

Herman Brood

A rock 'n roll work of art

By Helen Johnson

'Unbelievable he's already been gone fourteen years', is the way Herman Brood's lifelong manager Koos van Dijk sums it up. The vast majority of Dutch citizens will surely agree. 'Cause whether you agreed with his lifestyle or not, Herman Brood was a bird of paradise that made every regular robin proud to be part of the species. He was an odd bird, most definitely, but he was *our* odd bird. The kind you wouldn't want to cage if you were able to.

Speaking of birds, in Amsterdam Herman Brood ('Herman' henceforth, 'cause over here he is still a household name) was often spotted in and around his studio on the Spuistraat with his pet parrot 'Cor' on his head. That was Herman for you. More often than not he would have a specimen of that other kind of bird - a pretty woman - at his side. *That* was Herman for you. He was almost permanently under the influence of some substance or other. That definitely was Herman for you. And carrying his materials around with him, he would regularly decide to make a painting on the spot, handing it out to an interested bystander. That was Herman for you too.

Abroad Herman is mostly known for his music. 'Herman Brood and his Wild Romance' had a few hits of which 'Saturday night', 'Rock 'n Roll junkie' and 'Never be clever' will mostly ring bells amongst foreigners. He even toured in the States as an opening act for The Kinks, The Cars and Foreigner in 1978 and 1979. Sure, us cloggies still call Herman a musician too. But in The Netherlands we also witnessed Herman's resurrection as an artist. Over here he's now probably even better known for his artistic work and life than he is for his post-punk rock 'n roll music.

Provincial boy

Undoubtedly cramping his style hugely back in the day, Herman wasn't born in Amsterdam, but in the provincial capital Zwolle (in Overijssel, in the east of our country) on November 5th 1946. As a primary school boy he was already showing a keen interest in the activities that would keep him busiest most of his life: drawing and girls. (In that order).

He drew day and night, exploring a childlike style, also well into his teens. Herman at one point even drew cartoons for the renowned Dutch music magazine Oor (Ear). Unsurprisingly, after secondary school Herman chose to attend the Art Academy in Arnhem. He was however expelled only three months into his junior year for 'improper behaviour'. A (harmless for others) characteristic he never stopped portraying since.

Moaning, blazing Herman

'Who cares', he must have thought after his expulsion, 'I'm more into music now anyway'. Fact was, he was also very drawn to the substances that came with the rock 'n roll life Herman was keen to live. As a piano player, Herman started The Moans in 1964. He switched over to the famous Dutch blues band Cuby and the Blizzards three years later, but was booted soon after by the record company when they found out about his habit.

The following years Herman traded the stage for the gutter, but his luck changed when he met his future manager Koos van Dijk in 1974. Koos recognised Hermans talent immediately: 'I ran a discotheque in the northern provincial town Winschoten back then, when I heard Herman sing and play the piano in a pub nearby. I was blown away by his jazzy voice! I asked him to come and play at my venue straight away, even though people warned me about his untrustworthy nature. But Herman did show up, and it was a big success. Since then I never really stopped managing his affairs.'

In Corbijn's lense

Another man to spot Herman's stage talent is internationally renowned music photographer Anton Corbijn. Still Netherlands-based at the time, Corbijn saw Herman play at a gig in Groningen in the early seventies and took some pictures of him for Oor magazine a year later. Herman loved Corbijn's work, and the following years the young photographer documented Herman's rise to fame. A friendship developed.

Corbijn: 'I am still in awe of Herman and I know that he was proud that I had gone out into the big world and made a name for myself with photographs that he felt (and quite rightly so) he had helped to inspire. Herman felt that our relation had been a blueprint for my relations with people like U2, REM and Depeche Mode. I love him for many reasons - one of which is that he had more vision than I did, but he never claimed it.'

Corbijn witnessed Herman form his own band in the mid seventies: Herman Brood and his Wild Romance. The band released their debut album 'Street' in 1977 and it was warmly received. A year later, after the release of the second album 'Shpritsz', Herman's career really took off: Saturday night was an international hit, and Herman landed an acting role opposite German punk singer Nina Hagen in the film 'Cha-Cha'. Unfortunately the film wasn't well received, nor was Hermans next album 'Go Nutz' - released in the states in 1979. The band fell apart upon returning home, and Herman was gutter bound once again.

