



GLOBALISATION

Girl Next Door

BY CH Loh

THE WARM, WONDERFUL
STACEY KENT,
TRANSATLANTIC JAZZ SINGER

MOVE OVER DIANA Krall. Contemporary jazz singing has a new diva, and it's the very young Stacey Kent. Kent is now a big name in the scene in the UK where she resides with her husband, saxophonist Jim Tomlinson. She's since made her mark in her birthplace, America, as well as in Europe, where she is huge in France.

Kent has won hearts with her simple, natural voice, one that you might think has been around for decades. She's bubbly, witty and affecting with her simple, laid-back swing that grabs you even without sounding like she's trying.

Her prodigious career has seen six best-selling albums, the British and the BBC Jazz Awards, and a busy concert calendar. Kent tours with an accomplished band of British musicians who deliver a sound to match her clean, unpretentious style, a sound that conveys a real sense of fun in the way that the most enduring Continental artists of the past have. With the panache of Ella Fitzgerald, the effervescence of Petula Clark or Frente and the reserve of Suzanne Vega, Kent is one of the freshest voices of recent times, and that is good news in an industry flooded with Made-To-Sell artistes.

It's now legend that meeting your husband Jim was the X factor that turned you towards a career as a jazz singer. Can you tell us more about that?

It was serendipity. When I met Jim, I was still a student working towards my master's degree in Language and Literature. We fell in love instantly when we met in Oxford, where Jim had just graduated, through some friends. Jim, too, was planning on furthering his degree but we both decided, coincidentally, that we would take a year off from our academic studies to do a one-year course at the Guildhall School of Music in London.

Once we got there, it was obvious that we had great chemistry, both personally and musically. We just started playing together and our voices were so intertwined, we couldn't really think of doing anything else. We stayed on the course for a year and when it was over, I didn't go back to the US. We moved in together and starting working together, getting a lot of music jobs together right from the start. And so there was really no looking back...

What if the two of you had never met? Do you ever wonder what path your life would had taken?

This, of course, is an impossible question to answer but one that every single human being loves to ponder. I don't know what I would have done. I probably would have gone back to New York City and finished my masters, and perhaps I would have stayed on the academic path that I had chosen for myself at that point. And yet, my musical pull was so strong.

Someone who believes more in fate might have said that I would have made myself fall into a musical path via another route. I was born a musician. Even as a girl, as a student, my interest and passion in music was immense. So, perhaps I would have fallen into this career anyway. Even if I had stayed in the academics and had chosen another career, I would still have always been a musician. One just is. I would have always sung — to myself, to friends....

You said once that you're vocal style is not really jazz, yet there are traces of a young Ella Fitzgerald and just a hint of Billie Holiday in your style. Is this accidental?

All incidental and accidental. I am not very influenced by Billie in particular at all. Apart from listening to her as a forlorn college girl on rainy days, like most all other college girls, I have never really had a big love affair with her. I know how great she is but it doesn't do it for me.

That's one of the things I love about music — how subjective it is. What moves one person may not move the earth for someone else, even when you can appreciate its greatness. Billie was not it for me, although Ella was always beautiful to me. But then, she was not bigger to me than other singers. I loved so many different singers! I was just out there absorbing all sorts of sounds and I am sure they have all made their way into my brain, my ears.

These days, I do not think about genre at all. I am a singer, that's all. I am a singer of songs, regardless of genre. I am most influenced by 'song' singers — but the kinds of singers I like are very, very varied, and I have always had eclectic tastes. Just as a few examples and this is in no particular order:

Maria Callas, Bette Midler, James Taylor, Rosemary Clooney, Paul Simon, Nat Cole, Julie Andrews, Ricki Lee Jones, KD Lang, Carole King, Carly Simon, Frank Sinatra [and all the boys next door!], Ray Charles, Cat Stevens, Crosby, Stills and Nash, Neil Young, Harry Connick Jr, Joni Mitchell, Macy Gray... this list goes on and on and on.

I love jazz and jazz singers, but not exclusively. I just love voices — melodic, sweet voices, gruff voices — you name it. One of the things that is key in being an artist of any sort is that you find your voice, you find what fits you. It's not just a matter of finding music you love. It's about matching yourself, your personality, and who you are to the music you create.

I love to tell stories, to share stories with an audience — it's very intimate. Romantic stories that are sometimes joyful, other times wistful... but the key is finding that fit. I am an optimist and no matter what song I sing, I think my approach to life will reveal itself. A sad song may still have a '...to be continued' - for me, there is always hope!

