

## **'The results are vintage Soulsister, but still Soulsister for 2021.'**

*Soulsister is one of the select few Belgian bands who have ever cracked the official American singles charts, the Billboard Hot 100. 'The Way to Your Heart', their soulful Motown-flavoured evergreen, did the seemingly impossible in 1989. The accompanying album 'It Takes Two' similarly found its way into many an American home. Soulsister has been one of yours truly's all-time favourite bands for the past twenty-five years. My collection is filled to the brim with their singles (on 7", 12", cd, and cassette) and albums. An interview with the godfathers of Belgian soul has been a bucket list entry for more than fifteen years, ever since I graduated as a master in journalism. Today is the day. As part of the marketing blitz surrounding brand new single 'Something I Need to Know', I was granted an audience with Paul Michiels and Jan Leyers. Fifty minutes of anecdotes, songwriter tips and soul searching flew by quickly.*



**Julian De Backer: ‘Hello, Mr. Michiels and Mr. Leyers, thanks for agreeing to talk to me. New song ‘Something I Need to Know’ is the first new Soulsister ditty since 2011. Is it hard to get back into the mindset of ‘I’m going to write a new Soulsister track’ after ten years?’**

Paul Michiels: ‘It’s actually really easy, because our working method is very simple. One of us sings a melody, the other one picks up on it, it’s all very old school just like in the old days. My voice and timbre are still the same, dare I say, better than ever. Which makes singing quite the cushy pastime for me.’

**Julian: ‘Your voice has aged like fine wine. In what way does writing for Soulsister differ from writing for your own solo records and/or other artists? Does one open different cupboards in the songwriter brain?’**

Jan Leyers: ‘Well, a certain duality rears its head. Writing for Soulsister invokes a different mindset than writing for myself or for someone else. I’m a singer-songwriter as a solo performer, and I create a mix between blues and country. The ‘soul’ in Soulsister won’t pop-up unless we’re doing a co-write. Granted, now I’m taking a very analytical approach, but they’re mere after-the-fact contemplations all the same. I’m not taking place behind a piano in order to compose no matter what. You need to be able to turn on the radio, hear a new Soulsister cut and think: ‘What am I listening to? What does this evoke?’

**Julian: ‘You guys have had a very consistent sound since 1986. One can immediately recognize a Soulsister tune, and I do mean that as a compliment. Seldomly have you released experiments like a hip hop record or a dubstep album. I take it you like to keep on to the familiar sound?’**

Jan: ‘We did release the occasional one-off, such as ‘Het kan niet zijn’ for the Will Tura tribute ‘Turalura’ or a few songs for the movie ‘Blueberry Hill’ under the ‘Blueberry Hillbillies’ moniker.’

Paul: ‘When we sit down and write, we want to come up with something that can be played on the radio. You could dismiss said approach as commercial, but we have adequately been doing this since 1986. It blends, when we sing together. That’s the secret Soulsister recipe. That’s why our songwriting has been consistent for these past thirty-five years.’

Jan: ‘On the way over here, I heard Dave Edmund’s ‘Girls Talk’, written by Elvis Costello. I was once again reminded of how much that song hews to my personal taste. I remember the song’s release, and how we tried to perform it with my band Beri Beri. How would you classify that tune? Radio-friendly pop? If you were to ask me what my three favourite Dave Edmunds recordings are, I would say ‘I Hear You Knocking’, ‘Girls Talk’ and lastly, the flavour of the day. But I have never considered Dave Edmunds having sold out or having conceded. To me, these tracks are his discography’s highlights.’

Paul: ‘That’s what it comes down to, indeed.’

Jan: ‘My musical tastes are incredibly radio oriented. I want to turn on the radio, and hear The Police. Or Elvis Costello.’

Paul: ‘The best example remains ‘Good Vibrations’ by The Beach Boys. (starts singing): ‘I, I love the colorful clothes she wears ...’ It stops you in your tracks, and makes you wonder: ‘Damn, what is that!?’’

Jan: ‘Too many singles don’t sound like singles nowadays. To me, a single is a song you only have to hear once, twice tops, and never forget for the rest of your life. The rest of the lot can be described as charming tries. Perhaps I’m too old school as well, but that’s the bar to raise.’

Paul: ‘We all want that.’

