



BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS: CHERISH TAKE ON THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

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The music industry can be a pretty shitty place for female producers. Ask, for example, Canadian superstar and multiple Juno-prize winning musician and producer Grimes, who wrote and produced every inch of her celebrated recent album 2015 album *art angel*. “I’m tired of men who aren’t professional or even accomplished musicians continually offering to ‘help me out’ (without being asked), as if I did this by accident and I’m gonna flounder without them,” she wrote on Tumblr in 2013, “or as if the fact that I’m a woman makes me incapable of using technology. I have never seen this kind of thing happen to any of my male peers”. It’s not the most uncommon

story from the industry, as Senait Tesfai can attest: “there’s a lot of undermining going on, I’ve heard a few stories from women working in studios who are always being questioned about really basic things”.



AmberValent. Photo: Malin Bernalt

Tesfai, along with Evelina Åslin, stands behind the record label [Cherish](#), which aims to make this problem a thing of the past. Åslin says: “We’re a label releasing music by women and transgender people. We work on a project basis with some press and PR, and usually we throw a release party too, where the artist can play live. We also try to help out with good connections and collaborations if wanted. So far we’ve released music by [AmberValent](#), [sweep](#), [HELH](#) and AMKosman, and we’re very excited because we have a lot more coming up this year”. Cherish started back in 2015, when the right circumstances fell into place. “I started Cherish in the spring of 2015. It was my friend Lars’ idea that I should start my own label and I agreed”, says Åslin. “It all happened so naturally when Amber (producer and artist AmberValent) sent me her debut single ‘Chun Li’, and she wanted to release it somewhere. She gathered a great team around the single release, consisting of Senait Tesfai, Bell Rodriguez and Anna Ingler. It was lots of fun and so in a way Senait has been around since the start. But officially she joined in the summer of 2016, which made me really happy”. Tesfai adds: “It was such a fun experience. I thought the label and Evelina’s vision were very important and necessary. When you see how the industry looks today, especially after speaking to friends who are in the music industry and hearing from people who are working in the music industry about just how much an artist is actually involved in their career. For me it’s very natural that as an artist you should be involved and be able to say what you’re comfortable with and what you’re not. That’s something we try to make clear to the artists we collaborate with, that this is a safe space. I think that’s why it’s been so successful; we’ve never had issues finding different artists to work with. It’s like a team effort. They do all the creative things and we come up with ways for them to reach press, or if they want to have a release party we can find them a venue. If they want to take press photos or whatever. It’s never about what we want, it’s about what they want and we try to come up with solutions”.

Cherish see their role in the music world as facilitators of talented female and transgender musicians and producers, helping them get the support and resources they need to realise their talent. Tesfai says: “There are so many artists who are really good at producing: they write their own lyrics, produce their own songs, some of them even master their own songs. But it comes to a point where they have this finished project, which is amazing, but they don’t know what to do with it. Because they might not be comfortable working with bigger music labels, or they might not want to compromise. Especially when you’ve done everything yourself, it can be hard to let someone in, who might change things or taint it. I hope it’s a comfort for them to come to us, where we can say ‘We’ll help you! What do you want to do?’. Åslin adds “Our idea is to present and support women and transgender people that make music. Also we want to contribute with good connections and contacts, perhaps with other separatist spaces. There should be more safe spaces, as an example we really love what [Drömfakulteten](#) (a female and non-Cis male music collective) do”.



A big part of the issue is representation and people’s perceptions and prejudices. If you think about what you think an average producer looks like, an image that looks an awful lot like Max Martin starts to form in your head. We tend to picture producers as generally male, carefully watching their artists from behind a studio wall and running the show with a flick of a recording switch. That image isn’t exactly encouraging for young women who want to get involved in producing. By elevating female producers and writers, Cherish hope to change that and show

that production is a path open to non-males too. “The role of the producer in people’s assumptions almost always simply means men,” says Åslin. Tesfai says “I think there’s a lot of really amazing initiatives out there right now, like the producer program [Vem Kan Bli Producent](#), [UpFront Producer Network](#) and [PopKollo](#) for younger girls and they help to contribute to representation, which is so important. For example, at the Grammis recently, Laleh won best producer. She’s not the first female person to win best producer, but it’s still so uncommon to see a woman get recognised as a producer. Recently when I was at Where’s The Music (the industry conference and festival in Norrköping) and saw this panel discussion on female music producers. They were talking about how most female producers are also artists, but very few are just producers. And I think it’s an issue where maybe people don’t trust female producers”. “This can be changed with good representation – it’s the key!” concludes Åslin. “Representation can change the world”.



