



## ON THE MAKING OF THE SECRET DIARY OF NORA PLAIN

by librettist Lucky Fonz III

‘The Secret Diary of Nora Plain’, a new, modern-day song cycle, came into being through an unlikely collaboration between eight young Amsterdam-based musicians from very different backgrounds. First, there’s the **Ragazze Quartet**, a young but seasoned string quartet known for their ability to move between the classical, the modern and the theatrical. There’s **Nora Fischer**, a singer celebrated for her versatility in repertoire and iconoclastic approach. There’s **Remco Menting**, percussionist in jazz band Kapok, amongst other collectives. There’s composer **Morris Kliphuis**, known as a jazzman and French horn extraordinaire in Kapok. There’s me, lyricist Otto Wichers, better known as singer-songwriter **Lucky Fonz III**.

We all knew each other before the ‘Nora Plain’ project, through earlier collaborations that grew into friendships. The idea arose to all work together in order to create something new and original, completely on our own terms: a song cycle featuring 21<sup>st</sup> century themes, lyrics and music. It had to be modern, since we were all aware of growing up in a different era than the old masters of the genre. To begin with, Mahler and Schumann – unlike the eight of us – never had smartphones.

Our generation is undoubtedly the first to be monitored this pervasively and continuously. Internet companies and governments know all about our deepest and darkest quirks, our most intimate information is a commodity to be sold and we are watched 24/7, by different types of cameras, never quite sure of who is watching – or why. We had long discussions together on this modern ‘culture of surveillance’, and the ways in which its political, social and psychological impact are felt. In the words of Nora Plain: ‘To be watched is to be touched’.

Though these are very much modern issues, they touch upon questions that have always run deep in the human psyche. How can an individual be free in any relationship, be it with family, lovers, society or the state, if that relationship does not allow for privacy? When do so-called love and safety turn into exercises of power? What happens when this external pressure is internalized? How does one stand up against something so invasive, and so invisible?

To us, ‘Nora Plain’ is our portrayal of any ‘plain’ individual dealing with these questions. In these times of unrelenting electronic surveillance we imagine the old-fashioned act of writing in a diary as a subversive thing; a secret diary as the last imaginable refuge. Yet such secrecy might not be quite enough, for even in the act of private writing she feels the burning of eyes. She has no idea whose eyes: perhaps the state’s, her family’s, some other persons, perhaps even her very own. When she writes the words ‘A soul is on the line’ in her diary, a double meaning is at play: our lines are being tapped by another soul, but our very own soul is also at stake here. Nora realises this, and via fear and paranoia, moves from a sense of guilt to eventual rebellion.

‘The Secret Diary of Nora Plain’ is our own attempt at making sense of all this. We created it from scratch, in an intensely close and fun collaboration. It is a very personal piece of work, and we are very proud of what is, ultimately, our own our act of rebellion. With this album, you are welcome to join in.

## **ON THE MUSIC OF THE SECRET DIARY OF NORA PLAIN**

by composer Morris Kliphuis

In this cycle, I used the form of the pop song almost as a Trojan horse – as a way of presenting the emotional and lyrical ideas in an understandable way, while also giving us room to experiment with more abstract sounds and rhythms. I wanted to surround Nora Plain with different musical worlds, from nervous to ecstatic, from dazed to furious. The storms brewing inside her head are amplified and translated into soft, dissonant string chords, interlocking textures, an aggressively plucked violin, drums being softly stroked or savagely beaten.

Many of the songs have gone through different guises before taking the shape you hear on this album. We worked together very closely on this project, and to me, the most rewarding experience is that moment when a piece suddenly takes on a life of its own, ceases to be “mine” or “yours”, but becomes a third thing, all of its own.

It has been a dream to work with a group of artists so patient and supportive, and who put in so much of themselves. In the process, the music gained a depth that it otherwise never would have had.

## 1 I DID SOME THINGS

I did some things  
It was a long time ago  
It's water under the bridge  
But I did some things

I did some things  
It was nothing  
Nothing really nothing  
That was then  
Now is now  
Just one of those things

I was young  
Maybe too young  
Forget about me  
Let bygones be bygones be bygones

## 2 THE ELM SEEDS

Today the elm seeds came  
To drape the streets in white  
Today my simple name  
Set no-one's lips alight

No soul did make a sound  
No mirror called for love  
Today I simply walked around  
To see the seeds, and sing thereof

Back and forth between  
What is and what can be  
Today a bird is seen  
To fly so bold and free

### 3 AS A CHILD

As a child you feel invisible  
When you cover your own face  
Now you see me now you don't  
Until they put you in your place

And you learn to look upon yourself  
As a sight to behold  
And before you even understand  
You are already too old

So I sing my song for some sort of  
Invisible form of you  
If beauty is in the beholder's eye  
Then evil must be too

They are south across the border  
They are high up in the cloud  
They have eyes and ears and hands  
and arms  
They never have a mouth

Am I a dancer in a movie?  
Am I a laboratory beast?  
Is a word too much to ask for?  
An echo at the least?

