music—and, in general, European pop music—on a mass level?

Jackson: We haven't really been played on the radio yet, but hopefully that will change in the new year. The U.S. takes so much longer to "crack" than almost anywhere else. In the U.K. the media is obsessed with the hot new thing, which can make for a high turnover—the old "build 'em up and knock 'em down" mentality.

Paste: Sometimes I think we may be uncomfortable with any sort of style or image that is different from the blatantly-sexualized pop stars we typically have. Do you think that has something to do with the U.S. market's reluctance?

Jackson: If you're different, it may take a little longer to break through, but hopefully it sets you up for some longevity. It's cool to be unique. There are so many identikit artists.

Paste: At what point did you become aware of how important image is in pop music?

Jackson: Image goes hand-in-hand with the music for me. My favorite artists are people like Prince, Annie Lennox, Michael Jackson and David Bowie—all with a strong sense of style, a truly unique image and one that would develop album by album. [They're] true pop stars. You don't really get the sense that they had a team of stylists around them. Even if there was the possibility that they did, it seems both organic and truly fantastic.

Paste: You play around with an androgynous, mysterious sexuality that has been lacking in pop music, really, for the past couple of decades. How did that evolve?

Jackson: I've always been a little androgynous. I was a tomboy at school. I always had people slag me for being a strange little boy-looking-girl. And it has just developed as I've gotten older. There are many aspects of being a woman that I love and some aspects that men can get away with that I like to pick up on.

Paste: Now that you have a platform, what would you say to those bullies?

Jackson: I used to occasionally see some of the very people that had bullied me at some of our shows, and it gave me great satisfaction that I've made something of my life while they work as butchers or in tanning salons, wasting their lives away.

Paste: Well, now it seems that you've found a "brother in arms" in Ben Langmaid.

Jackson: Totally.

Paste: How did you two meet?

Jackson: A mutual friend put us in touch after he heard me playing the guitar at 4 a.m. at a New Year's Eve party.

Paste: Why does he shun the spotlight so?

Jackson: He loves the studio. I am so jealous that he gets to stay at home while I work my ass off promoting the record.

Paste: Since it's solely up to you to sort of present the collaboration to the public, do you feel an added pressure where you're not only trying to do justice to yourself, but to someone else as well?

Jackson: No.

Paste: No pressure at all?

Jackson: Most of the time it's fine but sometimes the pressure of performing, traveling and doing promo gets to be way too much. I recently had to cancel some shows as I'd just pushed myself too hard. I'm only now getting to know my limits, and in the future there are certain precautions we will have to take.

Paste: Are you comfortable being a pop star?

Jackson: When we started out I thought the most we would be was an underground success—cool and credible—but then things kind of took on a life of their own and from nowhere I became “La Roux the pop star.” We recently did the Christmas edition of Top of the Pops in the U.K. and they had fake snow half way through. It was such a pop moment. It’s hard to be a success without crossing over, so to some extent you have to dance with the devil. Today I am comfortable but tomorrow I may not be.