

# IMOGEN HEAP

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Part cool 'n' collected statuesque beauty, part thrilled eight year old, Imogen Heap is struggling to contain her excitement. "For the last year, I've had a mission to accomplish," says the former Frou Frou lass, kicking her pink stiletto-ed heels with joy. From the pride glowing from the songwriter's grin, it's clear "Operation Imogen" has been a resounding success. After twelve months of graft in her studio, the bubbly twenty-seven year-old is finally poised to release the glorious 'Speak For Yourself'. Filled with grace and passion, and loaded with hooks, it's a captivating Bjork meets pop-Squarepusher gem of a record and the thoroughly deserving source of her exhilaration.

Following on from her 1998 debut 'I Megaphone' and her 2002 Frou Frou collaboration with Guy Sigsworth, 'Details', this is Heap's second release in her own name. But it is her first truly solo album. Out on Heap's own label, Megaphonic, 'Speak For Yourself' has an almighty cast of just one, but it is a triumph of Oscar-winning proportions. Startling lead single "Hide And Seek" is already taking the States by storm. One week after it was played-out in the closing sequence to the season (2) finale of cult drama series 'The O.C.', in a prize slot which last season used Jeff Buckley's heart-rending version of the Leonard Cohen-penned 'Hallelujah', 'Hide And Seek' leapt from No. 98 to No.32 in the Official Billboard Hot 100 Download Chart, making Imogen the No.1 Electronic Act on the chart. Impressively, the track – which was only available on iTunes as oppose to the many music sites which make up the Download Chart – sold 9,700 copies as a download in one week alone, and more impressively, gave Megaphonic the only independently-released track in the entire Hot 100 chart that week.

Sitting among the chiffon curtains and butterfly fairy lights of her Bermondsey studio – the very same one in which Dizzee Rascal recorded 'Showtime', though now significantly girlied-up – Heap is the picture of satisfaction. Armed with Pro-Tools, some geeky toys and a room full of instruments ranging from a cello to carpet tubes, she wrote, recorded and produced every glistening note of her remarkable electro-pop record herself, fulfilling a life-long dream. "I always wanted to find out what I was capable of," she says smiling broadly.

In 2003 Heap parted ways with Island records, who released Frou Frou's "Details", though they were keen to put out the next solo album she felt it was "time for a change of scenery". Imogen recalls "I signed my first deal when I was just 17 and I've been on one label or another since then. I didn't think I'd end up releasing it on a label of my very own but once I'd finished I didn't want to give it all away again, specially as I'd put everything I had into it".

Working with Frou Frou partner, Madonna and Britney producer Guy Sigsworth had been "an apprenticeship in making amazing records," says Heap. But Heap was adamant that with her next project, she should get the recognition she deserved. "It's not Guy's fault, but with Frou Frou, everyone assumed the man did all the production and engineering, mixing and programming and that the girl – me – just sang," explains Heap. "And I have to say that really irritated me. We did everything together. I'd been programming on Macs since I was twelve and that was more of a love to me than singing ever was." After her break-up with Universal/Island, Heap felt the time had come for change. "I loved working with Guy," she says. "I'd learnt so much from him and all the other various collaborations I'd done

over the years. Now I was bursting with ideas and just wanted to get my hands really dirty!"

Writing, recording and owning your own music is a noble aspiration. But as Heap discovered, record labels do have their uses and summoning together vital funds was proving a tad problematic. "I traipsed my way round every bank but I couldn't get a loan," she says. "I had £10,000 on my credit card and I couldn't pay my bills" but just before despair could stick in its claws, Heap's luck changed. Clocking a "For Sale" sign outside her block of flats was, she says, like a little light bulb going on: "I couldn't help wondering just how much I could sell my flat to myself for."

From that moment on, it seemed as though Fate was smiling on Heap. The artist set about re-mortgaging her flat and thanks to a sympathetic surveyor ("I couldn't believe it," says Heap, "but he turned out to be a Frou Frou fan!") she got exactly the valuation she needed. The value of her humble flat had grown by a hundred grand, and with money to burn, Heap kick-started her year-long mission on her 26 th birthday, December 9, 2003 . "I had all my new gear delivered as a birthday present to myself," remembers Heap, "then I booked my mastering for December 7 a year later. That was my deadline – I was going to make sure I had my new album done in time to celebrate on my next birthday!"

