

CAMILLE - *OUI*.

The Mistral wind whips around the cloisters, courtyards and serpentine corridors of La Chartreuse, a 14th century monastery-turned-artist's residence near Avignon, southern France. It whistles down wells, knocks over bicycles, buffets a single pink rose on a bush in the grounds. *Oooo-eeee*, goes the wind, echoing and reverberating, stretching and playing with sound. *Oo-ee*.

OUI.

"I find this word so beautiful," says Camille, who wrote much of her new, momentous fifth album – including collaborations on a half dozen tracks - here in a monk's cell with a couch, a huge Afghani gong drum and a partial view of the walled garden. She rolls the diphthong around in her mouth: a mysterious *ooo*. An animated *eee* that makes a smile, lights her up.

"The story of the album is like this, moving from the elemental drums" - throughout *OUI*, percussion is used to ground, enchant, foreshadow - "to the treble and harmonics and light in my voice."

Ah yes, that voice. Anyone who knows Camille will tell you about her gift, an instrument of exhilarating range and phenomenal beauty and power, all crystalline delicacy one moment, roof-off sultriness the next; a sound maker given to a panoply of clicks and pops, whoops and yelps, *oos* and *ees* and whatever else takes this anarchic Parisian's fancy.

Listen, she says, writing out *OUI* on a notepad, changing its meaning ('*l'ouïe*' means 'hearing'), transforming it into symbol: "The 'O' is a circle. The 'U' is like a vase. The 'Ï' with the two dots over it might be a candle, or someone with eyes or ears or flames. I love this," she adds, blue eyes twinkling. "Even if you don't get French, it tells you a story."

As does *OUI* the album: the story of an internationally celebrated artist, one of the most iconoclastic singer/composers of her generation. A multi-award winner whose four acclaimed studio recordings - 2002's *Le Sac des Filles*, 2005's *Les Fil*, 2008's *Music Hole*

and 2011's *Ilo Veyou* - make up a growing oeuvre of astounding, genre-defying work. A cornucopia overflowing with folk, hymns, ballads, opera, catchy pop, raucous rock, soothing lullabies and breathtaking a capella, with choirs and backing vocals courtesy of Camille herself. An oeuvre marked by a grounded confidence, and by the way it keeps its eyes to the sky.

OUI is the next chapter in Camille's storybook. Just like its more folky predecessor, it revels in acoustics; the album's wordless classical choir, as sung by Camille, was recorded in a small chapel in the Tarn et Garonne in southwest France and at La Chartreuse, in the monks' former meeting place-cum-whispering gallery: "Which was a challenge," says Camille, leading the way down a labyrinth of passages overlooked by snub-nosed gargoyles, pagan Green Men and fragments of medieval frescoes. "But definitely spiritually uplifting."

Camille's year long residency at La Chartreuse brought focus, provoked thought. While she'd set out to write politically charged songs that took inspiration from age-old, drum-driven French traditional dances ("Which are revolutionary because they bring people together for real") and reflected upon the country's recent, tragic events, she was ultimately led to something more peaceful, vowel-oriented and vibrational in her exploration of sound. This had as much to do with Camille becoming a mother for the second time, and the sad passing of her beloved father Herve Dalmais, as it did something else.

Something above conflict. Even, she says, above time.

"Having my children has made me want to dive again into the spring of life, of love, of sound. I can see the sound springing, the shape a cry makes... " Another smile. "I really wanted this album to be in French, and for the French language to sound like a spring or a fountain, to be beautiful even if you don't understand it.

"All this mothering has led to me to an approach of fluidity," she continues. "I am enthusiastic about the cultural renaissance that is coming up, this going back to the earth. I wanted to use a drum in a stomping, shamanic way, as if I was drumming up peace. I wanted to be open. I wanted to say 'yes'."

We stop at the church, one the most spellbinding features of La Chartreuse, with an apse that collapsed in the 19th century, leaving the building open to the elements - and to the translucent Provencal light.

“The light in this place is so strong and present,” says Camille. “In French, we say it is pregnant. It’s as if it illuminates everything that has taken place here, shows you an ancient world made up of fragments. These old churches have their own dream world; you hear a voice. Feel something passing. See someone in the corner of your eye. A presence rather than something tangible.”

