



# Vagabon

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**I**t was during the recording of her debut album *Infinite Worlds* that singer-songwriter Laetitia Tamko, who performs under the moniker Vagabon, first heard her voice clearly, and it frightened her. A deep, rumbling vocal with a timbre so warm it almost resembled a brass instrument at its brightest moments. Rather than shy away from her fears, Tamko's relentless touring schedule forced her to know her voice and herself more intimately than before. "Through performing I thought there are valleys in my voice that I'm not sure are pleasant or pretty or beautiful but I want to step into them confidently," says Tamko.

It is a confidence that carried her through the creation of her latest release, *Vagabon*, an evocative, masterful record which sees Tamko embody the multi-talented auteur she was clearly born to be. The album crosses into new territory for Tamko as she largely trades in the distorted guitar driven melodies of *Infinite Worlds* in favour of hypnotic pop song structures. It is a move she claims was spurred by writing on tour, growing weary of her guitar, and having her new-found confidence in herself. →

To understand how she could come to doubt a talent so obvious to many (Pitchfork once called her a "game changer" in indie rock) we only have to look at Tamko's sharp ascent into the spotlight. Born in Cameroon, Tamko relocated to New York with her family as a teenager where she was introduced to the pillars of American pop music and soon fell in love with stars like Brandy and Mariah Carey. While studying engineering at college she was convinced by a friend to record and upload the songs she had been working on to Bandcamp. Shortly after Tamko was introduced to the scrappy New York DIY indie scene where she made her mark performing at the former staple venue Silent Barn, alongside her peers Mitski and Frankie Cosmos.

Tamko connected with audiences almost instantly through her introspective songs that tackled regret, longing, and loneliness with an honesty that was rarely matched. The praise placed a weighty pressure on her shoulders. Where previously she could write alone in her bedroom just for herself she now had the world watching. It wasn't until an opportunity to write for another artist came along that she felt comfortable writing for herself again. The resulting song from that session was "Flood" the first single from Vagabon and a noted change in direction. "Through writing for other people and through writing that song for someone else I learned that it's within me so I can get started," explains Tamko.

Pushing back against the fear that once quashed her creativity, Tamko was determined to challenge herself at every conceivable point. She was the sole producer, played instruments she had never even held before, and worked expansively with hazy, trap-inspired beats. The process was thrilling to Tamko and allowed her to become the same awestruck songwriter she once was. "I'm kind of like a kid in a candy store where I'm able to touch all these different instruments and see what sparks

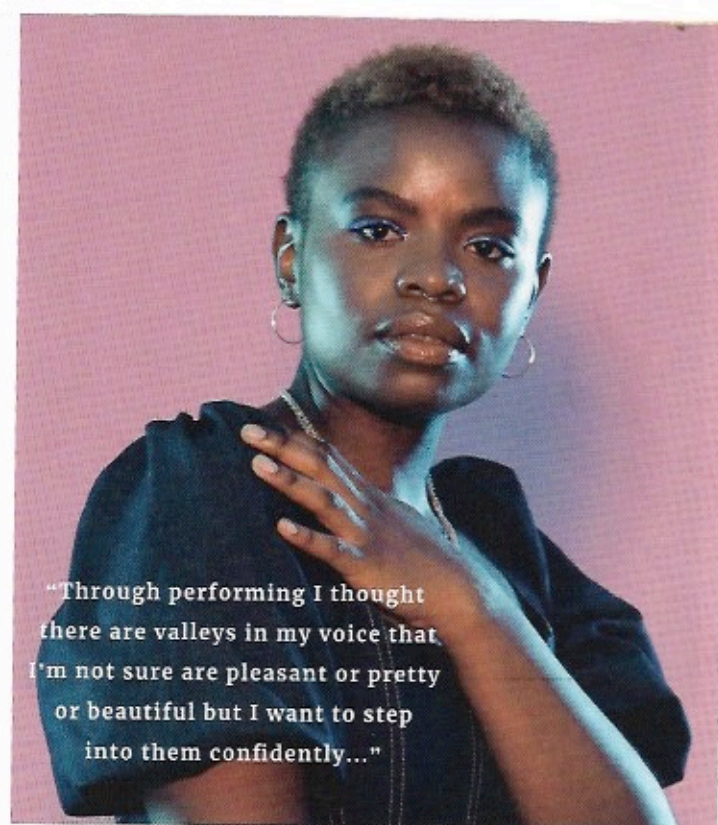
the naivety inside of me and what sparks this excitement and this beginner's mind mentality," she exclaims.