Do you relate to any of the jazz divas of the past? I mean, does it take tragedy to make music immortal?

Relate? Not at all. I don't think tragedy has anything at all to do with great music or immortalising music. Music solicits all sorts of emotions, some of it sadness, some poignant, some full of utter joy and that feeling of abandon, abandoning yourself to that joy.

If you want to get into the question of life and its sadness... Isn't all life sad because it has to come to an end? I don't want to get into the question of philosophy and the human condition in this interview because there's no real need to spell out the obvious — life can be cruel for every single human being on the planet. And yet it is the gloriousness of life that makes us want to create.

Music evokes many, many emotions on many different levels. And I can be as moved by the joy in a happy song sung by Fred Astaire as I am in the **Casta Diva** sung by Maria Callas. Or sometimes it acts as a catharsis and makes you feel better on a bad day.

Other times we want to feel bad, and will purposely listen to something sad — say, some Schubert — that puts you in that place. But I would never rate a sad moment in Schubert over a particular moment of joy in Mozart's **Marriage of Figaro**. They provide different emotions and we need all those things.

From your debut Close Your Eyes to Boy Next Door, there is a sense of your style slowly evolving; I hear you belt a bit more in the debut album, for instance. Now perhaps you are settling into a more laid-back style. Or is it just the confidence born of success?

It's always interesting to hear how people interpret ones' work but to be honest, I am not aware of how it is that I have changed or evolved. What we do is organic and I hope that it will grow and continue to evolve and continue to improve. I think I am a better singer than I was seven years ago

and I hope that in seven years, I will be better than I am right now. I hope to grow until the very end.

But I don't think I have grown more confident or changed musically on account of my success. Funny, sometimes success can actually do the opposite because there is more pressure.

But I feel like I have always had a realistic view about my success and a real balance. In other words, I do what I love, I am very passionate about what I do and I am thrilled that people respond to it, of course.

But at the beginning, for example, I was told that I would never make it singing the music I sing. They said I would have to scat or write or do this or that. But I never listened. I sang in my own way because I was compelled to deliver it in a particular way and I knew that it felt good and right, and that was the most important thing.

It turns out that a lot of people love this music and the joy they find in it. I get the most wonderful e-mails from people every day, telling me how much they are moved by it and that my music and voice made an otherwise bad day feel good again! That is the most wonderful compliment there is! And I especially love it because the music does that for me too.

You have covered a wide range of songs, from the jazz standards to songs really remote from the repertoire. How do you choose your songs?

I just sing what moves me. I'll listen to records or watch a movie, or when Jim and I are home, we'll leaf through music books. There are so many songs! I still have a huge list of songs that I haven't sung yet that I would like to include in the repertoire.

It's fascinating what you did with You've Got A Friend. It's as far removed from jazz as one could imagine. The way you uncovered the swing in these non-jazz classics — is that something you are pursuing consciously?

I don't know what I may sing next and what may strike me next. Sometimes, it's funny, I'll 'find' a song that I have known for years, but one day I'll hear it and it will speak to me profoundly for the first time, and I'll think, 'oh, I must sing that'. So, I am not looking for a particular repertoire — I think we'll find each other.

As far as singing a 'non-jazz' repertoire, I am not looking there either. I absolutely had to include **You've Got A Friend** on the last album because there was no way I could make an album tribute to my heroes and not include Paul Simon and James Taylor. They are probably the two biggest influences on my life and the reason I wanted to sing as a kid. So, we covered Carole King's 'You've Got A Friend'. And I think it worked really well. I think our band sound is our sound and there are lots of songs from other genres that will sound seamless sitting next to something from **The Great American Songbook**. It feels right.

It is said that you are more popular in the UK than in the US, your birthplace. Is that still true?

It's just that I am living here in London right now so the perception seems that way. I don't think I am more popular in the UK than in the US. We've been in the billboard charts in the US for five out of six of our albums. In the last two years, I have actually spent more tour days in the US than in the UK. We have had some great coverage over there that helped people to discover who we are.

I was lucky early on. In 1998, the producer of CBS **Sunday Morning** liked my CD and my story (of moving to the UK for a boy, et cetera) so they did a feature on me, a little 15-minute piece. This hit big in America, and so one minute nobody knew who I was and then after that, we hit the charts and we started getting concert work there. It has been good there since.