Jan: ‘Life’s too short. There are only twenty-four hours in a day. There’s only so many songs you can listen to. It better be irresistible. Consider it a pent-up filter, a repressed attitude. I have never said to myself:

'I'm off to write some album filler'. No one sets out to compose the B-side's unmemorable third composition. We all aim higher, don't we?'

**Julian: 'Quincy Jones once said that every album track has to be a possible single. On Michael Jackson's 'Thriller', seven out of nine songs ended up as singles, and nine out of eleven on 'Bad'.'**

Jan: 'There you go. Who am I to contradict Quincy Jones? 'Heat' contained ten singles.'

**Julian: "Heat" and 'Simple Rule' were records without junk. All killer, no filler. But taking in mind The Beatles' famous quote 'Let's write a swimming pool': isn't it nigh impossible to predict a hit? A record lives or dies by the audience's graces, doesn't it?"**

Jan: 'No doubt about it. Some songs elicit a more enthusiastic reaction – even from myself - than others, but it remains very hard to correctly or adequately gauge. Case in point, the many B-sides that have gone on to be way more popular and well-known than their accompanying A-sides.'

Paul: 'Purifying is key. Holding on to the rigid structure of melody-verse-refrain can be too much of a good thing. Subtract a few chords, and you end up with a more honest song. That's our method. Jan calls me up, and says: 'Polle, we have recorded this and that yesterday, but could you come back, because I have a few ideas to simplify. To make it even more straightforward.'

Jan: 'Less is more. But it takes more time to make it less. That's the problem. It costs a lot of time to end up with less.'

**Julian: 'A single-worthy lyric if I ever heard one. Your debut album 'It Takes Two' contains three songs that aren't co-writes from the both of you. 'Downtown', for example, is a Paul Michiels solo track. How do you agree on the final tracklist?'**

Paul: 'We didn't have a lot of superfluous material back then.'

Jan: 'Our first record wasn't conceived as an "album". We started out with a single, 'You Get to Me'. Polle had already written 'Downtown' by then. Our first recording session took place in Studio Impuls in Herent.'

Paul: 'That was 'Talk About It', wasn't it?'

Jan: 'No, that was our second single. During our first session, we recorded 'You Get to Me', 'Downtown' and ...'

Paul: "'Like a Mountain'?"

Jan: 'No, that hadn't been written either. Our demo contained three tracks. But what was the third one?'

Paul: 'I seem to remember a rehearsal in Mechelen with 'Like a Mountain'. By then, the song had been recorded on reel-to-reel.'

Jan: 'But certainly not on the first demo, the one Guy Brulez responded to.'

Paul: "'Blame You'?"

Jan: 'No. By the time 'Blame You' came around, I was already living in Boechout. The first album was a scattered affair. A first single, 'You Get to Me'. A second single, 'Talk About It'. A third single, 'Like a Mountain'. And only then did EMI say: 'Okay, let's do a full album'. The singles were in the can, Paul had a song, I had a song, and then we started co-writing. John Fotheringham contributed to the lyrics of 'Weak Like a Baby'. John was a kooky American living in Antwerp.'

Paul: 'Never heard of him since.'

Jan: 'No idea where he ended up.'

**Julian: 'Still bragging about writing a hit for Soulsister, perhaps.'**

Jan: 'Yeah, 'You know this band Soulsister?'. Anyway, that's how it went down. 'Heat' consisted of nothing but songs written by the both of us.'



**Julian: 'Could you tell me a little more about 'Downtown', one of the finest tracks on 'It Takes Two'? To me, it sounds somber, melancholic, eerie. 'Unheimlich', as the Germans would say.'**

Paul: 'Yes, sure, the song is about coming down headfirst. I remember it very well. I put my hands on my piano's keys, and I practically saw the car. The lyrics came in a flash. 'Driving downtown ...', the song wrote itself. The muse was very kind to me. Never await your muse, just take place behind your piano when you want to compose.'

Jan: 'I once asked him which city 'Downtown' was inspired by. 'My native Heist-op-den-Berg', he replied. 'Come on, Paul, don't be ridiculous', I said. Heist-op-den-Berg, *downtown*? There's no strip in Heist!'



Paul: 'I immediately had a video clip idea, of some chap driving a convertible.'

**Julian: "Downtown' always reminded me of a Miami Vice vibe.'**

Paul: 'Cigarette. Sunglasses. Cruising at breakneck speed through the tunnels of Los Angeles. Sun coming down. Looking for his squeeze, because he heard about her return.'

