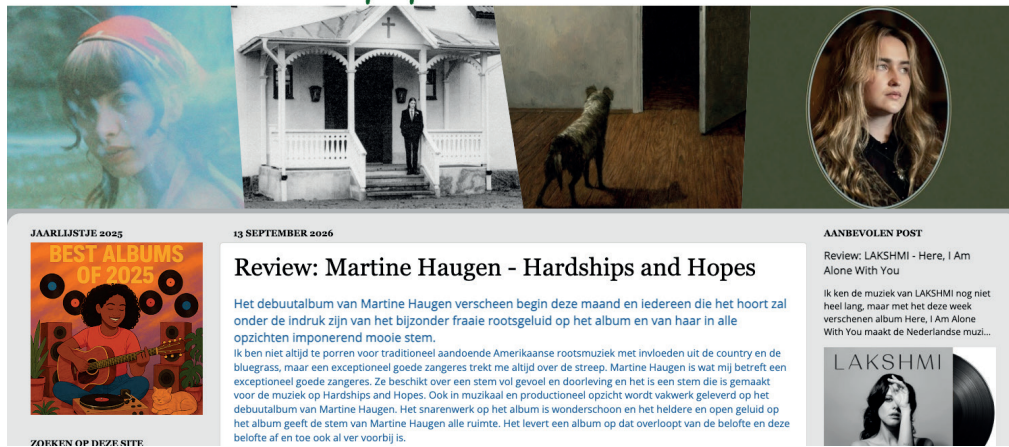


De krenten uit de pop



Martine Haugen's debut album was released at the beginning of this month, and anyone who hears it will surely be impressed by the album's exceptionally beautiful roots sound and by her stunning voice, which is impressive in every respect.

I'm not always easily won over by traditional-sounding American roots music influenced by country and bluegrass, but an exceptionally good singer will always convince me. And as far as I'm concerned, Martine Haugen is an exceptionally good singer. Her voice is full of emotion and lived experience, and it is a voice made for the music on *Hardships and Hopes*.

The musicianship and production on Martine Haugen's debut album are equally accomplished. The string playing is absolutely beautiful, while the album's clear, open sound gives Haugen's voice all the space it needs. The result is an album overflowing with promise – and at times already going far beyond that promise.

Last week, someone recommended *Hardships and Hopes*, Martine Haugen's debut album, to me. After just a few notes, I already thought it was a great recommendation – and even calling it “great” hardly does justice to the person who tipped me off.

The opening track, *Border Affair*, features wonderfully subtle playing, with beautiful guitar chords and intoxicating clouds of pedal steel taking centre stage. It gets even better when Martine Haugen starts singing, because she has a fantastic voice.

It is a voice made for traditional country music, and one that impresses from the very first notes. Haugen's voice recalls some of the great female country singers of the past, but she can also hold her own alongside the very best country singers of today.

Hardships and Hopes sounds beautiful, particularly for listeners who enjoy more traditionally styled American roots music. The album is superbly produced, and it is immediately apparent that some highly experienced musicians were brought into the studio. To be honest, I was fairly certain that studio must have been in Nashville, Tennessee, because everything about *Hardships and Hopes* has the quality associated with the very best that America's music capital has to offer. I also assumed that Martine Haugen herself must be from Nashville and, given all the emotion and maturity in her voice, that she couldn't be particularly young.

As it turns out, I was completely wrong on all counts.

Martine Haugen comes from the small mountain village of Dombås in central Norway and is only 26 years old. She recorded her debut album at Farm Studio in Høland, in the south of the beautiful Scandinavian country. Rather than working with a big-name Nashville producer and musicians, she was joined in the studio by musicians from the Norwegian band *Country Heroes*, a band previously unknown to me.

That may not be what you would expect when listening to *Hardships and Hopes* for the first time, but the results speak for themselves. Martine Haugen's debut sounds like a country album from several decades ago, although I also hear occasional influences from the Appalachian folk music of the past and echoes of contemporary bluegrass.

I certainly have nothing against modern country pop and, to be honest, I probably listen to it more often than I listen to the kind of traditional country heard on Martine Haugen's debut album. Nevertheless, *Hardships and Hopes* captivated me immediately, and it does so every single time I listen to it.

That is primarily due to the truly beautiful voice of the Norwegian musician, which at times reminds me somewhat of Emmylou Harris. It is also a voice that sounds considerably more seasoned than that of the average 26-year-old, making Martine Haugen's vocal performance all the more remarkable.

But the music on the album is also exceptionally beautiful. This is roots music of the kind that has been made for many decades, yet everything sounds just a little more subtle than the average Nashville production. Not only does this make for an extremely pleasant listening experience, it also creates a sound that gives Martine Haugen's voice all the room it deserves.

Hardships and Hopes contains two covers, but the nine original songs demonstrate that the young Norwegian musician has also mastered the art of writing timeless roots songs.

They may not want to hear it in Nashville, but a young musician from Norway is challenging Nashville's established order – and Martine Haugen is doing so in impressive fashion.

Erwin Zijleman