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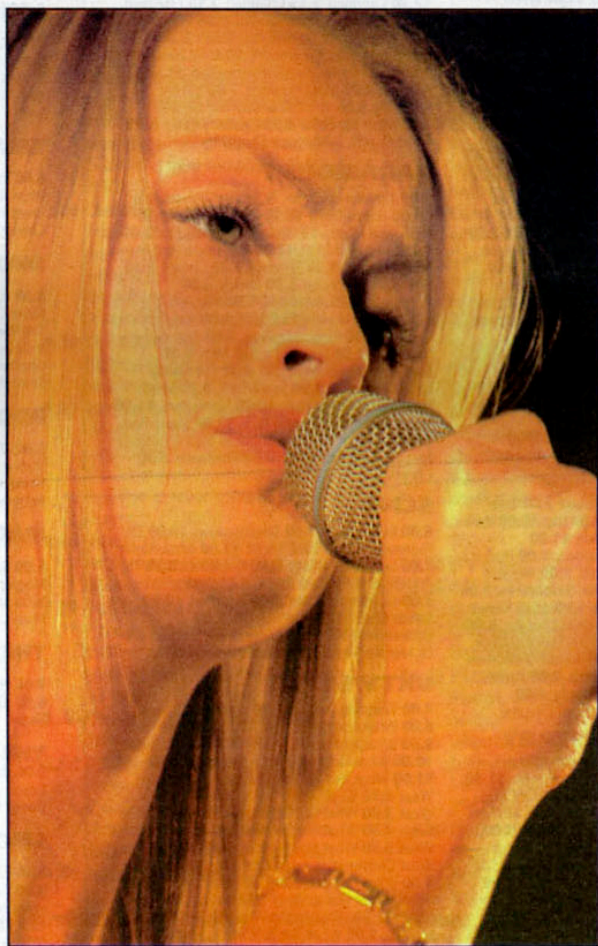


“I had a five-album deal, which would have lasted me for the rest of my life. It was great, and I was disappointed when it all ended. But now I think it was a good thing”



SOUL SEARCH: Stephanie made her own album after her debut record label went out of business

Following a string of setbacks, Lancashire singer/songwriter Stephanie Kirkham is set to release her second album, *Sunlight On My Soul*. She spoke to LAURA KENNERLEY



ENCHANTING: Stephanie Kirkham at a gig in Preston

Steph

in the right direction

TWO years ago it looked like Stephanie Kirkham's career was set. She had a five-album record deal, her debut offering had received great critical acclaim, and her first single had won airplay on BBC Radio 2 and Virgin FM.

But just as she was about to release her second - and, in her opinion, even stronger single - everything went wrong.

Hut, the record label she had recently signed to, went out of business, her second single was not released, and she was basically back at square one.

"To see it all end so abruptly was a real shock," says the singer/songwriter from Chipping, near Preston. "All I could think is: 'Where do I go from here?' I knew I could not just go away and do something else. I believe this is what I am here to do."

After much deliberation Stephanie decided the answer was not to find another record deal, but to make her follow-up album herself.

"I was worried that if I found another record company, the same thing would happen again

and my second album, which I had already started writing, would never reach the shops. "I thought it was safer to make the record myself, and then either approach a company once it was made or sort out its distribution myself." Once she had made this difficult decision, Stephanie established her own record label, SLK Music, and began a journey in to the unknown.

She had previously been involved in the creation of her debut album, *That Girl*, but Hut had taken care of the mechanics of getting it from the studio to the shops.

Now she had to get to grips not only with the process of recording and producing her own work, but with practicalities like purchasing barcodes, creating the artwork for the sleeve, and arranging marketing and distribution. Stephanie found that she was at the bottom of a very steep learning curve, which at times looked insurmountable, but luckily she was not tackling it alone.

While promoting *That Girl* she had become friends with musician, producer and engineer Johnny Dunne, who agreed to work on her sec-

ond album, *Sunlight On My Soul*, with her. "Even with Johnny's help there were times when it felt like a mammoth task. I didn't know if I could do it," says Stephanie. "It was difficult to find out which channels to go down to get things like the barcode and licence to manufacture the CDs, but we got there in the end.

"There is nothing record companies can do that you can't do for yourself. In a record company there are so many people working on an album that it all looks very mysterious. But it is not." One benefit of working with a record company, which she has not been able to replicate, involves money.

Hut gave her a wage while she worked on *That Girl*, allowing her to concentrate on it exclusively, but she could not afford to provide herself with such a luxury and has had to work.

"I have had a few jobs over the last couple of years to keep me going, but I don't mind. At the moment I am supporting my dream, so that it will eventually support me."

These jobs have still allowed her plenty of time to be creative and to invest a great deal of time and effort in *Sunlight On My Soul*.

The album is due to hit the shops on January 30. Stephanie has managed to strike a deal with leading independent distributor, Proper, who will ensure it is available in retailers nationwide, including HMV.

When it reaches the shops, listeners will discover a beautiful, enchanting album, which is easily as good quality as most albums produced by record companies.

On listening, there is no suggestion that it is an independent production; Stephanie's singing and Johnny's instrumentation are stunning. *Sunlight On My Soul* is just how Stephanie had hoped it would be. She has had a level of freedom she would not have been allowed by a record company, and made the most of it, using the instruments and arrangements she prefers. Now the album is ready, Stephanie is in many ways thankful things ended as they did with Hut. "I had a five-album deal, which would have lasted me for the rest of my life. It was great, and I was disappointed when it all ended. But now I think it was a good thing. Working with Hut gave me the opportunity to see how things work, to see how a song can come out of my head in a

really simple form and end up a finished version on a CD. I have been able to draw on that knowledge to help make this record.

"For me, it is all about the songs - and songwriting, working independently, has meant I can focus on this."

Stephanie did not have any concerns about following her own instincts as far as the songs were concerned. "If I make music personal to me, what can go wrong? My music has never been far away, and I think that is the safest place to be. It means you are not going to end up going in the wrong direction, or as a one-hit wonder." *Sunlight On My Soul* reflects her gentle nature and quiet intelligence. It also demonstrates her love of the natural world and a simple life.

It has also received one of the best compliments she could have hoped for - her nieces, who are both under 10 years old, love it.

"Hannah and Holly will happily sing along to it - that is the best compliment to me, hearing them sing along.

"They put on a little dancing show for me the other day - they had made a dance for each song on the album. I felt so brilliant that day."

www.stephaniekirkham.com