

interview by Elizabeth Rhodes  
photographer Marilia Fotopoulou

# Selofan

Based in Athens, Greece, the duo **Joanna Pavlidou** and **Dimitris Pavlidis** have been building buzz with their experimental minimal synth/synthwave sound since forming in 2012, and saw their 2018 release *Vitrioli* on the playlists of many fans of the genre and at club events with standout tracks like "Ist Die Liebe Tot?" and "Give Me A Reason". Their music videos, many of which were directed by Dimitris Chaz Lee, have generated attention for how the band has successfully incorporated visual storytelling into their music. Onstage and in press images, Joanna's appearance is its own form of storytelling, utilizing elements of visual art movements and underground no wave cinema. Selofan have a new album coming out this fall called *Partners In Hell* and the band has already released two songs and accompanying music videos ahead of the album's release. We caught up with Joanna Pavlidou to discuss Selofan's approach to making music, co-founding **Fabrika Records**, as well as their synthesizer shop **synthesizer.gr**, and the use of storytelling via cinema and visual art in the music of Selofan.

**When you began Selofan, did you envision the music to have a specific sound, feeling or mood?**

Joanna Pavlidou: We both listen to a lot of different genres and our sound is a mixture of them all. It depends mostly on the equipment we use and the mindset we are in at the time of the creation. Making music is like a journey with no specific destination. There are always new places to discover.

**Your music videos are short films, rich in visual information and storytelling. How do you approach making videos for your music?**

JP: It is a totally DIY and therefore very creative process, everyone involved may change the storytelling at any moment, since there hardly is any specific scenario. All characters might look extraordinary, but this is who they are in real life. Shooting is always great fun between friends. The most demanding part is the editing, which can elevate or kill a DIY production.

**Please share with our readers how Fabrika Records began and how you've curated the artist roster.**

JP: We see our life in terms of music, our life-defining experiences are all connected to it. We met each other because of it, it was in 2011 while I was DJing in a club and Dimitris was the sound technician in a live show I curated. Fabrika is like our child, a natural development of us. We used to hang out in the clubs and attend concerts all over Europe. This is how we met almost every artist on the label. In some dark, loud basement club. It sounds romantic but that's the way it has been. Fabrika is an artist-friendly record label, being a band ourselves we understand the importance of the complete freedom of expression when working with an artist. We value lasting relationships with our family of artists and work hand in hand with them to help realize their vision. We often collaborate, playing on each other's records, mixing and mastering for each other, shooting videos and playing shows together. There is an important sense of community, like in the first independent labels of the early 80s.

**What is the connective thread among all of the artists on Fabrika?**

JP: Fabrika embraces aesthetically diverse bands who tie into the dark core and fascinate us. They all live to play music and they all live from playing music. They all are new and unconventional artists, their music is mostly sad and of timeless character and they all use synthesizers.

**Your use of languages in songwriting is unique because you switch between singing in Greek, English and German. When writing lyrics, do words come to you in one language and then you translate to whatever works best with the melody, or does the language come along with the lyrical inspiration?**

JP: I don't think about the language at all. I have a notebook where I write lyrics in different languages, strangely less often in my native language, which is Greek. It also happened twice that I wrote in Spanish, a language I don't even speak, and eventually we have two songs in Spanish. Language is a medium of expression and every language has its own sound, transmits a different feeling, and has its unique cultural background. Therefore, I consider it to be one of the privileges of my life to be able to express myself in more than one language.

