



Johanna Billing

IF I CAN'T DANCE,
I DON'T WANT TO BE PART OF YOUR REVOLUTION

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Introduction to Johanna Billing
You Don't Love Me Yet by Johanna Billing

Johanna Billing



In her long term project *You Don't Love Me Yet*, which has been touring to different international cities between 2002 and 2005, Johanna Billing invited musicians to play a live version of a song by Roky Erickson according to their own interpretation. **If I Can't Dance...** organized the Dutch part of the tour in 2005 which traveled from Utrecht, to 's-Hertogenbosch and finally Leiden.

In this project, Johanna Billing made herself as an artist almost invisible. Behind the scenes though, she organized the event as precisely as possible. For example, by choosing a location that normally is not used as a music podium, or proposing an afternoon to stage the event instead of an evening, she consciously tried to break through existing patterns of behavior in both the music and the visual arts scene. As an artist she facilitated a collective experience where individuality expressed itself in the different artistic interpretations of the song, where the performing musicians were invited to listen to each others' presentations and where the audience was witness to the potential of repetition, as the event offered a wide range of versions of this single song's text. Each event had its specific line up of performances by rock bands, choirs, laptop musicians, professionals, amateurs or impromptu get togethers, mainly coming from the local scene.

All the concerts ended with the video screening of the studio recording of *You Don't Love Me Yet*, a work made by Johanna Billing together with a group of Swedish musicians.



You Don't Love Me Yet



On various occasions Johanna Billing expressed her ideas and thoughts about the project, as well as explaining how this project came into being. The following text is a compilation of quotes extracted from an interview with Helena Holmberg in September 2003, published in the Swedish magazine *Nifca Info*. The main part comes from a talk Johanna Billing presented on the occasion of the project *Radio Days* in *De Appel* in Amsterdam, broadcast live on Saturday March 30, 2005. The epilogue stems from email correspondence in April 2006 between Johanna Billing and the curators of *If I Can't Dance*...

Why Johanna Billing chose this song

"I think I first heard the original version of the song in 2001. It is written and performed by the American singer songwriter - and I guess you can say icon - Roky Erickson in 1984. Roky Erickson is perhaps most known for his work with the psychedelic rock group **13th Floor Elevators** in the 60's. He had a solo career later and released many songs, though this specific one is not the most well known."

"I happened to hear this Roky Erickson song, which is about love and relationships in both a hopeful and disillusioned way, about the same time as I heard on the radio that Sweden has the highest number of single-occupancy households in the world. That made me reflect on just how highly we value independence. I've been brought up in an era where it's almost ugly to be dependent on someone. This applies not only to love matters, but in other areas too. It can be exceedingly

difficult to let go of oneself and one's own selfish interests."

"I cannot remember if I liked it very much in particular in the beginning, but it really got stuck in my head. I spend a lot of time wondering about it. I guess it puzzled me a bit. I was really curious to put together an almost manifesto type of event. Coming together around something that was very slippery and vague and ambiguous. I wanted to see if coming together would help to pin down the core of the song, what it was about, or could be about..."

How the project originated

"My main idea at the beginning of 2002 was to gather musicians and artists from many different groups to join in a studio for a recording of a version together. (Yes, I know the word Band Aid comes to mind! But for me it was not really about making a project in relation to that.) At that time there was no money to produce such of big project. **Index**, the institution that had invited me to work on this project, did not have this kind of money. So what I did, to just get some things started, was to invite all these groups to Stockholm to come down to the basement of **Index** to perform one version of the song after another, twenty bands in a row from four in the afternoon till eight in the evening. It was not meant to be anything more than a kind of a starting point for something else. I never dared to think that this extremely simple set up could actually turn out to be something quite magical

in the end because while the concert was going on, and the song after a while started to repeat it self, it created an incredible atmosphere that I still cannot really describe.”

How the project proceeded

“Ok, so the concert was a success! It could have ended there, but the reason why all the groups took part in the concert in the first place, was because they were promised that they could do the big version in the studio later on. So I had to continue and already then I started to feel a bit manic. Should I really take this any further? But apparently it was just the beginning! So in June 2003, eight months after the first live event, we managed to get the funding and were able to enter the wonderful prestigious old **Atlantis** studio in Stockholm where for example **Abba** made some of their first recordings. I got help from an extremely talented musician and composer **Ida Lundén** to arrange the song with strings, horns and choir arrangements. These arrangements were made very flexible and had to be invented in the studio while people were playing basically. This was because we could not control beforehand who would come and what instruments people would bring. I am still amazed that it actually sounds quite planned! The version from the studio, where altogether forty five musicians took part, was put on CD, distributed and handed out for free during the tour. I also made a film from this recording session.”