So I sing my song for some sort of  
Invisible form of you  
If beauty is in the beholder's eye  
Then evil must be too

### 4 RAT IN MY ROOM

There is a rat in my room  
There is a rat in my room  
There is a rat in my room  
I can hear it

I hear its feet in the middle  
of the night  
I hear its feet in the middle  
of the night

Chop its head off with an axe  
Set its head and tail on fire  
Whack it with a rusty nail  
Choke it with a piece of wire  
Throw it off the balcony  
Put the poison on the floor  
Stab it deep inside its head

Beat its head against the door  
Smack it with it a baseball bat  
Suck the life out of its soul  
Slash it with a dirty knife  
Turn its heart into a hole  
Smoke it out, take it down  
Hang it from the highest tree  
Beat it, beat it, beat it up  
Let it never ever come for me  
Go to it and shake it up  
Listen up you dirty rat

Maybe I will let you live a little  
Then shoot you through your  
fucking head

## 5 A SOUL IS ON THE LINE

I feel like I'm in school  
With masters at the head  
Or in some kind of theatre  
Where everything I've said  
Is weighed for what it's worth  
Like nuggets on a scale  
What's to tip the balance?  
When is it I fail?  
When is it I fail?

Is it having talked too much?  
Is it having been too small?  
Is it having been too wicked?  
Is it having been at all?  
A soul inside the camera  
A heart behind the web  
A soul is on the line

You tap tap tap

I thought I had one father  
But I guess I have many more  
I have a father to be punished by  
And a father to adore  
And a father to keep me safe at night  
From the fathers at my door  
With their pitchforks and their torches  
And all their longing for  
My body of expression  
They'll throw me in a lake!  
They'll drown me if I'm innocent  
And if I'm not, they burn me  
Burn me at the stake

## 6 WHAT I SEE NOW

I came home late at night  
He said 'are you my child?'  
I said 'what do you mean?'  
He said 'you'd only understand  
If you saw what I see now'  
He said 'you'd only understand  
If you saw what I see now'

## **7 TO BE WATCHED**

To be watched  
Is to be touched

## **9 HE PROMISED TO WATCH OVER ME**

He promised to watch over me  
He promised to watch over me

He pulled me up against his chest  
And said 'my darling, can't you see'  
My arms were made to hold you  
And my knees they do get weak  
When I think of you as older  
I almost cannot speak

He promised to watch over me  
He promised to watch over me

The world will be around you  
The way my arms are now  
Think of me as someone  
With arms so wide and tall  
The one forgotten fortress  
That never came to fall

## 10 KEYHOLE

Keyhole here  
Keyhole there  
Eyes electric  
Eyes so fair  
Deep recorders  
Under floors  
Holes in walls  
Doors in doors

Mirror mirror  
Monitors  
Soft surrender  
Subtle force  
Ghost above  
Ghost in me  
Ghost police  
Police me

Drones a-diving  
Dreams abound  
Seventeen acres  
Shocked by the sound  
Of the cold hard rain  
Sweeping away  
At the very foundation  
Of what I would say

If I had my choice  
If I had my chance  
If I had my voice  
If I could have it again

## 12 HERE IS MY ARM

Here is my arm  
Here is my hand  
Here is my body  
Right where I stand

Is that not enough?  
How much do you need?  
My lips or my ears  
My neck or my feet?

Come closer to me then  
Come closer, stand near  
Peek at these freckles  
Right next to my ear

Small little spots  
The size of a pin  
Tips of the pyramids  
Under my skin

Now sing of the valleys  
Sing of the hill  
Sing of the hollows  
A lover may fill

Sing of the Nile  
That from finger to toe  
Waters the flowers  
You ask me to show

Sing of the backbones  
Sing of the sea  
Sing of the whole world  
But don't sing of me  
But don't sing of me  
Don't sing of me

## 13 THE TURNAROUND

Today  
I made a doll  
In the image of me  
To sing and dance  
On CCTV  
Instead of me

Today  
I built an altar  
For me and my secret groom  
I placed it  
In the back of a dark room  
A dark darkroom

Today  
I turn around my mirror  
Hoping that you will see  
Whatever it is you look for  
When you are looking at me

**Music composed and arranged by** Morris Kliphuis  
**Lyrics by** Lucky Fonz III (Otto Wichers)  
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