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First-time managers

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"Love is the answer"

Rislane El Harat is the winner of a Hollywood music award. But this isn't what she hopes to achieve with her music.

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ETH zürich





PORTRAIT

Rislane El Harat is probably the first ETH employee to win a music award in Hollywood. But this isn't what she hopes to achieve with her love of music.

"I actually wanted to be a whale researcher," laughs Rislane. "Whale song and marine biology have always fascinated me." Today it is not whale songs but her own songs that are in the spotlight – something that she attributes to her former choir director. "She would always pick someone out unexpectedly to sing solo – and at some point it was my turn. That was the initial spark," says the 35-year-old. "I closed my eyes, sang and forgot about everything around me. I merged with the music and became one with it, as though I didn't exist any more. That's when I knew that this was what I wanted to do!"

From that point on, the then 12-year-old's life revolved around music. However, apart from a couple of private lessons with a singing teacher, her music career has been largely self-taught: "Learning by doing has always been my motto," says Geneva-born Rislane. Most of her ideas for songs come to her in the shower. She starts by recording a voice note or sitting down at her piano: "I feel my way into the song: Which instruments would work? What do I want to say with this song? You cut, replace, swap chords or passages of text. The first spark comes from inside. Then I have to shape the sparks into a song."

The honesty of busking

For many years, busking was her favourite way of singing her songs: "There is a lot of honesty with busking," says Rislane. "If people don't like it, they just walk away."

Her confidence grew as she realised she was able to cast a spell over people with her music. But the idea that it would ever become so popular that

she would receive an award in Hollywood never occurred to her. Which is why it came as such a surprise when her debut album *Newland* won the Hollywood Independent Music Award this August – the highlight of her career to date. Receiving this honour made Rislane incredibly happy and confirmed that she was on the right track.

Carried by the audience

An equally important milestone on this journey happened four years ago when she was on tour in Spain: after a cold turned into a severe inflammation of the throat, Rislane became more and more hoarse and almost lost her voice entirely. But cancelling was out of the question for her and she continued to perform in a different place every evening. At the end of the tour, she suddenly found that she was well again. "I am sure that was only possible because I was carried by my audience. And that's when I realised it is universal love that carries people. I know it sounds cheesy, but I wouldn't exist without the people out there." And that's where her artist name came from too: "Rislane and The Lovers". "The Lovers" refers to her audience.

This experience shaped her approach to life as well: "Love is the answer," says Rislane with a smile. "I'm convinced that love is the answer to many of our problems. If everyone acted in the interests of love, so many problems would be solved. And that's what I want to do with my music: spread as much love as possible."

Putting something positive back into the world is important to Rislane away from the stage too, and it is one of the reasons she has worked in accounting at the ETH Institute of Robotics and Intelligent Systems for seven years. "I like the fact that research is useful and application-oriented," says Rislane. What she particularly enjoys about her job is its logical nature: "I take care of invoices; everything is very clear and

structured – it's very different to the world of music."

An incorrigible optimist

The fact that she is able to combine these two sides of her life is down to the exceptional flexibility she has at ETH.

Although she only works part-time (20 percent), she is hugely valued by the entire team, according to Brigitte Spors, who also works in accounting and is friends with Rislane outside of work. "We just love her! She brings such a zest for life to the office and is such a warm person. An incorrigible optimist."

As a friend, there is one quality of Rislane's that she particularly values: "If you were having a rough time, you could call her at two in the morning and she would still answer the phone." She also admires her colleague's commitment to improving equality between men and women in the music industry.

Rislane's work colleagues have been able to enjoy her musical talents on a number of occasions, including at the 20th anniversary of the institute and this year's Christmas drinks reception.

Incidentally, she has never regretted the fact that she didn't go into research herself. "In a way, life as a whole is a kind of research," she says. "Who knows if there is a right way to do it?"

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