



## Oh Wonder, Biography 2017

In an era in which pop careers require careful planning, Oh Wonder are an anomaly. They're a band formed by accident not design, a duo who didn't intend to play live but spent more than a year touring the world, and a major label act who never saw this being anything other than a DIY project.

**Ultralife** is both Oh Wonder's extraordinary second album and their debut proper. Its eponymously-titled predecessor, released in late 2015, was a collection of songs they had posted online at the rate of one a month, which millions of listeners fell in love with, turning London-based Josephine Vander Gucht and Anthony West into reluctant pop stars.

"We've never pushed this project," says Josephine. "It has always felt like it's pulling us along. We initially put our songs on Soundcloud hoping to pitch them to other artists. What happened next surprised us as much as anyone. Almost from the moment we began, we felt a connection with fans. We had both put out music before, but never had such a rapid response. We were anonymous at the time. Not even our friends knew what we were doing."

Classically-trained pianist and violinist Josephine was about to begin a career in law when she met Anthony, a producer and former member of a rock band, in a south London studio. He offered to produce some of her songs, but the moment they started working together, something clicked. Or as Anthony recalls it, "stars collided".

His background in arranging and production – no less than the legendary Gil Norton had advised him to become a producer – complimented her classical training and songwriting skills. Their voices in unison were spellbinding. They were better at writing lyrics together than they had been apart.



Three months in to their song-a-month challenge, they had established an international audience who were attentively awaiting new music on the first of each month. As their success snowballed, labels came calling, but they refused to sign. By the time some of their songs had racked up tens of millions of plays, the pair finally conceded that they were a band.

After self-releasing 15 of their songs as an album, Oh Wonder bowed to pressure to play live, booking just four shows – in London, Paris, New York and L.A. – planning to head straight back to the studio they'd built in a room at the bottom of Josephine's parents' garden. When all four gigs sold out within a week they were inspired to tour, ending up crossing the States several times, finding fans as far afield as South America, Australia, Russia and Asia. It culminated in 162 shows in 14 months across 112 cities, and a mighty 83,000 tickets sold. A connection.

Along the way, Oh Wonder's songs became soundtrack staples, featuring everywhere from Scream, Elementary and Made In Chelsea to Catfish, Collide and Coronation Street. The dreamy 'Drive' was used in the pilot for the BBC's hit show Doctor Foster. 'All We Do' was the spectral theme tune for Unforgotten, ITV's recent, acclaimed detective series.

"This band has shown us how powerful music can be," says Josephine. "It has given us opportunities we couldn't have imagined and taken us to places we never dreamed of. We receive messages from fans telling us how our music has helped them and changed their lives. That none of this was planned just makes it more special."

The perennial underdog might just be about to become the odds-on favourite. Written in New York and London and entirely composed, produced and mixed by the duo, *Ultralife* takes the hallmarks of the band's experimental debut – its hypnotic dual vocals, its exposed, emotional lyrics, its bewitching, ethereal beauty – and adds the weight of experience, the confidence of success and the coherence that comes from forward planning.

"Last time, we had no idea what we were doing," laughs Anthony. "We didn't even have a specific sound in mind. Every aspect of Oh Wonder we learnt on the job, from how to sing together to how to play the songs live. What was great about making this second album is that we got to put all of that new knowledge to good use."

*Ultralife's* luminescent lead single and title track sums up Oh Wonder's new-found self-assurance and vaulting ambition. Easily the most up-tempo song they've ever released, it's a slinky, sensual, piano and beats-driven burst of pure joy itching to soundtrack the start of summer.

"What we didn't realise as we were writing the album," acknowledges Josephine, "is that it has strong narrative arc. It's about needing other people, but at the same time needing time for yourself. 'Solo', the opening song, is an ode to the freedom of being alone. The closing track, 'Waste', is about how pointless life feels when you have no one to share experiences with.

"We wrote both of those songs early on, during a month out from touring when we moved to an Airbnb in Brooklyn with just a piano. The rest of the album is us filling in the gaps between those extremes.

"Being on tour is an incredibly isolating experience. You can be in a room of 3000 people screaming your name and still feel lonely. It's perverse. You desperately miss friends and family back home, but you also long for downtime to nurture yourself. *Ultralife* strives to find a balance between the two."



"A big influence on the album was Jon Krakauer's book Into The Wild," adds Anthony. "It's a true story about a suburban guy who was headed to Harvard and decided instead to escape the pressures of society by moving to the wilderness. On his death bed in Alaska, he etches six words in to a wall – 'Happiness is only real when shared'. He realises that life isn't as good on your own. We both read the book and, after a year on the road, it resonated."

During the few months that Oh Wonder spent writing the album, James Blake, Bon Iver, D. D. Dumbo, Frank Ocean and Beyonce all released albums. The duo immersed themselves in them all and emerged eager to make an album as life-affirming as their debut was melancholic. They wrote the summery 'Heart Strings' listening to the Beach Boys and The Beatles and the happy, honeyed, hip hop-influenced 'Lifetimes' after going to see Drake in concert.

Back in London last autumn, they wrote '**Ultralife'**, the shimmering, spine-tingling '**Bigger Than Love**' and the joyous, electronica-driven surefire future hit '**High On Humans**', inspired by Josephine's empowering encounters with strangers on a tube trip home from Heathrow.

"One was with two women who worked at Sunglasses Hut, with whom I had a half hour discussion about hot sauce," she says. "It was wonderful. I didn't know them and they didn't know me but we bonded out of the blue over food.

"When I changed to the overground I met a guy covered in blood, who'd had his teeth knocked out. I told him the same thing had happened to me and suddenly the whole carriage started offering up stories of their injuries and operations. I watched people get off that train energised by the interaction. I immediately called Anthony and sang him the chorus and we wrote the rest of the song that night."

Rather than rely on computers, *Ultralife* boasts lots of live instrumentation, including drums and bass, as well as Anthony's collection of analogue synths, which are central to the songs' warm, sensual sound. Some of the album, including the strings, was recorded at The Pool in Bermondsey, but most of it was made in the pair's home studio, where they had to work around TFL's bus timetable.

"Our studio is on a busy main road, on the corner of two bus routes," explains Anthony. "Whenever we'd start recording, another bus would go by. We couldn't do vocals before 10pm."

"But some buses do sneak in," reveals Josephine. "The album opens with a bus, an ode to the fact that the entire album was compromised by London transport. There's also a police siren from New York, where we had the same problem with traffic.

"We could have made our lives easier by going to a studio with soundproofing, but that isn't us. Our lives are in these songs and it didn't feel fair to leave the night buses out."

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