

For Koen Van De Wardt, making music is a far greater pursuit than simply creating something to catch someone else's ear. "The more people that respond to my music the less lonely I feel," admits the singer and musical architect who records ethereal, oft-hushed but forever gripping synth-anchored music under the moniker Klangstof. "For me it's just about getting in the studio and erasing all the bad feelings I have in my mind."

It's a funny thing, really, the way in which the Dutch-born, Norway-raised Van De Wardt is on the surface a happy-go-lucky 24-year-old ("People expect a very depressed young man and instead they get this smiling asshole"), and yet when he retreats to his solitary place to write music, much in the way he's done since first picking up the guitar at age 14, the anxiety, the negativity, the feeling that he's misunderstood, it all comes pouring out. The result is a collage of the supremely genteel yet haunting vocals, sleek melodies and experimental beats and rhythms. Ask him how this all happens and even the man himself has trouble putting his finger on how or why exorcising himself of his demons come by way of songwriting. "It's a very weird thing that goes on in my head whenever I'm making music that I don't even understand myself," Van De Wardt says. "For so long I locked all my feelings out as a human being. And now the way I express those feelings is through music."

There's a patience and precision at play in Klangstof's aural creations: much in the way he delicately mines his emotions for lyrical inspiration, the musician is a master craftsman when constructing the chilling, mercurial sound that comprises his stunning debut album, *Close Eyes to Exit*. It's there in the crisp, slow-building single "Hostage," electric guitars gently strummed, electronic beats like a rising heartbeat, all giving way to full-throated release: "I ran for shelter/But I got there," he intones. Or in the way "Sleaze" shifts from whispered confession ("Nintendo is the only thing that makes me smile") to propulsive, rainbow-hued synths at a moment's notice. Van De Wardt refers to this as "dynamic range," a driving force he possesses in taking his time to perfect his craft. "That just doesn't happen a lot these days anymore in music," he offers. "Bands are trying to fit into this three-minute pop sound where everything has to be as loud as possible. It's one of the most important things now: to make people feel."

There's a power in reaching deep into oneself, even to the ugly parts, in order to ultimately connect with others. For better or worse, Koen knows this from personal experience. It's why he began making music in the first place. After moving with his family from his native Netherlands to rural Norway at age 14, the once-social teenager found himself totally isolated. "I was just a guy playing football and hanging with friends in Holland and then all of a sudden I was sitting in Norway with no one around," he recalls. "My life was torn apart and I had to start all over again." He turned to music. More specifically, he became enamored with Radiohead's seminal 1996 album, *OK Computer*. Koen says he related to the longing and undercurrent of unchecked pain in lead singer Thom Yorke's voice. "You just feel that there's something going on in his life that he feels very uncomfortable with. And I felt the same thing as well. It really comforted me."

In short time, creating music became an almost manic pursuit for the fledging musician. He'd lock himself in his parent's basement, master one instrument after the next, tinker on his laptop for hours at a time, searching for the perfect sound. Even after attending Hedmark University College and playing bass in a popular Norwegian band, Moss, Van De Wardt felt compelled to return to his own well. "I felt really stuck because I couldn't find that creative outlet that I was looking for," he says of those transitional days. "That's when I started to do Klangstof" – a name with no particular meaning ("klang" means echo in Norwegian and "stof", dust in Dutch) – "and then I couldn't stop. All of a sudden I felt happy and comfortable again." Van De Wardt even goes so far as to say that if away from his studio for too long and not writing new music his insecurities start to creep back into his psyche. "If I stay somewhere for a week without making music I'll feel so bad," he says. "I really need those bad emotions to come out."

Creating "Hostage," one of 10-12 demos he'd recorded over a few years that would wind up comprising the bulk of his debut album, was a major turning point for Koen: not only did it attract the attention of L.A. based record label Mind of a Genius, it also signaled a significant musical milestone for the musician. "I got very inspired by that synth-based 'Hostage' sound," he explains, "and I wanted to add to all the other demos as well."

While he emphasizes Klangstof is a highly personal pursuit, Van De Wardt is emphatic in his belief that playing with a band – he currently tours with three other musicians, a few of which he found via Facebook – is crucial to his properly articulating his music. "It's so important to have a band around me that I fully trust. They're an extension of my body, an extension of my mind. As a songwriter I know what I want to hear and I know what sounds I like. But there are always people who are more specialized."

The question remains, however: how does a man like Koen, someone who creates by his lonesome and seemingly channels so much pent-up emotion in his music, articulate that feeling onstage before an ever-growing fanbase. As it turns out, for him performing is a highly cathartic and communal experience. "I really feel like I'm connecting to people that understand the music," he says of the Klangstof live show, which makes its way to the States this fall. "Every show when someone comes up to me and gives me a hug with that warm emotional feeling I almost start crying. It's interesting how everyone kind of feels the same way. We are all in the same zone. And the more people there are the better I start feeling about it all."

More than anything, making music and sharing it with others – whether via them listening to his pristine album or communing with him in the live setting – most importantly has Koen no longer feeling quite so alone. "I'm coming out of my old world where no one cared and getting into this new world where all of a sudden everyone cares about me. It's a very weird thing. I don't know if I should like it or not. But it's very special."