**Julian: 'Jasper Maekelberg has produced your new single. How does working with him differ from working with, say, Jeroen Swinnen, David Werner or Werner Pensaert? What does he do differently?'**

Jan: 'I have often given that some thought and it's very hard to put your finger to it. It's not about the big maneuvers. Granted, the difference was immediately apparent with engineer-producer Chris Lord-Alge: he started installing mics around the drums in the upper corners of the studio. I never saw that before. Jasper is the sum of a lot of different small parts. Delicately differing horns, a meticulous drum sound, a culmination of elements that influence the end result. But never ever: 'Unlearn everything you have ever learned, now we're bringing in the Assyrian flute'. Or one acoustic guitar, the Rick Rubin way. No, working with Jasper was, once more, 'less is more'. He was very adamant about what was acceptable, and what certainly wasn't. I'm very happy with his productional work. The results are vintage Soulsister, but still Soulsister for 2021.'

**Julian: 'Is 'Something I Need to Know' an analogue or a digital recording?'**

Jan: 'Jasper puts the drums through a tape recorder. He records in ProTools, but gives it the analogue treatment.'

**Julian: 'Isn't it difficult to take orders from a producer who is several decades your junior?'**

Jan: 'It's very educational to witness a youngster's approach. 'Something I Need to Know' has disco touches. I let Jasper listen to The Trammps and KC and the Sunshine Band to get in the mood. He found no discernible differences between the two bands, whereas they're worlds apart to me. Undoubtedly because of the memories. I looked back on all the shindigs where The Trammps were an important part of the playlist, and remembered all the café visits where KC and the Sunshine Band were part of the background noise. Moreover, I suggested a certain synthesizer sound, which sounded cheesy to his ears. He then came up with a different sound, one that sounded identical to my ears. To me, it was just another eighties synth preset, but it passed Jasper's judgement. He has a different filter of what is acceptable and what is not. It's just like picking clothes. You can try on a pair of orange pants and people will react disgustedly, but they'll adore a pair of mauve pants. Oh well. Hiring a producer is akin to hiring a taste. It's a sounding board of yes/no.'

Paul: 'The dawn of pop music starts with Elvis Presley. 1954. "That's All Right Mama". They had little to no tools, but it sounded amazing nonetheless. We're still profiteering from the work of the pioneers of the fifties. I was six years old in 1954 when I first heard Elvis sing, and I thought: 'Wow. What is that!?'"

**Julian: 'I'm quite jealous you were alive to witness the humble beginnings of Elvis Presley. You heard something that was unheard of at the time. You experienced the birth of rock 'n roll. Quite the privilege.'**

Paul: "Rock Around the Clock', too. 'Jailhouse Rock' is impossible to cover. Put it on today, and it still sounds amazing. Fats Domino, Louis Prima, all *one takes*. Once again the constraints and the limitations: they had no tape recorders to record on more than one track.'

Jan: 'Jackie Wilson. Yeah, man ...'

**Julian: 'I recently bought a 78 rpm copy of 'Rock Around the Clock'.'**

Paul: 'Decca, I remember that.'

**Julian: 'Back then, they actually included a small photograph of the artist on the label. I own one by Bobbejaan Schoepen.'**

Jan: 'No way?'

Paul: 'And the His Master's Voice dog. Buddy Holly's label was Coral, Louis Prima's was Capitol. I'll never forget it.'

Jan: 'Jasper and I disagreed about one thing, and one thing only. He dislikes ABBA. That cannot be, can it?'

**Julian: 'You're glad they're back?'**

Jan: 'I wasn't holding my breath, but I went in with an open mind. I was mildly disappointed. It's theatrical, as could be foreseen and expected. I expected just that little bit more.'

Paul: 'Jasper should have produced it.'

**Julian: 'Maekelberg even sounds Swedish. Producer David Werner co-wrote almost all tracks on your album 'Simple Rule'. Isn't that a conflict of interest? Didn't he prioritize or favorize his own songs?'**

Jan: 'No, because the songs on 'Simple Rule' came out of sessions in which he was involved. He didn't come knocking on our door with a briefcase full of songs and the suggestion to record this or that. He contributed to the lyrics, but most songs already existed in an embryonic form: 'All I've Got', 'Pretty Bad News', 'Broken', et cetera. A few were composed from scratch in collaboration with him. We wrote 'Changes' in Los Angeles. Ditto 'Sign of Emotion'. The moment the vacuum salesmen come out, the results will be fishy. We all know that. It just doesn't work that way.'

