

PILVAX

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The Unbending Trees are a trio specializing in sparse, brutally honest chamber ballads and slowcore pop from Budapest. Their album *Chemically Happy (Is the New Sad)* was released in autumn of 2008. Singer and lyricist Kristof Hájos is a former monastery friar, but was thrown out at age of 18.

The Unbending Trees

Pilvax interview

The Unbending Trees are one of a new breed of Hungarian pop bands that are backed by an international label and targeted at audiences beyond Hungary. It turns out that Hungarians also liked what they saw in their first single “You are a Lover,” and the elegiac, affecting song rose to number five on the local video charts before the album, *Chemically Happy (is the New Sad)* was released last November.

Pilvax sat down with The Unbending Trees front man Krístof Hájos at his favorite Ráday street café to find out what he was thinking by putting out melodic, carefully arranged and written music, and thus confounding all our nasty preconceptions about Hungarian pop, and we discovered he had more than one story to tell.

Pilvax: Ben Watt (of Everything but the Girl, and his label Strange Feeling) discovered you on Myspace out of the blue?

Hájos: I put a couple of songs on Myspace with no real aim in mind, and then I started adding my favorite musicians as friends, as you usually do. I added Everything but the Girl, and then Ben sent me a message that he liked my songs very much. He asked if we have more and I said “oh sure,” but of course we didn’t, we only had three songs, so I had to sit down and write four more and send those. Then I asked him, “now what?” and he said he would like to sign us. It is very strange, almost like you fight for something for ten years, and then you decide to give up and have a simple life, and then suddenly appears a record deal in London.

Pilvax: Which was the song he attached himself to initially?

Hájos: First there was “You are a Lover,” and then “Alfred’s Love Song,” and a third.

Pilvax: In terms of the video for “You are a Lover,” it made me a little angry that some foreign band came to Budapest and captured the feeling of the city so well, then I discovered it was Hungarian, which was pleasing.

Hájos: It was a funny thing because Ben didn’t want a video, because of it not being cost effective, and then I thought that there is a young guy who I used to work with on some web pages, and I asked him to help make it. I was just coming up with ideas of what to do, and I was just sitting on the underground, the földalati, and I was thinking, wouldn’t it be cool if there was just some couple who would snog next to

me like hell. And I told him this idea and we were thinking to do this on the BKV might not be such a good idea, so why don't we just do it in a car? I asked my colleague who sits next to me "do you feel like snogging in a video?" So they came but they split up after the video, but it was a lucky combination because the video cost nothing and the welcome has been really warm.

Pilvax: Does the constant downloading of the song bother you?

Hájos: Of course it does because it takes money out of my pocket, but what can you do against it? The only thing that really upsets me is when these teenage boys and girls write us and ask for the mp3s. Of course I am not going to send them. That is the only strange situation. Obviously, we have to start thinking of new forms of music and sales, and I don't think the concept of an album is going to survive much longer.

Pilvax: The famous Hungarian song "Gloomy Sunday" came up on my Youtube search.

Hájos: We covered that version live, and it comes up on all these sites for some reason. But it is also going to be on the UK edition of the album.

Pilvax: Why not on the Hungarian release?

Hájos: That would be too cheap, too obvious, but for England it seems like a good thing to do. We also used to do "A Whiter Shade of Pale" in concert.

Pilvax: I read that Hungarians were rated the third-saddest population in Europe.

Hájos: Our music is not going to help. But when we signed with Ben, I did not think the album would be published here because it is so against the mainstream in Hungary, but the welcome has been a lot warmer, I would have never dreamed to be played on MTV like we are.

Pilvax: Well, it's fresh.

Hájos: But Hungarians don't care about what's fresh, they care about what the trend is. We aren't Kylie Minogue.

Pilvax: Then what is your logical predecessor?

Hájos: I don't know—I don't really listen to music like that. The music itself is written the two other guys, Peter Háy and Hávasi, the renowned pianist, I only write the lyrics and sometimes the melodies. But the melodies sort of come from the music anyway. They say we are sort of like Nick Drake or Tim Buckley or all these people who have died prematurely. We were also compared to Antony and the Johnsons, but he has a much higher voice. It might be just because he plays piano, I don't know.

Pilvax: Do you like that comparison?

Hájos: To some extent, but after a while, his voice starts annoying me. The only artist who I really like is Nick Drake, I don't listen to the rest.

Pilvax: Is there anything specifically Hungarian about your music?

Hájos: I don't know. The Kodály way of music education is in our blood, so maybe.

Pilvax: What is slowcore?

Hájos: I have no idea, that is a word that the label invented. I have no idea about genres. The label has all these nice promo people who come up with these things, so I don't have to think about it. They come up with slowcore and I don't know what it means, but it sounds nice.

Pilvax: Was it hard for you to come out as a vegetarian?

Hájos: (laughs) I have never heard of coming out as a vegetarian, I started eating less and less meat about five years ago when I started doing yoga. It is purely moral, it is not a health issue for me. And then last year I decided I can't have any more meat—I can't see the food in it, I only see the corpse. It is not very easy, because sometimes it is fried cheese for a week. It's easier in London. I live with my partner, and my partner is fine with eating tofu all the time.

Pilvax: There were some dramatic aspects to your life story.

Hájos: Traumatic?

Pilvax: Dramatic.

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The rest of the Pilvax interview with Unbending Trees singer Kristof Hájos can be found in ISSUE 6 of PILVAX, locally available in Budapest.