 “But what about this tour? How did it come about? It actually happened because of a major misunderstanding. In order to get funding for the filming and the recording in the studio, **Mats Stjernstedt** and **Helena Holmberg** of **Index** had contacted all these smaller art institutions around Sweden, asking them if they were

willing to contribute to the project. And then we would screen the film and make exhibitions with them in all the different cities. Further, my idea was to have a local band or artist to make one more contribution in every city. But many months into the process, I realized that I had totally misunderstood what **Mats** and **Helena** had told me: it turned out that all these smaller cities did not want to make anything less or smaller than the event we did in Stockholm, so they were all in for making the huge live event with many bands. I think at first I kind of panicked! We were talking about arranging a really big tour with live events in ten cities within only a couple of months.”

 “Knowing how much of an effort it was for me to put together something like this, even though I was used to arranging concerts, the other question was how it would work for an art museum that perhaps had never had any experience of working with music. Luckily it was too late for me to say anything and the whole tour thing was already starting to happen.”

Johanna's ideas about the notion of the cover version

“I had been thinking about the idea of making cover versions a lot and was interested in working with that. Personally I really love cover versions and I have always envied musicians because they can do cover versions. When you do a cover version, you pay a tribute to something, in a loving way; you might even reveal your influences by doing that. This is something that I have found very rare in the art world where you, in-

stead, basically spend all the time creating an aura around yourself that is as unique as possible. The closest thing to cover-versions we have as artists is the paraphrase. This is something often more complex and theoretical and very seldom about something you like, or even worship... .”

“I guess another reason why I like the cover version is that it implicates that you have to step outside of yourself and focus on someone else, enter someone else's world. You are making something maybe not about yourself, or if it is a tribute, not even for your self, but to me that does not make the result any less personal. On the contrary, I think when you work with cover-versions you sometimes let your self go and experiment even more. And to let go of oneself, no matter if it is in a love relationship or in a collaboration, is I think what this project is about.”

“Working with cover versions as a format for this project has served a bit like a catalyst. Because it is about finding something out while you are doing it, taking part in a project for reasons that are not the most immediate ones in a way. In this case, you are invited to take part not to play your own song, but another persons song, and you might ask yourself for what and for whom? These questions and how you relate to them, are very important ingredients in this project.”

“Related to the idea of the cover version, is this other important element within the initial concept, namely repetition. The fact that *You Don't Love Me Yet* is repeated time and time again, in different forms, is almost like an incantation. But this repetition cannot just be about doing something again. I hope everyone

feels that it's about extending the project and that the new versions work as additions and commentaries.”

About the effect of the setting

“Many of the performers, no matter how established they are, said they had never been as nervous as in these specific concerts. I guess that is because there was this extremely intense listening experience. You sit down, it is totally quiet, no beer drinking and talking, as is normal in other concert situations. And of course you start to listen for the small things that are different in the songs. Or if you are a performer, you might even sit there and compare your own version to the others before going up to play and that is perhaps what made so many of performers so nervous.”

About the encounter of different styles and communities

“During these events, the set up worked almost like a trick - even though not deliberate - to get people to listen with equal concentration to different types of music. And that is something that has been so revealing for me working with this project. Since I normally arrange a lot of music concerts with the record label that I also work with, my experience is often that when it comes to music, people are very specific about their taste, and about what kind of music concerts they go to, not quite as open as people who are interested in art and visit art shows.”

“This thing, that it is possible to arrange a concert

with the toughest hip hop guys playing together on the same stage with for instance classical guitar students, and that it can feel like a very natural thing, only because you have something else to focus on, that has been a really amazing experience.”

“I think it has helped a lot that the audiences were extremely mixed. The mix of both the performers and the audience came, I guess, out of a very practical set-up we tried to establish in all the cities we went to. In every city we wanted the local art institution to collaborate with a local music institution or venue. And many times this happened for the first time, often with a lot of skepticism and hesitation. Could this be something good? Nobody wanted to loose any of his or her integrity of course in the process. There was a fear sometimes that the music would not be taken seriously enough in the art museum context and vice versa. The funniest thing that actually happened in many of the cities, was not that people came up afterwards and said how good it was but instead they often were a bit surprised that it actually happened at all!”