**Julian: 'Who came up with the phrase 'Swinging Like Big Dogs'?'**

Paul: 'Joey.'

Jan: 'Joey Balin, said record's producer. He's quite the funny geezer. He became a stand-up comedian in New York, no less. He really understood us.'

Paul: 'He knew engineer Neil Dorfsman. And David Werner knew Bob Clearmountain. A lot of coincidences hugely improved our albums.'

**Julian: 'Quite amazing that you guys worked with THE Bob Clearmountain, the engineer/mixer of some of my favourite records (e.g. Springsteen's 'Born in the U.S.A.', Bowie's 'Let's Dance', the Dire Straits single 'Heavy Fuel', et cetera).'**

Paul: 'Shy guy.'

Jan: 'A real nerd. But quite the resume indeed: INXS, Springsteen ...'

Paul: 'Our friend Michael Lang (co-organizer of Woodstock, ed.) got his foot in the door in America. That's how we always found the right producer for the right job. We're still grateful.'

**Julian: 'Speaking of big names, you have collaborated with Pino Palladino, the genial Welsh bass player. Did you bring him over, or did he record his part in a studio in his home country?'**

Jan: 'No, he came to London's Olympic Studios, where we were recording the album. Producer Joey took care of it, he put the band together. Pino was a member of Paul Young's backing band at the time.'

**Julian: 'The Royal Family.'**

Jan: 'A most excellent experience. Pino lit one blunt after the other, but never missed a beat. It will never cease to baffle me. He was unflappable. He hit every note. The more hazy his vision, the better his game. He just can't play off-key.'



**Julian: 'You even collaborated with Steve Winwood.'**

Jan: 'That's overstating things. Let's keep it at: Chris Lord-Alge sent Steve the tape, and he recorded his organ part. But we never met him. It was akin to how albums are recorded nowadays. 'I send you a file, you contribute, and you send the file back'. Back then, we did it on tape. We were working in Hilversum with Chris Lord-Alge, and we sent a tape to Steve Winwood's studio in Los Angeles.'

**Julian: 'Too bad, otherwise you could have asked him fascinating career tidbits. Such as how he managed to write 'Gimme Some Lovin'' as a wee seventeen year-old.'**

Jan: 'Incredible. And that voice!'

Paul: 'I personally handed over a copy of 'Heat' in the canteen of the Ancienne Belgique in Brussels. 'Welcome to the Canteen', I quipped, the title of a Traffic live record (laughs). He came across as quite sedate. That was back in 2007.'

**Julian: 'Oh, okay, not when 'Heat' came out in 1990. In all those years in between, he had never heard the fruits of his labour?'**

Paul: 'No, but he did remember Chris Lord-Alge asking him.'

**Julian: 'To him, it was just another odd job. Something on the side.'**

Paul: 'No biggie, just take the sheet music and hit record. We took out quite a lot, pieces where he was pulling our leg. Synthesizer sounds that resembled monkey noises and whatnot.'

**Julian: 'I saw Steve Winwood a few years ago in the OLT Rivierenhof in Deurne, but he refused to play his big hits.'**

Paul: 'He seemed a little jaded in Brussels. I once saw him in Peer, and he was very good back then. He started off with 'Pearly Queen' (starts singing).'

**Julian: 'Not too shabby.'**

Paul: 'You know 'Pearly Queen'? How is that possible?'

Jan: 'Julian is a connoisseur, Polle.'

Paul: 'Yeah, but he's a spring chicken.'

**Julian: 'I'm thirty-seven. I'm not with it anymore. I have no idea what the cool cats listen to nowadays.'**

Jan: 'Thirty-seven, that's half of Polle's age.'

Paul: 'My oldest child is forty-six. My youngest is sixteen.'

**Julian: 'A thirty year difference.'**

Jan: 'You've been waiting at the school gates for thirty years now, haven't you?'

