
Björk on by: why breakup albums are so hard to do

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Has performing Vulnicura become a bit too much for Björk? After recently announcing the cancellation of all foreseeable live dates due to a “scheduling conflict beyond control”, Björk posted a further message on Facebook revealing that the experience of performing songs from her recent breakup album had been “intense and the internal clock of it different to the other ones”. She added: “It has sort of had to behave in its own little way. Both the urgency of the leak and now this sudden closure for reasons beyond my control is characteristic of that. I have started writing new songs and feel the best, most natural pathway is to let this beast flow its natural course and start anew.”

While tour cancellations due to the bureaucracy of schedules and commitments are nothing new, it was the admission of the difficulty performing emotionally fraught material that seemed to stun fans. Though generally understood that turning heartache into verse can be a cathartic experience, it’s been less considered how reliving such feelings can be detrimental, or simply outright unwanted.

Björk chronicles the demise of her relationship with gorgeous choruses and audacious melodies on one of her most cohesive – and emotional – albums yet, writes Alexis Petridis, writes **Alexis Petridis**

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It is possible that Vulnicura – a record that documents the end of her marriage to artist Matthew Barney and was leaked online two months [earlier than scheduled](#) – may not have given the Icelandic singer the right amount of time needed to come to terms with the emotional weight of the songs’ content. There had been prior evidence that the performer may have been suffering from the reenactment of such raw material, night after night. A review of the [singer’s New York show in March noted](#): “She played the first six songs from Vulnicura as a single set and with evident difficulty. She frequently turned away from the audience, and on the short song History of Touches she couldn’t sing the words at all, replacing the lyrics with her trademark ah-sih-mah-lay-kah-ah-ah Björkish.”

It shouldn't be surprising that many artists are loth to stoke old fires. Earlier this year, nu-metallars Korn played their song Daddy – a track that [recalls the sexual abuse its lead singer suffered](#) as a child – for the first time in 20 years, with frontman Jonathan Davis labelling it as “too personal” to perform previously. Elton John, too, rarely performs his John Lennon tribute [Empty Garden, because it reminds](#) him too much of his former friend and the late Beatle: “For two years, John was a big part of my life, and it is difficult,” John said [back in 2013](#). “I don't look back when I'm playing that song – if I see the footage of John, I get choked up and it's too hard to get through the song.”

U2 have [yet to add One Tree Hill to](#) the regularly reworked setlist for their current iNNOCENCE + eXPERIENCE tour, which has seen the group splicing in numerous songs they haven't performed in decades. Speaking of the Joshua Tree track, inspired by the death of their former roadie, Bono previously stated: “It's a very special song that holds inside of it a lot of strong feelings, and I don't know if we're afraid of it or something”.

However, for some, it's less of a case of old songs causing them to relive old memories and more the fact that they simply cannot connect with what they're singing any more. In March, Sinéad O'Connor announced that [she would cease to perform Nothing Compares 2 U live](#), citing the loss of “emotional identification” that first urged her to cover the Prince-penned tune that made her name. O'Connor explained: “I don't want audiences to be disappointed coming along to a show and then not hearing it, so I am letting you know here that you won't. If I were to sing it just to please people, I wouldn't be doing my job right, because my job is to be emotionally available. I'd be lying. You'd be getting a lie. My job is to give you honesty. I'm trained in honesty. I can't act. It just isn't in my training. I have ceased singing other songs over the years for the same reason.”

Though it is understood that emotionally wrought songs can be cathartic to write, what is rarely examined is how reliving these feelings again and again can affect an artist. Like the rawness and vulnerability invested in such albums as Vulnicura, we should admire the honesty of Björk and agree that sometimes, it's better to just move on.