Cherish see signs of that change beginning to happen, despite a reluctance from the mainstream music industry to participate. “It always amazes me that record labels don’t invest time and money into doing the stuff that Vem Kan Bli Producent or any other similar organization does. They should pay these initiatives to give them this new generation of producers. Because good music needs new perspectives. In the future, people are going to demand more from the creative industries. For example, we have several artists who are very determined to work with female producers. So there is a demand there. If you’re signing incredible talented artists who demand female producers, and you can’t provide that, you’re not doing your job. If your idea is that there aren’t any, then you should provide a solution”.



Photo: Daniel Leksell

Cherish certainly don't feel that there's a shortage of female producers in Stockholm at present. They talk about a huge wave of talent, and the strong sense of community that's built up. "We've never had problems finding talented, competent female anything" says Tesfai. "Or people of colour. It's never been a problem or an issue for us. I don't know why it is for some people. You can tell that a lot of female artists are more comfortable working with other female artists, or producers, or sound engineers or whatever. I guess it's a safe space thing or a trust thing. Just because they've been in the same industries and have a lot of things in common. They've been through the same stuff. That realisation, that someone you respect or admire has been through the same stuff that you've been through, it's such a relief. It sounds horrible, but you think 'Great! I wasn't crazy, it happened to me too!'. There's so many situations where you feel you can connect on a different level, because things have happened to you both, so you talk about it. It's definitely happening worldwide. It brings us together more and makes us more determined".



Evelina Åslin & Senait Tesfai. Photo: Austin Maloney

Despite the worthiness of Cherish's mission statement, no one would pay attention if they didn't have the music to back it up. Luckily, the label has made its name by releasing some of the most exciting new music in Stockholm over the last year and a half. From sweep's nerve-rattling electronica to AmberValent's colourful digital r'n'b, the music has spanned multiple genres while retaining the high quality levels throughout, with an extra stamp of individuality that makes it stand out in the crowded Stockholm music landscape. I asked them what makes a song and artist shine for them. "I think it's when the song talks to us in a certain way and if we just really like the track", says Åslin. "There's been a few that we rejected, not many, since we're a new label, but that was because we felt that it wasn't our style of music. Obviously, our taste comes into it. So it's subjective, it's not that the things we reject are necessarily bad. And when rejecting, sometimes we ask them to keep sending us stuff in the future. So far many of the songs we've gotten we've loved when they were sent to us". "I love our chat group, when somebody sends us something we get excited about" says Tesfai. "It's like having a crush, the way we write about it: 'Oh my god, did you hear that!!'. I used to work at a radio station, and after a while you stop reacting to songs [after hearing so many], because everything sounds the same. When I heard 'Body' [HELH's first single on Cherish], it made me happy all day. A lot of what we do is about females making music, but it's females making good music. There's such a high quality in everything they do. For us to be a part of it, it's just amazing. Also, we always make sure to give feedback when it comes to the songs, about what could make it better, and then we could try again in the future. It's never a definite no".

The label have a lot planned for the next few months. “We have some more releases this spring and even more interesting collaborations for the summer too”, says Åslin. Tesfai adds “I’ve always said I’d love to curate an album with all our artists. We’ve been thinking about that for a while. Or a showcase show. Our dreams are big, definitely, but we have to be realistic. We also have day jobs and DJ, run clubs, which is also important for Cherish, to build up relationships with clubs. It will take the time it needs to take”. Åslin wraps it up: “2017 is going to be a good year for Cherish!”



Cherish’s latest releases, HELH’s new single Another Delilah and [RO-E’s Tasty EP](#), are out now. [Live Sessions x Cherish Label Night](#) takes place at Under Bron on April 20.

Words: [Austin Maloney](#)

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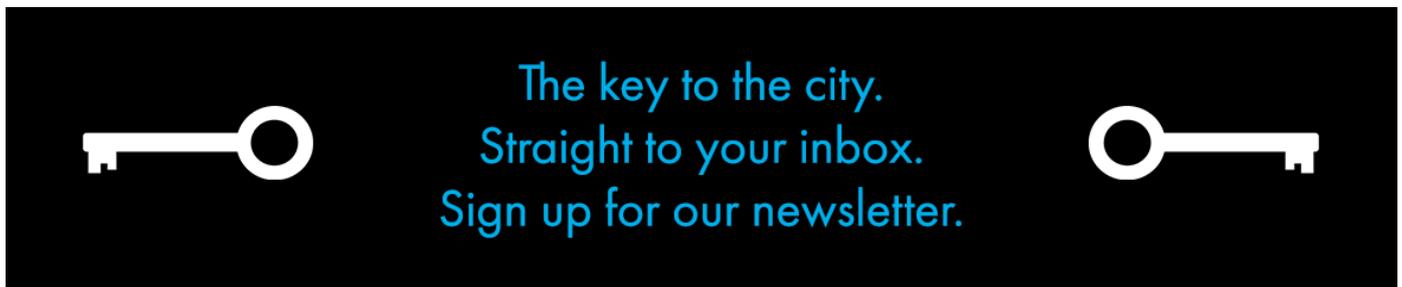
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