**Julian: 'Do you remember the recording sessions for 'Like a Mountain'? It seems like you, mister Leyers, are singing in a super excited manner. Chewing the scenery, almost.'**

Jan: 'When I listen to those old recordings, I mainly hear the adrenaline, the drive, and the feeling we had back then. Certainly because nothing was happening at that point in time. We performed in youth clubs, but we didn't hit it big until the release of our follow-up effort 'The Way to Your Heart'. I can hear a dude kicking and screaming, attempting to break free and conquer the world. Our modus operandi back then was: Polle or I start singing, the other one takes over, and the refrain is teamwork. It's the same for our new single, 'Something I Need to Know', and it feels like homecoming.'

**Julian: 'Would you rerecord 'It Takes Two', given the chance?'**

Jan: 'I think we have improved on all counts. Just a tad cooler, half a tone lower, a lot more crusted barnacles and seaweed. Our voices are no more virginal breakwaters.'

Paul: 'It's still fun to play the old hits.'

Jan: 'I'd rather release a live version than a new studio version.'



Paul: 'Our live album 'Live Savings' sounds perfect. That's how the songs are supposed to sound.'

**Julian: 'You didn't cheat at all, that's quite something. A lot of so-called live albums have overdubs.'**

Jan: 'Live isn't always live nowadays: a lot of it is prerecorded, and you can hear stuff that isn't being performed.'

**Julian: 'I have a tour booklet from 1992, from your 'Simple Rule' tour. My parents saw one of the performances, and brought home the book as a souvenir. They told me you guys were called 'Leyers, Michiels & Soulsister', because there was a competing American band called 'Soulsister'. Is that the real reason for the name change? The story seems off.'**

Jan: 'No, no. Michael Lang considered the name 'Soulsister' too confusing for American audiences. 'Soulsister' has a completely different undertone for native English speakers, especially in America. They didn't expect two white guys. We could proactively avoid the confusion by putting our last names in front of the band name. That is all. Our initials being 'L&M' was pure coincidence. The cigarette brand did sponsor us for a while. It became our 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds'.'

**Julian: 'I'd say both 'Leyers' and 'Michiels' are quite hard to pronounce too, at least abroad.'**

Jan: 'Our names aren't that hard. Take 'Sinéad O'Connor', when you read it the first time. Even 'Beyoncé'. 'Is it Beyonseas'? No, it's 'Beyonsay'.'

**Julian: 'Bono has to be pronounced as 'Bonno' in Irish.'**

Jan: 'There's only one way to pronounce 'Leyers' in English.'

**Julian: 'Layers. Or liars. But! Even earlier, you were 'The Soul Sisters'.'**

Jan: 'We have had more names than albums.'

**Julian: 'You're aware of the 'scrambled eggs' syndrome, in which placeholder lyrics are used during the creative process. Do you have examples of songs? 'Rocks & Knees' instead of 'Locks & Keys', for example?'**

Jan: 'The slogan, the battle cry, the refrain phrase, those always came quickly. And it subsequently triggered the rest of the song. For 'Something I Need to Know', the lyrics, the music and the chord oozed out of us. The other bits and bobs were added later. Verses are always hard work. It's a maze, a labyrinth, and you often end up in 'third verse hell'. You often get the feeling that you have said everything you wanted to say in two verses.'

**Julian: 'Refrain first, verses next.'**

Jan: 'Generally, yes.'

Paul: "'Sweet Love' and 'Car' were more experimental.'



**Julian: 'I don't possess trained musician's ears, but the single mix of 'You Get to Me' seems to differ from the album mix.'**

Paul: 'Indeed.'

Jan: 'Sure.'

**Julian: 'The single mix seems better, too, without any disrespect. It's snappier.'**

Jan: 'I agree. We wanted to rerecord it properly, but it ultimately lacked properness.'

Paul: 'Different bass drum. Dum-dum-dum.'

**Julian: 'The album mix seems slower, too. It still baffles me that 'You Get to Me' was your mission statement. Out of the gates with a bang. You didn't need any warming up, you guys were no diesel car. No mean feat.'**

Jan: 'Everything was right on the money. We inspired each other. There was ample opportunity to perform and play. We had chemistry, there was a vibe. We were hungry. Paul had ten years more mileage and experience. As I said before: the door needed to be opened. You can hear that on the record. It's the spirit of 'You Get to Me' and a few of the early songs. *Hungry like the wolf*.'

**Julian: 'Gentlemen, it has been my pleasure.'**

Paul: 'You're welcome.'

Jan: 'See you soon.'