

ALMA

Alma's extraordinary soulful voice and sharply observed lyrics hit somewhere between Sia and Amy Winehouse. Perhaps understandable the world wants to know where and the how the 22-year-old Finnish powerhouse (currently working with MNEK, Rudimental, Charlie XCX, Sub Focus, Tove Lo, Justin Tranter and 2 Inch Punch) began her career in music. "I don't think I ever really started," Alma recalls. "It's just when I was little, I understood that singing made me feel things. It made me feel safe, it made me feel good, it made me feel better. It's how I've survived everything, cliché as that sounds."

Alma needn't worry about clichés: with her long, electric-neon hair, baggy punk attire and magnetic attitude she is everything but the stereotypical pop princess. "She looks like a cybergoth reimagining of a young Adele and sounds like Beth Ditto had she been raised on tropical house," The Observer wrote recently - they hit the nail on the head.

Growing up between Helsinki in the winter and Lapland in the summer, Alma sang constantly. "If I was happy, if I was sad, if I was walking alone in the dark and a bit scared," she says. "It made me feel like I had a shelter around me." Singing was her secret security blanket —until one summer when her family were driving north for the season. She told her parents that she wanted to sing for them, and they imagined they were in for a rendition of something by the Spice Girls or Destiny's Child. If they were surprised by her daughter's choice of the Jackson 5, that's nothing compared to what came next.

"They started crying and mum had to stop the car," Alma recalls with a grin. "She was like, 'How haven't I known about this...?' She made me sing it again and again on the trip." Back at home, Alma's parents suggested that she take singing lessons and join the school choir, both of which she tried and dropped. "Studying and being told what to do, even when it came to music has always been very hard for me," she says. "If I do something, it needs to be for myself, it needs to be completely free."

From then music was always a totally independent pursuit for Alma. When she and her twin sister Anna (now her backing vocalist) were 12, the family got their first computer, and she devoted herself to YouTube, discovering The Jackson 5 and Amy Winehouse amongst others who would become her inspiration later in her career. "I wasn't doing very well in school, I was uncomfortable in my own skin, people were unkind but then I found music and lost myself in it." she says.

Her newfound obsession crossed genres: punk, reggae, soul, pop and techno (The Prodigy, if she wanted to let off steam). "No one else around me knew much about music, it was just mine. When my friends were playing video games, or going out I could easily listen to four or five hours of music straight. Not even dancing, just listening." (On the rare occasion she removed her headphones, she binge-watched Skins. "Oh my god, I loved it.")

Having struggled through school Alma didn't believe that she could write songs as well as sing them, but age 15 she picked up a pen and started giving it a go. Six years later she's still writing her own material as well as tracks for other artists she loves.

Writing sustained her through a period of crisis when she was 16 and spent six months sitting home alone while her friends and sister went off to college. Alma didn't get in. "I was so shy and insecure about everything at that time," she says, radiating confidence today. "All my friends had moved on. It was especially hard seeing Anna go. Me and my sister were always together until then. I was like, 'This is shit. I can't be home when I'm 16 years old'—it's not good for my mental health."

She threw herself into writing, singing and performing every day. "I understood early on that to have success in this business you need to work hard and stand out above the rest." She adopts an innocent voice. "If you're like, 'I just want to sing!' then you are gonna fail! You have to have something to say."

It was then she was invited to a rap writing camp on Suomenlinna, a beautiful island fortress just off the coast of Helsinki, ("because hardly anyone else had shown up!") She wasn't sure if she should go, but a friend encouraged her to "just come and say hi." It was her first time in a studio and it felt like home. "When I got there and started sharing my material everyone was like 'Where did that come from,' and suddenly it felt like rap camp turned into Alma camp."

Germany's Sony/ATV Music Publishing heard the demos and immediately signed her. But "Finns are naturally pessimistic," Alma explains, so she didn't let herself get too hopeful. She also wasn't sure if she was going to be a songwriter or a performer. "But in time, I started to understand that people were really digging my voice and my words together." She signed with Universal, but still didn't believe she could break outside of Northern Europe until "my managers and I showed my songs to the Universal UK team and to Republic (now her US label) in New York, and they were like, 'Fuck yeah!'" Alma's debut EP,

2016's *Dye My Hair*, makes it pretty obvious why, with three euphoric, intricate productions (and one acoustic version) bolstered by her phenomenal voice.

She's brazen explaining the story behind "Dye My Hair," laughing about the prospect of fatal devotion. "Would Bruno Mars really catch a grenade for you, y'know?!" she says. "The song is tongue in cheek, I think people get that when they see me. I'd never change the way I look for anyone, it's not my thing." (It's since picked up 30 million plays, hit Number 1 on Finnish iTunes, Top 10 in the singles chart, and been playlisted on BBC Radio 1.) She switches between innocence and steeliness describing Karma, "it's about taking revenge on an ex" which she swears she's never done. "Success is the best revenge," she grins. "And this song."

Alma's unique voice as a writer (honest, educated and satirical) is best exemplified by "Knock," a shuddering embrace of a song that offers sanctuary to a friend in need. That's the one she's proudest of. The track sighs at the ritual of "crawling through the weekends," though Alma admits that despite having no club scene, Helsinki has the best parties in the world. "Kids are just real there," she says. "Anywhere else in the world when you go to an underground club, you can see them trying really hard to be cool. In Finland there are those people, but when you go into a club they can be anyone. People are cool even though they don't look cool, and I love that, it's very inclusive."

Given Alma's love of soul (Amy Winehouse remains her all-time favourite artist), it might seem surprising that she's embraced such a massive pop sound—one that's already seen her rack up 100 million Spotify plays, and praise from Annie Mac, MØ, Elton John and more. Her answer is eminently sensible. "I'm a mixture of everything," she says. "I love house, electro, hip hop, R&B, soul and jazz but pop and dance music is what I know."

Her attitude places her among a generation of young pop geniuses who are swiftly taking over the industry—she's currently working on her debut album with the likes of MNEK, Rudimental, Gorgon City, Sub Focus, 2 Inch Punch and Charli XCX ("she parties haaaaaard") in studios around the world. She recently won two awards (Best Newcomer and Best Export) at the Finnish Grammys, performed at the BBC Radio 1 Future Festival alongside Jorja Smith and Nadia Rose, and will join Ray Blk on the bill for Annie Mac's AMP Collected Night at London's Jazz Cafe in March. Her new single, appropriately titled "Chasing Highs," is coming at the end of March.

"I am an ambitious person," she admits. "But I want to live in the moment, I'm not thinking about tomorrow, about big arena concerts, or flash awards. I want to keep writing, performing and working with people I like and see where it takes me."

Despite her openness to whatever the future may bring, Alma's sense of self is steadfast. She recognises that today's pop stars "are like gods" to their young fans. "They need to understand they're powerful people who really can change things," she says. One day, she'd like to work with kids who felt like she did in her teens. But in order to get there, she knows she must build up trust as an artist. "I just want to be here and be real," she says, her blue eyes wide. "I don't want to bullshit anyone or write empty pop bangers. I want to keep the Finnish mind-set, cos I'm just a Finnish girl, y'know?"

