

NAO

BIOGRAPHY 2015

2015 has been a fine year for NAO, whose brilliant “wonky funk”, presented in two critically acclaimed EPs, has earned her fans on both sides of the Atlantic. But with a debut album on the horizon, 2016 looks set to be the year when her mix of r’n’b, soul and electronic textures seduces a wider audience. “I’ve been learning about myself quite publicly with those two EPs,” says the singer-songwriter, born and bred in East London. “I know what I want to say now.”

That much is clear from NAO’s latest song, *Bad Blood*, a teaser for next year’s LP. Given its radio premiere on Annie Mac’s influential Radio 1 show, the prowling, sensual track shows how much NAO’s songwriting has evolved since she first started performing solo 18 months ago. The song, inspired by an intense teenage friendship, earned much praise in the blogosphere. Admittedly, that’s nothing new for NAO, whose February 15 and *So Good* EPs gained love from the likes of Pitchfork, The Fader and Spin. But if she’s flattered by the attention, the artist has no intention of being just another tastemakers’ favourite on the internet.

“My friends and I have been making beats and songs for a while now, sometimes we can get bogged down in the detail of how to make the music interesting,” she ponders. “Mostly it doesn’t matter; music should touch you, that’s all it should do.”

None of NAO’s tracks have failed that test. From the up-tempo strut of *Inhale Exhale* (“quite in-your-face”), to the delicate coos of *Apple Cherry* (“a good broody tune”), the Londoner has the many facets of 21st century soul covered. There’s also the zany charm of *Zillionaire*, the subtle groove of *Adore You*, and the simple love song for her boyfriend, *It’s You*. For a new artist, NAO’s identity is already clear. She may have worked with a wide range of on-the-money producers - AK Paul, Abhi/Dijon, Disclosure, to name but a few - but each track is stamped with her unique voice and vision.

It was NAO’s future manager who first saw her perform at someone else’s gig, and asked her if she’d considered doing solo stuff. She had, but had been quite content working as a session singer, having graduated from the Guildhall School of Music a few years earlier. The question was timely though. “The more I thought about it, the more I thought: actually, yeah, why not?”

This set her on a quest to find her own sound. A session with the mysterious producer AK Paul, with whom she produced the excellent ‘*So Good*’, proved to be a turning point. She realised she should do what came naturally to her. “Beforehand, the songs quite dark, quite James Blake-y, and everything was a bit moody. And then I did the session with Anup and I realised how easy it was to write the song.” NAO’s natural knack for melody and lyrics, twinned with Paul’s nuanced production, make an irresistible combination. “I just noticed how easy it was for me to write soulful r’n’b melodies,” she says. “I didn’t have to think about it, if the beat was right.”

NAO admits that the classic 1990s r'n'b tunes she listened to growing up lie at the heart of her writing. "I can't help that coming out when I write and sing, because that is what I listen to. But for me, it's about being able to interpret that in a different way - in a 2015 way."

But it's not just r'n'b which influences NAO: all sorts of music have seeped into hers. The youngest of a large clan of siblings, she recalls the brother who liked grime and drum'n'bass; another one who loved Nas and Jay-Z, the greats of American hip-hop; another who was more into Michael Jackson, Stevie Wonder and Prince; and then there's her big sister, who encouraged her love of Brandy, Missy Elliott and SWV. Meanwhile, her mum was into gospel music, and even that has had its effect: "I like to put a lot of emotion into what I'm singing. I hope that people believe me and see that it's the truth." In other words, it's all been a melting pot. "I don't think grime is in there though!", she laughs.

Then there's her knowledge of jazz, which she studied at Guildhall. For NAO, standards by the likes of Cole Porter and Bernstein are another source of inspiration, for their craft and lyrics. But she's wary of letting that formal education harness her own creativity. Jazz can be great for pushing you musically, but ultimately, she wants her tracks to connect with all sorts of listeners, with no complications. "The 18 year old nurse who gets home and just wants to chill - can she relate?"

In fact, NAO really developed her distinctive voice earlier on, at an after-school club in Walthamstow, singing with all sorts of people every Thursday night. She chuckles now thinking back to her practising at home, "putting my karaoke machine on, making way of getting better." Performing gigs with the club could be quite a random affair - in schools and town halls - but learning how to reach an audience was invaluable. "It really helped, because you have to get them to engage with you. I think that's where I learned the most."

As NAO prepares her new LP, one thing is for sure: if you can expect a few "broody" tunes, don't expect the usual moping about of much of today's alt-r'n'b. "I wonder if most people, when they're writing, fall on the darker side because it's easier to write," she muses. She's more interested in "being a bit more conscious: writing songs that do explore a lighter mood, or a sentiment other than the dark. I hope to have a good balance of it all." She singles out the track Inhale Exhale as a good indicator of where she's going: "the tempo, the beat - you get it straight away, with the kick and the snare". Its construction is devastatingly simple. "The melody is on the edge more, and it's just me and the bassline doing it together. But you can still dance to it, it's still got a groove."

As always, the tracks are being released on NAO's own label, Little Tokyo. The artist first created the imprint in order to retain the rights to her masters. But she has big ambitions for it, hoping one day to be able to sign other artists, set up a regular Little Tokyo night, and develop her own merch: "In a dream world, I'd do lots with it."

And it's not just her business she is building slowly but surely; the same goes for her image. Previous artwork has focused on the theme of hands - a way of keeping fans guessing, not giving too much away too soon. A forthcoming video for Bad Blood, recently filmed in Bulgaria, should provide more clues. Meanwhile, her live gigs - including an acclaimed stint supporting Little Dragon last year - have also helped her develop her persona. With so many

grooves in her repertoire, a NAO stage show has to include a little bit of dancing - something she loves. ("It's got some movement - but it's not Steps!")

Key to it all, she has found, is honesty - just being herself. NAO's stage name is actually just her Christian name lightly tweaked, and that sums it up: NAO is "a hyper-version of me, I guess". Get ready for the hyper-version to gain yet more hype in 2016.

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