

The man who knew the answer!

Music | Bittles' Magazine: The music column from the end of the world. An Interview With Jori Hulkkonen

Producer **Jori Hulkkonen** has had the kind of career most of us can only dream about. Over the last two decades he has released a number of records on **Laurent Garnier's** seminal *F. Communication* imprint, had a hit single with **Tiga** (*Sunglasses At Night*), DJed around the world, and created some of the finest electronic music known to man. Whether composing glacial ambiance, banging techno, sublime house, electroclash, synth-pop or any number of musical styles his music always contains a fabulous sense of depth and groove. By **JOHN BITTLES**



September the 28th heralds the release of his fantastic new album, *Oh But I Am*. The record is out on Canadian label *My Favorite Robot* and features a winning combination of smoky house grooves, late night synth-pop sleaze and heart-wrenching electronica. Opener *Last Cut Is The Deepest* is a lush piece of deep house mastery, which paves the way for an album which sees the veteran artist in majestic form. The forlorn vocals on tracks like *Italian Love Affair*, *Ready Player One* and *Four Step Program* could bewitch even the stoniest of hearts, while the more dance floor ready cuts such as *Capetown People* and *Songs Of The Eastern World* lend the entire record a deep, electronic sheen. Make no mistake, this is a rich and varied album which will delight pop fans just as much as those who worship at the altar of the 4/4 beat.

Since I have been playing *Oh But I Am* repeatedly over the last few weeks, I was delighted when the opportunity arose to have a chat with **Jori Hulkkonen** about the album. In the following interview we discuss the new album, synth-pop, his **Nuclear Winter Garden** project, the **Pet Shop Boys**, making a film with **Jimi Tenor**, and loads more.

To start off, can you tell us a bit about who you are and what you do?

I'm the man who knew the answer. Age 42, occupation DJ/producer/musician/journalist. I did my first record back in '93, and ever since then been putting out records pretty constantly, with some 20 albums, and 150 singles out to this date. DJing all over the globe since signing to *F Communications* back in '96.

Your new album *Oh But I Am* is released on the 28th September. What can fans and newcomers expect?

As always, more of the same, spiced with something totally new and different. It's a mixed bag in terms of styles, ranging from lounge to deep house and synthpop, with quite a bit of vocals thrown in.

Oh But I Am is an interesting title for an album. What inspired the name?

WIFI at my studio is pretty bad sometimes, and my computer often tells me »you're not connected to the internet«, and I noticed I kept replying in my head »Oh but I am«. I like the sound of it. There's a certain (false) confidence in there. It also embeds certain cynic commentary to the very self-centered age we live now. Everything is all »me me me« which I find very boring and uninteresting, but as an artist I'm obliged to play the game at least on some level. So the name actually refers more to my artist persona, rather than me. It all gets a bit confusing at times.

Over the last few years you have brought out music under various aliases including **Sin Cos Tan**, **Third Culture** and **Nuclear Winter Garden**. What made you decide to release *Oh But I Am* under your own name?

I think in this day and age the pseudonym-game really doesn't serve a purpose that much anymore. Previously people would buy the physical record and then on the sleeve you'd find who's behind it all, and it kinda made sense. Nowadays you just see the filename, and that's pretty much your only chance to claim credit on your work, so I'm trying to stick with my real name more now than before on my solo stuff. **Sin Cos Tan** obviously is my band of which I'm only 50%.

The track *Last Cut Is The Deepest* is an exciting and energetic album opener. Was this always going to be the record's first track?

Actually no. This particular album is more like collection of tracks rather than written as an album. When I eventually picked the tracks I thought would make an album that made sense, then it was a question of finding the right running order and then work on the intros and outros to create the right flow. I know if I made the album today I might make different choices in terms of running order or even tracks themselves. But I guess that's the beauty of albums, they capture a certain point in time.

This is followed by the gorgeously melancholic *Waiting Is All We Have*. Can you tell us a bit about how this song came about?

Occasionally I have an idea of the mood, rather than actual song, lyric, chords or anything concrete. The trick is then to try to find how to translate that mood or vibe to an actual song.

One of the main ideas of writing this album was not to write lyrics. I had some phrases written down, but no real lyrics. I basically just hit record, and improvised all the vocals, and then worked with what I had done and very rarely went back and changed anything. It was a pretty interesting way of working, and it kinda ties a lot of the songs together in that sense. It's more about the vibe, rather than story.

The albums I did with my other band **Proccessory** were very heavy lyric wise, dealing with everything from technological singularity, death, economics, ecology, generation gap etc. With this record I just wanted to use the vocals in the very classic disco/house -sense, where there's a phrase or a word that just connects to the very basic vibe what this music is all about: love and dancing.

Songs like *Waiting Is All We Have*, *Italian Love Affair* and *Ready Player One* make me reminisce about the glory days of synth-pop. Was the music from the early 80s an influence for you while making these tracks?