Also, there are now other European regions where my success is greater than in the UK. In France, for example, when the album **The Boy Next Door** came out, the disc went Silver and I hear it is quite close to going Gold.

France is great for us. They are a nation of song lovers. The French are amazing at being highly intellectual but when it comes to the arts, they let themselves feel it. They don't look at the music cerebrally. We have a great relationship with them and it's just about my favourite place to tour.

So, yeah, UK started out as the most important spot for us but that has since changed.

One thing that seems crazy, though. Although we are constantly on tour [for **The Boy Next Door** tour, we performed over 250 dates],



we have never come to the Far East! Every time we are asked to travel out there, we are always busy doing something else and for some crazy reason, the dates have never worked out. My manager has said that 2005 is the year. It's about time we got out there. We've had so many requests, I think it's going to be great to finally come and see everyone!

That's certainly something to look forward to! Now, during *Close Your Eyes* you finally came home to New York and to Birdland. How did that feel?

Great, of course! The first time was enormous, like I was finally home again! Now I am there so often, so although I am not blasé about it, I don't have that same poignant relationship to it. But I still love playing in New York. I still get a great feeling whenever we play the Algonquin [we love the Algonquin, there's so much history there!] for the whole month and are asked to open up the New York season. We have done that for the last four seasons — New Yorkers get very excited about their season openings, so it's quite an honour to be asked to kick off each year. Another huge honour was when I was asked to sing the American national anthem at the US Open tennis championships last September. I am a huge tennis fan so this was just great!

Do you sing in the shower?

Oh yes. I sing everywhere, all the time. As a kid, I was famous in my house for singing while doing my chores, cleaning the kitchen after dinner, raking leaves, et cetera. Or if we were ever on a family trip, I would watch out the window from the car, the plane, and just be singing to myself (or with my sisters). I still do the same but I'm not even aware of it. Jim will tell me that I'm singing or comment about a song he heard in the shower — I wouldn't even know that I was doing it.

LISTINGS

FEB 2005 MUSIC

MPO IN FEBRUARY

Dewan Filharmonik Petronas, Level 2, Tower 2, Petronas Twin Towers, KLCC, KL. (03) 2051 7007

With **Harry Connick Jr.** Feb 3-5 (8.30pm). RM295/RM225.

Lindgren's Guggi-guggi for trombone and tape; **Maurice Ravel's** Sonata for Violin & Cello; **Henryk Wieniawski's** Selection of Capriccios for two violins, Op 18; and **Johannes Brahms's** Piano Trio No 2 in C, Op 87.

Feb 1 (6pm). RM10

Ernst von Dohnanyi's Symphonic Minutes, Op 36; **Bela Bartok's** Violin Concerto No 2; and **Franz Schmidt's** Symphony No 4 in C. Conducted by **Kees Bakels**, with **Janine Jansen** and her violin. Feb 19 (8.30pm), Feb 20 (3pm). RM95/RM75/RM55/RM25 (Feb 19); RM86/RM65/RM40/RM20 (Feb 20).

Alfred Schnittke's Epilogue for cello, piano and tape; **Poulenc's** Sonata for horn, trumpet and trombone; and **Spohr's** Nonet in F, Op 31. Feb 22 (6pm). RM10

Wolfgang A Mozart's Symphony No 1 in E-flat, K 16, Sinfonia Concertante in E-flat, K 364 (320d), and Symphony No 39 in E-flat, K 543. Conducted by **Kees Bakels**, with **Daniela Rodnité** and her violin, and **Judit Kelemen** playing the viola. Feb 26 (8.30pm), Feb 27 (3pm). RM85, RM65/RM40/RM20

EVELYN TOH SOLO RECITAL

Soprano Evelyn Toh was the only Malaysian who qualified in the finals of the this year's International Chinese Art Song Competition held in Hangzhou, China. Accompanied by pianist Chin Yin Soong.

Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall, 1 Jalan Maharajalela, KL. Feb 26 (7.30pm). RM20/RM100 donation. (019) 2201 703

For more details, go to www.kakiseni.com

What do you see yourself doing 10 years from now?

Well, just over 10 years ago, I had no idea I would be doing this so I have no idea what I'll be doing 10 years from now. How can anyone make a prediction about their life when we have no idea what is waiting around the corner for us?

I don't think hugely far ahead. I love where I am right now, I feel very lucky with all that I have. I have a best friend in Jim, who is the greatest gift I will ever know. I love my work and I have been fortunate to have success there. I count my blessings. ■