

## FIRST PERSON

**M**usic was at the centre of my life from an early age. As soon as I learnt to write I began jotting down the lyrics of songs I liked into a notebook and singing along when they came on television. And my father gave me a Dictaphone so when an idea for a melody came into my head, I could record it. I was lucky I had a good voice, because as much as I longed to play an instrument it wasn't possible – I was born with only one arm. Just about every instrument with the exception of a tambourine needs two. My condition is not genetic. Doctors believe something happened early in my mother's pregnancy, that I must have been squashed in the womb perhaps. Limbs are formed around the six-week mark, and if something goes wrong at that time, a fetus can never catch up.

I began wearing a prosthetic arm when I was just one year old. It has always felt part of me, although the size has changed over the years. It's made of plastic and attaches at my elbow. I can't do anything with it other than use it as a support. People have tried to convince me to get a "robot" arm – my name for the high-tech wizardry that allows control with residual nerves – but for me that's frightening. As it is, I can do pretty much anything I need to do. You get used to what you've got.

I was born in Ghent in Belgium and went to a Catholic school. We were often told Bible stories about how Jesus made the blind see and the lame walk, and so I thought that he was going to come and give me an arm. When other kids looked sceptically at me I reminded them of the parables. I was about six years old when I realised that Jesus wasn't going to come. I lay in bed thinking, I'm going to have to deal with this for the rest of my life. It was a very dark time. The nuns at the school were an amazing support though. If they saw any hint of bullying they would intervene right away. I remember one culprit was made to walk backwards up the stairs for an entire week. It was so embarrassing I actually felt bad for her.

For most of my peers being taken swimming was something to relish, but not for me. This was the only time I had to take off my prosthetic limb. Children in the changing room who didn't know me would scream, "Eeeee – what a freak," and behave as if I was some sort of monster. Taking off my arm is still the most intimidating thing I have to do. Going naked is easy in comparison, because we're all more or less the same underneath. But one thing I learnt from my father was never to run away. "You're getting bullied?" he'd ask. "Not a problem, take off your arm and knock 'em on the head. I promise you they will stop." So the next time it happened, that's what I did. I actually took off my arm and whacked the bully. The abuse stopped immediately. My mum was a little less rock'n'roll about it, but neither of my parents allowed me to become a victim. Once you get locked into that mentality, life becomes even more difficult. It's always better to be a fighter.



# SINGING *a* DIFFERENT TUNE

Belgian singer Ilse Gevaert was born with one arm, but she refuses to be a victim. She explains how she found success in an industry that appears to only value perfection

My voice has always been my safety net; singing has never been about what I couldn't do but about what I could. At eleven I joined a choir with my father and at 15 an after-school drama club where we performed a lot of musical theatre. There I discovered how much I loved being on stage. But Dad had dropped out of university midway through a bio-engineering degree because he thought he would make it big in music, and my mum was of that *Mad Men* generation when girls either became nurses or secretaries, so they were both insistent that I study further after school. I understood their thinking. Education was important to them.

I chose psychology because it was something that genuinely fascinated me and graduated with distinction. But still the only career that interested me was music.

So I took a job as a care worker in a home for the mentally disabled, while also providing private one-to-one counselling from home, and pursued my passion. As a performer, New York had always been the dream for me so it wasn't long before I decided to move to Brooklyn. But it was a complete culture shock. In Ghent, I was cushioned by my family – my boyfriend and I had lived rent-free in a house my parents owned, which meant I was earning enough to get by. Now here I was in America with no job and no money. My English wasn't great and, let's face it, who here would want a Flemish-speaking therapist? The usual fallback plan for young people trying to make it in New York was waiting tables – the one thing I definitely couldn't do with only one functioning arm.

I took any gig I could get. I worked as a nanny, and as a backing and demo singer. I sang in clubs and restaurants at night after working all day, no matter how tired I was. I slept on a couch for years. Like every other aspiring artist in New York, I hoped life would imitate art, and just like *42nd Street*, a big-time record producer would say, "Hey! That voice, that girl, sign her!" But it never did.

Difference is what makes the human race so rich, yet in films and music videos it seems to be all about perfection. One A&R guy I met at Universal wanted me to write an entire album of up-tempo songs, but I said no, because life's not like that. My vision for my last single *I am Human* came to me very quickly. I worked on it with an incredible team – Juliet, for instance, who was the only African-American violinist in her music conservatory and experienced truly terrible racism. And Dario, the black, gay video director, who has also had a really tough journey.

Thanks to the internet and YouTube the song that said everything I felt about people – whatever their colour, religion, physical perfection or imperfection – has now been watched, and bought, by hundreds of thousands of people. But the big labels are still not interested. Despite this we have released an album of the same name, plus a new single *Behind the Scenes*. But for me nothing beats live performance, so we're currently planning a tour. On one level it's mission impossible;

a lot of the music is very orchestral and how do you replicate all those strings on stage without taking them along? But without industry backing and the funds that go with it, we'll have to be creative. That is no bad thing. And I know for sure that, one way or another, we will make it work.

Most of the time being different in New York is no big deal. And I will never really know if my disability has held me back. But yesterday, I saw a man with no arms begging in the subway station. I had to swallow and fight back the tears as people threw coins into his hat. What do I do in a situation like this? Give him coins too? How will he feel when he sees that I'm just like him but my life story has worked out fine? ■ *In conversation with Pendope Dening. Visit [www.youtube.com/Ilserecords](http://www.youtube.com/Ilserecords).*