Obviously being my generation I grew up with synthpop. Both *Italian Love Affair* and *Ready Player One* I started off as demos to my band **Sin Cos Tan** who are full-on synthpop, but they never were developed past the demostage. But for this album I wanted to have a bit of that vibe as well, and I tried musically to make

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them different from what they might've been were they **SCT**-songs, and obviously keeping my own vocals in there makes a big difference.

For anyone too young to know what synth-pop was, what albums would you recommend they track down?

Just listen to the first 4 **Pet Shop Boys** albums; *Please, Actually*, *Introspective* and *Behaviour*. You can also get the »further listening« versions of them online, which feature all the b-sides as well. This really is all you need.

Was *Ready Player One* inspired by the book by **Ernest Cline**?

Actually no, although I knew it existed I didn't make the connection to the title before somebody pointed it out. Workings of subconscious, surely.



Quick To Judge, *Slow To Execute* and *Capetown People* are two of my favourite tracks on the album as they seem to make up the electronic heart of the entire LP. How important are the demands of the dance floor for you when creating music?

I've been always balancing between the dancefloor and home-listening, both in my own preferences but also as an artist. I think that's why I love the album format as you can have both.

Are you planning to tour the album at all? I would love to hear some of these track live!

I've given this a bit of thought, but the kind of production I'd like to do for this is a bit out (of) my reach for now, so unfortunately no. I don't want to do a basic laptop based live (show) with some hardware thrown in for looks. I have some rather ambitious ideas, and hopefully I'll have the resources and time to put a proper show together at some point.

The album is coming out on My Favorite Robot Records who also released your **Third Culture** and **Nuclear Winter Garden** albums. How did you first hook up with them?

I think I just got some promos from them when they started and really liked the style of the label. Then I was DJing in Toronto and we met up and sometimes when you meet people you just click with them. I think Scandinavians and Canadians have somehow similar mentality. So from the very first meeting onwards we kinda agreed we should work together. I think my **Third Culture** album was the labels very first artist album, something I'm very happy about.

I am a big fan of your **Nuclear Winter Garden** album which came out earlier this year. What are the main themes and ideas behind this LP?

For the past 11 years I've been running this night called *Ydintalvipuutarha (Nuclear Winter Garden)* in Turku Finland, every Thursday all June, July and August. It's a small intimate garden, outdoors, and we have a great soundsystem and the philosophy is to play everything I normally couldn't play in a club; classical, folk, pop,

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jazz, experimental, really just everything. The crazy thing is that it took me 11 years to come up with an idea to make a record for that mood as well.

I first discovered your music in 1996 with the wonderful *Selkäsaari Tracks* album which was released on **Laurent Garnier's** F. Communication label. In what ways do you think your music has changed since then? Well obviously I'm 20 years older now; my views on music, people, and world in general are quite different now, and that comes thru hopefully in the music.

When I started out, I knew nothing about making music, playing music, electronics... so it's all been a big learning process. Obviously the technology has changed a lot from those days. I'd like to think I'm just a lot better at everything nowadays; both in terms of providing the musical substance, and also in the technical execution. But I'll leave it to others to be the judge of that.

Over the years you have released a wide variety of music touching on many different styles and genres. Do you think there is such a thing as the quintessential **Jori Hulkkonen** sound?

There are certain things that I think you can find in a lot of my records, especially the ones done under my real name, that kind of tie things together. It's hard to escape the things you like; certain sounds, moods, chords... But I consciously try to avoid repeating myself. My worst fear is to notice someday I've been making the same record all over again. So it's a balance you need to find in terms of having your own sound, and re-inventing yourself and moving forward.

You have been releasing music since the mid-90s. What is the secret to staying relevant over such a long period of time?

You need to know your history, respect it and use it, but never get stuck in it. You have to be more interested in the records that are coming out next month, than in the records that came out 20 years ago. You need to have the drive and the curiosity.

You have also made a name for yourself with some scintillating DJ sets. What are the key components to working a dance floor?

Experience, balls, skills and naturally the right records.

What three tracks are currently working for you in the clubs?

Shit Robot: *Where It's At* (**Johnny Aux** remix)

Acid Bitches: *Thinking About Acid*

Of Norway: *Running Lights II*

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[Are you working on any other projects right now?](#)

Quite a bit actually. Apart from DJing, I'm also touring right now with two different projects. One is the **Tiga** - live show of which I'm part of, and we're also finishing off his third album I'm co-writing and producing, as always.

The other is, I made a film with **Jimi Tenor**, a silent sci-fi film, and we wrote the score for it. The film is being screened only when we play the soundtrack live to it, so we've been playing some art- and film festivals this year with this.

Also my band **Sin Cos Tan** has a new EP coming up in October called *Smile. Tomorrow Will Be Worse*.

[What annoys you about the music scene in 2015?](#)

This could be an endless list, but I've decided to keep focusing on the positive, there's too much things to be done to waste energy in to something I have no control over.

[Do you have any last words for our readers?](#)

Yes, but it's not time for last words yet. Ask me again in another 20 years.

The album is available to buy in all good record shops and download stores from the 28th of September. Do yourself a favour by ensuring that *Oh But I Am* finds a place in your life.

| [JOHN BITTLES](#)

| Photo: NOORA ISOESKELI