**Tell us about your upcoming album, *Partners In Hell*. What inspired it, how did you come to that title and is there anything new that you experimented with on this album?**

JP: This has been our most "uneasy" album up to now, not really difficult in the making, but complex and emotional. We wanted it to sound better than the previous one, as every musician does. It's always a good sign when your best album is also your most recent, you feel like you've taken a step up. We collaborated for the first time with Serafim Tsotsonis, a producer and accomplished musician. Doruk from She Past Away did fantastic mastering. The way I sing has changed. I am still discovering new ways of using my voice. I recorded double vocals in some tracks and played the chimes and Dimitris created his own simple but beautiful bass

sound, using three slightly detuned DX7 synthesizers. A warm chorus effect bass sound came out of it and that's probably the characteristic of this record. We used more samplers, the Fairlight, the E-mu Emax and old effect pedals that radically altered the natural sound of the keyboards. Another novelty is that you won't hear Dimitris voice anymore as he prefers to only be present by his music. The title is a verse of a song I wrote that funnily didn't make it on this record.

**Your music videos have a cinematic feel to them. What films, directors and cinematographers have inspired you?**

JP: Kenneth Anger, Jim Jarmusch, John Waters, Derek Jarman, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Shinya Tsukamoto, Pedro Almodovar, Werner Herzog, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Andrei Tarkovsky, Nikos Nikolaidis, to name but a few. My all-time favorite is *Liquid Sky* from Slava Tsukerman. We love German Expressionism and old Hollywood pictures as well as b-movies and horror films.

**What about *Liquid Sky* and German Expressionism specifically are inspiring to you? I can see these as influences in aspects of your visual and musical style.**

JP: I think *Liquid Sky* is the purest and most psychedelic artifact of the new wave era in New York. The imagery, fashion, makeup, hairstyles have references to Japanese Kabuki theatre combined with sex, drugs, aliens and the hottest gender fluid persona that is the leading lady (and man). I am fascinated by the disconnection between subjectivity and reality, the visual distortion, showcasing the drama of the human condition and the absurd and dystopian aesthetics of German expressionist films.

**For that matter, what visual artists (painting, photography, multimedia, etc) have inspired you lately?**

JP: Well, I am rather old-school in this matter. I admire in random order Peter Saville, Vaughan Oliver, Jamie Reid, Pierre et Gilles, Man Ray, Robert Mapplethorpe, Helmut Newton, Salvador Dali, Andy Warhol, Frida Kahlo, Banksy, Keith Haring, Basquiat, Wassily Kandinsky, Caravaggio among others.

**What about these artists inspires you?**

JP: Their ability to de-contextualize and recontextualize an image in another artwork. To create a trademark, a personal authentic style, is a great achievement for an individual.

**Your live performances incorporate more elements than just the music: you seem to engage the audience in performance art to tell the story of the songs. You both play multiple roles/instruments on stage which adds a dynamic edge to your performances. Do you consider yourselves to be visual artists or performance artists in this way, in addition to being musicians?**

JP: We value very much the visualization of the show, it is the door leading to our world, connecting the audience with the band onstage. Creating an atmosphere through projections in the background or theatrical elements added to the live show is a necessity for our kind of music, which is strongly emotional, has its roots in the early darkwave/synthwave movement and combines the performance part by tradition. While on tour playing every night there is a repetition, which kills the vibe for us. We don't consider ourselves as visual artists, we improvise and reinvent ourselves so that each show is unique and both us and the audience carry it in our hearts longer than just one night.

**Aside from Selofan and Fabrika Records, what other creative projects are you currently involved in?**

JP: Time is not on our side, especially the last three years since we opened a synthesizer shop in Athens. Lately we recorded some tracks in Greek that are by nature totally different from Selofan. We would like to release them at some point, but they really don't fit the narrative of Selofan, so that the tracks themselves oblige us to create a new project. Time will tell.

**Tell us about your shop **Synthesizer.gr** in Athens.**





## ..... auxiliary music

JP : Sure, and the best thing is we live in the same building. It is literally our second home as we spend more hours of the day in the shop than at home.