She shrugs. “On *OUI* I wanted to evoke the world to which I belong but also other worlds that are present yet not quite real. ‘Nuit Debout’ [a song that takes France’s Standing Night protest movement as its subject matter] is like this; I say that I am standing with the protestors in Place de la République but I am evoking it like a vision, in a poetic way. Mainly I am working with sound, exploring different registers including classical, this memory of old European civilization.

“All the voices on the album are telling a story,” she says, “and I am all the voices.”

Co-produced by Camille and her longtime collaborators, composer, arranger and multi-instrumentalist Clement Ducol and sound and mixing engineer Maxime Le Guil, and featuring voice, percussion and the versatile Moog analogue synthesiser, *OUI* is a work with a pulse. Threaded through its 11 highly original tracks is a programmed sound akin to a heartbeat: “It really resonates,” says Camille, an African dance practitioner who values movement as much as she does minimalism. “On some songs there are no drums, just this sub-bass like a kick drum, which leads the way and gives it a beat.”

In this respect, *OUI* might be viewed as a dance album, since a pulse leads to movement, which is an energy that gives rise to dance: “I wanted to follow that pulse, so I included two French traditional music pieces [‘Je Méne Les Loups’ and ‘Twix’] that I’d collected while I was attending all these different folk balls. These were songs which belonged to one village with its own dance and costumes; ten miles away there was another village with their own dance and so on.”

For Camille, a woman raised in a family that sang, this is what culture is about. Community. Music as a social link. Humanity as a choir. 'Seeds', the album's only English language song, is about reaping what we sow; a hopeful track, nonetheless, and one that errs on the side of abundance.

"We have to go back to the earth," she says. "The greatest luxury now is to do things local and little. We need to put our hands in the dirt and make food come to life. I have a little garden and I grow and eat my things, and I see how it helps people feel reborn."

Having earned a stellar reputation for her live work - cross-art form happenings that have seen sold-out crowds from Paris to London and Sydney create their impromptu live mixes - two years ago Camille did a pared-down tour of the Le Beaujolais region, singing in a series of chapels that she and her small audience walked between. "People rediscovered their own land. When you go local, you realise how huge the earth is, how infinite every path, every street corner."

After which Camille set her wild imagination to work on crafting songs such as 'Sous Le Sable', an ode to a mysterious woman named Laure/L'Or who lives below the sand; 'Piscine', which tells of a swimming pool desperate to burst out and flow into the sea, *la mer*, or *la mere*, the mother ("It's the tame thing that wants to go wild, the woman that wants to leave"); and 'Lasso', with its uneven rhythms and lyrics about throwing, spinning but never quite catching, about feeling *las*, or jaded.

Camille loves a play on words, a double meaning: the lyrics of 'Twix', which she wrote to accompany one of the traditional instrumentals, continue this theme of going back to the earth: "I'm saying if you plant a Mars Bar, you'll get nothing except war, because Mars is the God of War." A pause. "But if you plant an apple, after a little while you'll get an orchard."

She finds words tasty, too. Some more than others: 'Je Ne Mache Pas Mes Mots' is a paean to the piquancy of vowels and consonants, diphthongs and syllables. Its title is chanted like a pagan mantra. Its subtext champions freedom of speech. Elsewhere, there's 'Langue', a song that is variously about the tongue, the French language and the magic of sound: "At the end there's a high note. And then there's a harmonic that's even higher than that high note."

With Indian raga-influenced music composed by Matthew Ker (aka MaJiker) and Indi Kaur and additional percussion by Pierre Francois Dufour, 'Fille A Papa' is about the blossoming of a daddy's girl, a woman now tending the generational flames.

"My father was a singer [whose stage name was H. Bassam]. He didn't do music for a living but he definitely showed me the way. This is the first time he won't hear a new album of mine, which is maybe why I also called it *OUI* - like 'heard'. I wanted to make something so vibrational, so beautiful, that he can hear it where he is. Music has always helped me communicate on another very subtle level."

Finally, fabulously there is 'Fontaine du Lait', the album's first single, a life-affirming whoosh of - what? - milk, fluids, purity, positivity, love. A ribbon of words with the Mistral blowing through them, a song with flute sounds, and arrangements that overlap like a waterfall, sparkle like fractals.

Then there's that pulse, and that voice.

"Everything flows in this track," says Camille. "I say 'oui' a lot. I stretch French words so that they feel fluid; I think we the French need to be less strict. Sound making helps us all feel more open, don't you think?"

More open, more grounded, more uplifted.

All together now.

OUI.

Ends