About what this long term project entails

“For me it feels natural working with a project for a long time and it is exciting having so many components in a project and at the same time activating something so open and motley. The collaboration between the organizers is also interesting, as they now make ‘cover’ versions of the first concert in their respective towns. Obviously, there’s a double-emotion connected to it, but still that is what the project has been about since the start. I find it exciting - and quite right - that in part even I must relinquish control over the way I work with exhibitions and events. Of all the various parts of this project, I think that

is the most exciting: trying to create a more flexible form for how things are shown while maintaining the content.”

How the project further developed

“From the cosy candlelit concert place in Östersund, it was a totally different atmosphere setting up the event at the **Frieze Art Fair** in Regents Park in London in October 2003. When we were doing the sound check in the temporarily built lecture room that the concert was going to take place in, the directors of the fair got a call from the gallery booth next to us where the owner of the gallery was very upset and shouting that he could not hear what his client was saying. So it was all very different, trying to fit something in to a context where you feel like you make a big contrast just by being there - even though this of course was an art project to begin with.”

“After the event at **Frieze** I think Mats, Helena and I started to feel more confident and relaxed now that the project had been made in five cities: Stockholm, Eskilstuna, Norrköping, Östersund and London, it was all going great! We might even have thought that this concept could never go wrong... ”

“But then a month later we went to Vara, a very small town in the middle of Sweden. There the project was incorporated into a big cultural youth camp, where young kids from the Baltic countries came to the concert house in Vara and took part in all kinds of cultural

workshops for a week. And *You Don't Love Me Yet* was one of the projects they were supposed to work on. What made the whole experience so different (and difficult), was because they were told to do these versions by their teacher, and they had no choice. I think it is very important for this project that it is about choice and that you bring something with you in the process, the fear of what you might loose or the speculation of what you might win, or what ever other reason you might have for taking part. But still it is up to you!"

"Next stop was outside of Sweden again: Helsinki, Finland. There all my prejudices about the Finnish music scene were proven right when all the Finnish performers came to the sound check with their hands full of all kinds of electronic equipment: game boys, synthesizers and homemade computers. There were not even enough electrical outlets in the end to set up everything and the concert was delayed for hours."

"Coming closer to Roky Erickson, in March 2004 we went to the US, to Chicago, where the event was organized by Kristen Van Deventer, a music enthusiast working at *Vedanta Gallery* with a lot of contacts to some of the finest musicians in Chicago. When doing the events in smaller cities around Sweden, many of the participating bands had not heard of Roky Erickson before. Still they took part. Some knew of my record label perhaps as some kind of security and some took part for other reasons, for the song itself. But one nice thing with the Chicago event was that this time nobody knew who I was. Instead, everybody knew of Roky Erickson, so the event there got to be a lot about a tribute concert to Roky Erickson which was very beautiful and a bit different from the previous events."

"The Chicago event was supposed to be the final stop ever. For many, also very practical reasons, I could not work on any new work basically and started to feel a bit trapped. So for the next couple of months no events happened and we turned new proposals down. In Timisoara in Romania though, there was a remix version being made in October 2004 by the Romanian group *Makunochi Bento*. And while I was in Romania listening to their version, I got a call from Michael Stanley who is working in Milton Keynes, a city outside of London, asking if we could not do it again. Having the song in my head again, I could not say no. So in March 2005 there was another concert held in Middletown Hall, the shopping mall of Milton Keynes, a new city, only 35 years old that you could say basically centers around its shopping mall."

"Sitting on the floor there in the middle of the shopping mall, for me the event suddenly got to be a bit strange, because right in the middle of the performances, all of a sudden this memory popped into my head from when I was a teenager in the small town of Jönköping and was singing in a religious choir, mostly because there was nothing else to do in your spare time. Anyway, suddenly I saw myself very clearly on this choir trip up to Stockholm and how we were standing in the middle of a big shopping center in the south of Stockholm, singing for people passing by. So to be doing this kind of event in a public place like this, suddenly freaked me out! So maybe, for me it all comes down to this thing again: the choice you have also as

an audience member to take part in this or not.”