The songwriter set about experimenting. "I just wanted to see what kinds of sounds were coming out of me," she says reliving her excitement. Alone with her new toys, the singer found a voice she didn't know she had. And it was a discovery that was to unexpectedly shape the new album. Halfway through the album she set up an online blog [www.imogenheap.com](http://www.imogenheap.com) to help keep herself in check. "Somedays I wouldn't get much done as I didn't have anyone to answer to," says Heap, "so I thought if I wrote a diary on-line people could see if I'd been crap in the studio and it would keep me from slacking. If I got really stuck on something, just seeing the problem up there would help me tackle it better and one time I even asked those reading the blog to choose a lyrical direction from a poll I set up on my website!"

The soundtrack to Heap's cycle rides between her Waterloo home and her studio may partly explain the cross-pollination of genres that is 'Speak For Yourself'. Pedaling to the glitchy electro-sparks of Avril, Squarepusher and Cursor Minor, to contemporary classical composers Arvo Part and Ryuichi Sakamoto to the pop/punk/rock of Cornelius and the Foo Fighters. And though the album's dominant personality is electronic, Heap says, it's also intrinsically vocally-lead. The lyric-based songs are accompanied by vocal segments, layered over each other and treated just like the pianos, strings, guitars, and harps are. And like all the other live instruments, her voice is tweaked, compressed or put through harmonisers to achieve the perfect sound. "I write in terms of the voice being a part of the score more than one vocal line hovering over a backing track," she explains. "I'm so lucky I've ended up with such a bizarre voice. It's distinctive enough to hold itself in whatever music I throw at it."

However the real emphasis here is on the minutiae; the fluctuating dynamics beneath the soaring sounds. Aside from textured incidental noises, like trains rumbling past the tracks outside Heap's studio, breaths, sighs, whispers and intimate vocal quirks make this electronic wonder sound human again. And this warmth compliments the intensely personal nature of Heap's songs.

'Speak For Yourself' is vulnerable, exposed and flooded with emotion. So what's it all about? Heap pauses for thought... "It's quite tricky writing lyrics for "love" songs when you

are happy and content with your man,” she laughs. “The subject matter can get pretty repetitive, so sometimes I found myself running away with a naughty thought or stealing a friend's situation and eventually the song would turn itself into something all by itself”. And yet Heap's cinematic vignettes are remarkably vivid. Elusive little fantasies or based on real life? For example, epic closer, “The Moment I Said It” is a tumultuous scene of badly-broken news; stark electro-a cappella “Hide And Seek” a hymn to disbelief, betrayal and grief awhile “Goodnight And Go”, which features Heap fan, Jeff Beck on guitars, is a wistful ode to forbidden love.

With the album done and dusted, Heap can't help but revel in her serendipity. “Ever since I decided to do this on my own, great things have come my way,” she says sitting back in her fluffy studio chair. Not withstanding her star-struck surveyor, other factors have also seemingly conspired in her favour. Last year, Scrubs-star Zach Braff personally selected the Frou Frou track ‘Let Go’ for the soundtrack to his critically acclaimed indie-hit and directorial debut, ‘Garden State’, helping fuel the Imogen Heap fire. Musical directors across a variety of television outlets have clamoured for her tracks; in addition to ‘The OC’, ‘CSI’ and ‘Six Feet Under’ have also featured her music and LA's influential KCRW station is already spot-playing album tracks. For a couple of months before release “Speak For Yourself” has been floating in and around the music business and a few household names have been in touch with Heap since hearing ‘Speak For Yourself’, hoping to book her for knob-twiddling duties. “I thought I might like to get into producing other artists records one day but it seems one day is already here and I'm really enjoying it”.

It's no surprise Heap emanates a burning self-belief. ‘Speak For Yourself’ has been a test of her abilities; a test she's passed with glowing colours: “In the past there were times when I wished I had been listened to,” she says, “but I've never really known if I was right. This time, from the start I've done things my way.” Part cool 'n' collected statuesque beauty, part thrilled eight year old, Imogen Heap is struggling to contain her excitement. “I feel nothing can stop me,” she says through a huge grin. “This is just the beginning and I can't sit still with excitement to see how things are going to pan out.”