



On navigating love, releasing her
sophomore EP, and finding the perfect
motorway services;
this is

Gretel Hänlyn



West London based Gretel Hänlyn, real name Maddy Haenlein, has spent the last few years rocking the indie scene with her uniquely deep-set vocals and gothic-style storytelling. Following 2022's *Slugeye*, her sophomore EP - *Head of the Love Club* - cements her sound and showcases a more confident songwriter.

Originally, Hänlyn had planned to complete a degree in Physics and Philosophy at Bristol University. However, a last minute change of heart saw her attend a music university instead. "That's where I found my manager, actually," she explains over Zoom. "It all happened so organically."

It was Hänlyn's mum who first encouraged her to pursue music seriously, and is still involved in the project; she painted both of *Head of the Love Club's* Pre-Raphaelite-inspired motif paintings. "They're sick," Hänlyn grins, "they're so good."

Hänlyn's music has long been influenced by the women in her life. "It's not just the women, [but] the relationships [they] find themselves in," she muses. "I was definitely writing about it in *Slugeye*. Those relationships that women have to deal with a lot, especially young women, but that older women also haven't been taught how to deal with - they're told to just suppress it."

On her newest EP - an eight-track offering that sets her vocals against a backdrop of gritty guitars and haunting harmonies - she's still finding catharsis to vent those frustrations. "I've got a song called 'King Of Nothing'," she explains with a grin, "which is me coming up with a list of names - not necessarily just [for] men, but that can be associated quite heavily with a manipulative man. I'm listing out disses and that's the whole song, just yelling out 'you're an arse!'"

The arse in question, as it happens, actually inspired more than half the EP. On the titular 'Head of the Love Club', as he is caricatured, Hänlyn confesses her love against a wall of crunching instrumentals; it's "probably the only song, or one of the only songs, that I can't really compare to any other," she says, explaining why it became the

record's namesake. "It feels authentic, and it feels very 'Gretel'."

"I feel sure of myself – musically, at least!"

Knowing just what 'Gretel' feels like is what sets this EP apart from her first. "I was learning how to write music, so I didn't really have much of a process [for *Slugeye*]," she recalls. That experimentation is reflected in the record's long list of collaborators, as she was still figuring out who she worked best with. *Head of the Love Club*, by comparison, had a "much clearer vision" from the outset, and that self-assurance is audible on the finished product. "I think I've really cemented my sound and what I'm doing," Hänlyn nods. "I feel sure of myself." She laughs. "Musically, anyway – I don't know what I'm doing otherwise!"

And what twenty-year-old does? Part of the charm of Hänlyn's music is her unabashed vulnerability, documenting her first attempts at navigating life and love. On 'Easy Peeler' – a gorgeous, folk-inspired ballad – Hänlyn struggles with not knowing where she stands with the aforementioned Head of the Love Club. "It made me feel so childish and vulnerable," she admits. "[The song] was just a stream of consciousness, being quite forgiving and vulnerable about how little I know about relationships!" While most of us keep our streams of consciousness confined to 'notes' apps or diary pages, Hänlyn's – twisted into fantasy narratives befitting her aesthetic – are the lifeblood of her songwriting.

It's a process that also helps her understand her own feelings: when first announcing *Head of the Love Club* on Instagram, Hänlyn described it as being "about gothic

and obsessional love, infatuation, sex and fear, humiliation and honesty." However, she now explains that those themes only emerged when six months' worth of demos were finally strung together. "I was like, 'oh, so *that's* what I've been going through!" she laughs. "I didn't even know until I listened to the EP start to finish."

Despite writing from such an intimate place, sharing her stories and emotions with the world is a surprisingly easy prospect for Hänlyn. "You live with a song for so long before it actually gets released," she explains, "so it isn't so much like you're putting your heart on the line." The really scary part, she admits, is when she has to send a song to her producer or manager for the first time – "you're like, 'this is so embarrassing if it's shit'," she grins, "because I've just been so vulnerable!"

When songs do finally make it to release day, though, she's learned not to stress herself out: "I know that I like it," she shrugs, "so that's enough for me." She's released three singles ahead of this EP: 'Drive', with its crunching guitars and retro feel, was picked up by both 6 Music and Radio 1; it was followed in December by 'Today (can't help but cry)', the EP's closing track. Hänlyn had already pegged it as the record's best song, and she was proven right: it's become her fastest streaming song on Spotify and has amassed over half a million listens. "It's got that melancholic hopefulness that I think people need around that time



of year," Hänlyn muses. "[Its release] was interesting – surprising, I think, to a lot of other people."

The final single, 'Wiggy', is about *Head of the Love Club's* other muse: Hänlyn's cat. "There seems to be such a split in how people receive 'Wiggy'," Hänlyn says cheerfully. "There's one half of people saying, 'oh, it's Dad rock, it's cheesy', then the other half are like, 'exactly, it's Dad rock, it's a song about a cat, it's ironic'. It's not meant to be taking itself too seriously, which is what I like about it, but it seems to be splitting the population a bit more. That's okay, I'm happy with that!"

Looking beyond this EP, Hänlyn reveals she next has her sights set on creating her debut album. “I’ve already started noodling away on what I want from that,” she says. “I’ve written a few things for it, but I want to write quite a few and then narrow it down; see [if there are] any themes, like I did with this EP, and then keep writing the last few songs with that in mind.” She explains that most of her writing takes place when she’s already in the studio, and can marry lyrics and production together in real time; “that’s where you create this atmosphere of magic.” Having set the scene with her two EPs, seeing where her storytelling goes on a full-length record is super exciting. The album would also be a huge ‘pinch-me’ moment for Hänlyn –

second perhaps to a slot on Glastonbury’s Second Stage (“I will cry if that happens!”).

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More immediately, though, she’s kicking April off with a string of headline shows in London, Manchester and Bristol. “Yo, I’m so excited for them!” she grins, her eyes instantly lighting up at the mention of them. “Touring and writing are my two favourite bits of all of this. I love my team – we’re best mates on holiday every time we go and do a show!” Headlines

are also undeniably more special than other gigs. “At festivals [and support gigs] people look right through you the second you’re off stage,” she says. “At headlines they want to talk to you; they’re really rooting for you.”

The other upside to touring, like any good road-trip, is obviously the service stations. For the Hänlyn crew, it’s serious business. “Me and my band have this thing where we rate every single service station out of five,” Hänlyn explains, laughing. “If there is not an M&S, it immediately can’t get past two stars out of five. M&S just have all of the good salads, all of the good sandwiches – vegan options! Price is a little steep but, you know, when on holiday!”

The best offering, from their extensive research, is up north: “there’s one on the way to Manchester that is fucking phenomenal,” Hänlyn gushes. “The toilets are amazing. You know how you [press] down the tap and [water runs] for a certain amount of time? Perfect amount of time! No water wasted, you don’t have to re-tap it. [The] toilets don’t smell. There’s an M&S, there’s a Starbucks; there’s WHSmith. They also have sushi there – it’s a *good* one!” She laughs. “This is really stupid!”

Stupid or not, it’s a reminder that Hänlyn is just trying to have fun while forging her career; two EPs deep, it seems she’s still managing to keep that balance. “It’s exciting, knowing what you want and then being able to succeed in that,” she muses. “This is Gretel. This is what I know is right.”