 “It is funny to sit here and talk about this in Amsterdam because as I speak, the plans for setting up three new *You Don't Love Me Yet* concerts here in the Netherlands are being made at this very moment and they will happen in Utrecht, on 19th of May, at **Festival a/d Werf**, then in August at **Theaterfestival Boulevard** in Den Bosch and finally at **De VeenFabriek** in Leiden in November later this year. So for all you listeners in the Netherlands, consider this an open call, if you want to join this project and make a cover version in any of these cities, contact Annie Fletcher, Frédéricque Bergholtz and Tanja Elstgeest who are organizing these events together.”

Epilogue

“From talking, to doing and now, finally sitting here writing about it. We did make the three events in the Netherlands as I said. It went really well I think. In fact it went so well, the first time in May at **Festival a/d Werf** in Utrecht, that I almost felt a bit weird about it. Where did all the nervous tension go? The anxious and subdued atmosphere, where you could sense the mixed feelings of reluctance and enthusiasm and the worries in between the songs, about what was going to happen next, was completely gone! The event in Utrecht was so enjoyable and easygoing: it was an atmosphere allowing people to clap their hands, sing along and even make jokes and laugh! I was amazed. I realized later that this was perhaps just my first encounter with the easy and relaxed Dutch way of socializing, doing things together with absolutely no inherent struggle or problem, collaborating for the fun of it! Just like that! It was great, but weird to feel that maybe the functions I was aiming for the

project to have, did not really apply here. I started to think that there was maybe not really the same need for doing the project in Holland. But then on a rainy afternoon in August, when the summery festival spirit all of a sudden seemed very far away, I did get back to the more harsh moods together with the smaller and more hesitating crowd on the second floor of the foyer of **Theater aan de Parade** in 's-Hertogenbosch. The atmosphere gradually evolved though, each time a song was performed. And amazingly in the end, people just did not want to stop playing: encores, again and again.

And finally on the 27th of November 2005, what was to be announced as the final stop ever of the *You Don't Love Me Yet* tour, took place in Leiden. It was the most massive set up so far with around twenty seven bands performing during a couple of extremely cold hours in the freezing **De VeenFabriek**, that was not yet fully renovated. Before the bands started to perform, in my introductory speech I was stressing the uniqueness of the event, talking about how final it was. At the same time I felt kind of stupid, standing there and saying all this, though knowing that this whole Dutch tour for example never even should have happened, because the stop before, the one in Milton Keynes - no actually, the one in Chicago, or even the one in Ystad was the real final stop originally...! And this is something I have found so striking about the project: to realize eventually that maybe I just cannot stop it. It is not longer my project, and of course not my song. Anybody can come along and do it, and may be do it even better.

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 And that was also one of the more interesting conversations we had when talking about whether the *You Don't Love Me Yet* project could get this 'other chance' again, and be turned into a Dutch tour, after the final stop in Milton Keynes last year. We started talking about the differences in making performance and art projects in the art world compared to the theatre world, or the music scene. A play, a concert or a tour, just gets better the more it is interpreted, played or seen, the more it travels and the more people get the chance to get involved, all over the world. Also in the art world, there is sometimes a kind of feeling that it is ok to repeat some things, in fact, that is good! But just not too many times, then the project can face a risk of loosing its credibility or value, its uniqueness perhaps as an "art object/project". And so, when discussing the ways of working with art and performance and how to make something that can have a function, a catalyst again, showing the differences and the similarities between these fields, it was just impossible to resist continuing to explore this. One of the other more interesting parts of working with this project in the *If I Can't Dance*.. frame, was the notion of repetition. To take an already repeating project and repeat it three times within itself almost, and within such a small area, and on top of that, within only a couple of months, turned out to be very fascinating and challenging. And I am so happy also to not only have the same performers coming again and again to the different cities in the Netherlands, like the fabulous fishermen choir *De Rotte Herders* who the second time around took their version even further and transformed themselves and the song from a traditional Folk tune, sung in a specific Den Bosch' dialect, to the coolest rap version (still in Dutch though!). But,

for me, it has also been great to have the opportunity to work with the same fantastic group of people, with for example Joris Tideman and his great way of finding and working with the musicians, not only for one event, as in the other cities, but again and again, and to have the possibility to not only look at things as a one of a kind experiment, but to have the chance to redo things, and work on them, taking the bad experiences into consideration and making them better next time.

 So, now that it is over, and especially since the last event was so nice, I cannot stop thinking of the somewhat vague but intriguing suggestion I heard the other day, which was that somebody told me to "just think about the possibilities" of perhaps setting up a *You Don't Love Me Yet* concert in San Francisco and imagine "how many great musicians there are over there. Just one more time...".