**Has your shop become a community center for musicians in Athens? What do you find is the impact of running a business like this?**

JP : It is definitely a community center for musicians, as it is an exclusive synth boutique. We are open on specific days, everyone can try out everything, which means most people spend some hours in the shop, playing music or hanging around having a coffee and a nice synth-chat. We are located in the suburbs of Athens, so that we can enjoy the luxury of a small front yard, where depending on the day and hour you can find members of local and international bands discussing their favorite synths. We have been told that we contributed to a new band being born. And that's what keeps us going

**Joanna, you continually change up your look on stage and in videos and promotional shots. What inspires you as far as makeup and how do you go about creating the looks for specific performances? (I especially loved your makeup in the "Give Me A Reason" video.)**

JP : Thanks. That was another improvised moment created by a friend who is a tattoo artist. I really left it all up to her and didn't know how the end result would look like. Usually there is an initial idea and if it's for a video it goes with the character. The stage look I create easily on my own because it's not far from reality. I developed my personal makeup style in all the years of nightclubbing which I overdo a bit for the stage and I also have a vast collection of flea market vintage clothes I am using on and off stage. My first job as a teenager was in a second-hand shop, I was always style conscious.

**You've mentioned that Selofan has always been a DIY project. With multiple full lengths released and numerous performances, how has your approach to songwriting changed over time?**

JP : None of us is a musician, we practically don't have any technical knowledge, we grow, learn and develop through experience. At the beginning we were more experimental. We knew there would be some people out there who would identify with us, but it all felt like a blank canvas, we even uploaded first-take demos on Bandcamp, taken away by our excitement the moment a track took shape. The first record is definitely underproduced, but it's a document of how the band really was at that point. Now we are pragmatic and well aware that we have to keep the songs coming and make them better, not only to please our audience, but to prove something to ourselves as writers.

**Why do you think the postpunk, synth, and darkwave/no wave genres have seen such a resurgence in recent years? What is your take on the current cultural zeitgeist for music?**

JP : Music reflects the spirit of the times. Currently, we don't exactly experience the brightest side of life on a global scale. I appreciate the comeback of the dark theme in music. There are many new, interesting bands with their own musical identity, who don't sound like a cheap remake but like an honest approach adjusted to our time.

**We are in unprecedented times with a pandemic and its major economic impacts. How has your view of artistry changed in recent months?**

JP : The life of an artist was never supposed to be easy and from the hardest periods in the history of humanity bloomed the most gorgeous masterpieces. Artistry is needed now more than ever, and I believe that there will be some "COVID-19" records that will surprise us in the future.

**What is the path forward for creatives without resources to perform at traditional venues (v. DIY spaces)?**

JP : From my experience the musical scene we belong to is very supportive, there is always a nice promoter to invite an interesting new act to play in his club, or

at least this is how we started. If a band can connect with people and have an authentic spirit, resources aren't really needed. Bands like us usually play both at traditional venues and DIY spaces. Here in Greece, DIY spaces are strongly associated with politics and a specific ideology, so that some bands playing there wouldn't be bothered playing in a traditional venue.

**How has your home base of Athens impacted your creativity? Do you find it to be an inspiring, creatively robust city?**

JP : It is a love-hate relationship, the kind you can only survive if you are creative otherwise the city might swallow you. The combination of eternal sunshine and permanent existential angst is definitely inspiring.

**As a listener, I've noticed an underlying theme of death or contemplation of mortality in your music. Would you agree this is a theme of your music and lyrical content?**

JP : It is a theme in our music as it is in our lives and in everybody's lives at some point. It's not about being miserable, it's about being realistic.

**You both are an example of how collaboration with other creatives can build a community, from your label Fabrika to your inclusion of friends in music videos and performances. What advice would you give to artists starting out who want to create something similar?**

JP : If you have a vision, go for it. There are countless possibilities out there for the ones who dare. And work hard for your dream, as Picasso once said, "Inspiration does exist, but it has to find you working."

Check out Selofan's discography and see the full artist roster for Fabrika Records at the label's site [fabrikarecords.com](http://fabrikarecords.com). You can also check out Joanna and Dimitris' synthesizer shop at [synthesizer.gr](http://synthesizer.gr) or on Instagram @synthesizergr.