Her experimental creative process can be heard in some of the highlights of *Vagabon*. The buoyant, dancing on my own number 'Water Me Down' catches the ear in the same way Rihanna's recent cover of Tame Impala does. While the experimental piece 'Please Don't Leave The Table' could easily sound at home anywhere in Solange's back catalogue. Would Vagabon ever make a more deliberate move towards the pop world? She insists her writing process does not centre around reaching specific audiences or genres. "I know the feeling I want to convey and I know the feeling I want the listener to have when they hear a specific part," she explains.

The noted difference between her previous release and *Vagabon* is not lost on Tamko: "I'd be lying if I said I didn't think 'Oh, this is so different from *Infinite Worlds*, what does that mean?' but the thought was not enough of a hindrance for me to change course." Her move away from indie, both in terms of her sound and her real life community, was necessary for Tamko who at times felt at odds with the scene's lack of diversity. Now for Tamko creating a community where there were no limits on who could feel at home was imperative to her. It is a notion captured effortlessly on 'Wits About You' as Tamko sings "I was invited to the party / They won't let my people in / Well then never mind, never mind, never mind / We don't wanna go to your function".

It is a process that allows Tamko to prioritise those who she sees as her community in every aspect of her work: "When I'm headlining and I have a say in who opens I know who to go to. When I am asked 'who are you listening to today?' I know who I want to talk about."

Her ever-growing community now consists of fellow touring musicians who contribute to a "solid group chat" sharing road stories

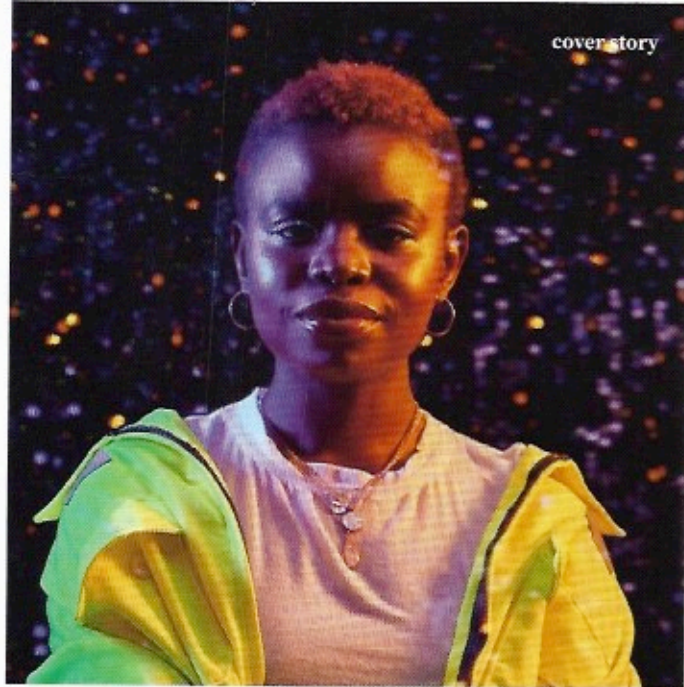


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and offering much needed support. Outside of the group chat her friends have influenced her work in other ways. Melina Duterte, of dream pop outfit Jay Som, featured Tamko on her latest release. Anak Ko. Tamko returned the favour, enlisting Duterte on trumpet and backing vocals on 'Please Don't Leave the Table'. It is a reciprocal friendship that naturally sparks creativity in both women. "Coming over to her house and seeing what she's working on, it's like, 'Oh wow' we get to talk technically but we're

also just seeing mirrors and I think that's really important," says Tamko.

In September 2018, Tamko performed album opener 'Full Moon in Gemini' at The Getty Museum, accompanied only by a string section. Commanding the stage in an asymmetric black safety pin dress in green tights and white heels Tamko was in the early stages of her evolution towards her new stage look. Her fresh faced, Instagram-ready look is a far cry from her →



previous stage outfits, which usually consisted of jeans, a t-shirt and beanie hat. Her deliberate efforts to showcase a curated style are part of her want to bring more showmanship into her performances. Tamko says: "Now I want to create a space with my shows where I'm now performing with a little bit more intention because I'm more available to give that whether it's through a look or dancing, or putting the guitar down and interacting with the audience."

Her excitement with performing filters down to the rest of her life. When I ask whether her confidence in her music affected her personally, she is quick to reply with a hearty 'yes', adding, "there is such an affirmation to follow your instinct and to have your instinct

lead you in the right direction". Considering Tamko is only 26, it is thrilling to consider how much she has already achieved and how far the rest of her career could take her. It is a thought that keeps Tamko inspired. "I'm trying to live a full life," she explains. "I've lived many lives at this point, I've lived in a totally different place in the world, I have lived a life where I only spoke French and not English, now I'm living a life where I'm here." Considering she has so many plans for her future, we hope she gets more lives. ■

Vagabon is released September 27th via Nonasuch Records

LIVE: St Pancras Old Church, October 21st

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