Artist again

Herman was the type of man that couldn't have lived out his wild romance with life without the support of two pillars of people around him: his manager Koos, and his wife (since 1985) Xandra. Be it a coincidence: the year Herman got married is the year he reinvented himself as an artist. Koos: 'Herman's reacquaintance with his artistic side funnily enough started with a club owner making a joke at his expense. Herman was drinking heavily at the Richter's bar and doodling away on paper beer mats when the owner called out - "do you think you could do those a bit bigger, so I can sell them and settle your tab?" After that day Herman never stopped making art, at dazzling speed. I estimate he made as many as 5000 paintings, up until the week he died."

To make his art Herman used acrylic paint, spray paint, syringes, lace and washing basket lids as templates and (literally) blood, sweat and tears. How to describe the end result? Art critic Jan Donia puts it like this: 'Herman's work fits in an artistic tradition that's influenced by a mixture of Cobra-, graffiti- and children's art. The painter and poet Lucebert was originally a huge example of Herman's. But Herman also made references to Keith Haring, Jackson Pollock and Robert Rauschenberg in his work. He absorbed what he saw and pictured it without a hint of narrow mindedness or embarrassment.' Other examples of Herman's were Vincent van Gogh, Dylan Thomas, Basquiat and William Burroughs, to name but a few.

Souvenirs

Herman used to call his paintings 'souvenirs' - a souvenir to remember him by, if you will. Many artists seek recognition and admiration, in life and preferably thereafter. Herman was no exception. Ironically, his lifestyle undermined that (subconscious)

goal to great extent. The fact that he could make a painting in a matter of minutes, that he used whisky if there wasn't any thinner around, or his own blood if he was out of red. The fact that Herman was prepared to paint - behind Koos back - whatever the customer asked as long as they paid him enough to score, didn't exactly give him the artistic acceptance he longed for.

During his lifetime, that is. This is where Herman's life shows an at first glance rather unlikely parallel with that of Vincent van Gogh. Both painters really only received the artistic recognition they deserved after they died. Making Joni Mitchell's line 'you don't know what you got 'til it's gone' poignantly accurate. Or, to translate a more cynical but strikingly fitting Dutch phrase: One man's death is another man's bread. (Brood is bread in English). Koos van Dijk couldn't agree more: 'After Herman died the prices for his work surged through the roof. Everyone all of a sudden wanted 'a Brood'. His work was forged at great scale, and all sorts. After we cleared out Herman's studio, builders even cut the paint splattered floor in pieces and sold them via internet. We stopped them soon enough and picked up that business ourselves so we could put the revenue to good use. But it went to show: posthumously everybody all of a sudden praised Herman's artistic merit.'

True enough, Herman's work wasn't exhibited in museums during his lifetime. After he died the Cobra Museum and the Jan van der Togt Museum (both in Amstelveen) and the Groninger Museum organized extensive exhibitions, displaying a broad variety of paintings, artefacts and personal mementos. All of them drew masses of visitors. 'Herman would have loved the attention', Koos van Dijk stresses. 'An exhibition in these renowned museums? Fantastic! And better late than never, eh?'

Out with a bang

Herman was a strong believer in the last lyric of the Neil Young song 'He he my my': 'It's better to burn out than to fade away'. Koos van Dijk: 'The truth is, for the greater part Herman's habit induced his unprecedented artistic energy. Unfortunately, at times when he did manage to clean up his act, his creative well also dried up. He didn't want that. He preferred to live by his "live fast, die young" motto.'

He stayed true to his vow. In hindsight, Herman's last few paintings hinted that the end of his life was near. 'No time' was the title of the piece he painted only a few days before his passing. The name of the picture, and the stoic face depicted, say it all: Herman had worn himself out. His time was up. On July 11th 2001 Herman

Brood jumped to his death from the top of Amsterdam Hilton Hotel.

Herman was buried at the local Zorgvlied cemetery, in the applicably named section 'Paradiso'. On his tomb is, amongst others, is the word 'Respect'. It probably sums up why Herman was so cherished as a colourful character in this country. He mirrored the essence of what being Dutch is all about: creating a society in that holds the freedom to live and let live in high regard.

On August 18th 2001 Herman Brood reached the number one spot in the Dutch billboard charts for the first time ever, with his cover of the Sinatra song 'My way'. And that he certainly did.

Trivia:

- A wax statue of Herman Brood is on permanent display at Madame Tussauds
- In his birth town Zwolle there's a bronze bust of Herman near the music venue Hedon. The city also hosts a 'Herman Brood walk'
- Koos van Dijk is developing plans for an official Herman Brood museum in Zwolle. Wageningen has one already
- A Dutch feature film about Herman's attempt to make it in the US was released in 2006: Wild Romance. Herman also featured in many books and documentaries
- In Utrecht aspiring musicians can attend the Herman Brood Academy