

and the rest **etc.**

Who's That Girl?



Meet Stephanie Kirkham, a girl from Preston who might just be going places

This is a story that could go either way. A year from now, Stephanie Kirkham could be up there with Kate Bush, Tori Amos, Beth Orton and co, a famous name with a voice to match. Or maybe, one little gem of an album later, she'll have given up on her fledgling musical career and gone off to be a painter. Or a poet. Or a stained glass artist. Or maybe – well, life, as Stephanie knows only too clearly, is rarely straight-forward. Who knows what might happen?

Stephanie is nothing like you'd expect a maybe-future-star to be. She's friendly, modest, quietly spoken, unglammed-up, and more surprised than anyone that the man who signed David Gray and The Verve liked her enough to offer her a recording contract. 'It's a bit of a scary time because I don't know how everything's going to go now – it could just go so well...' she says, sipping a decidedly unshowbiz malted coffee in the Preston café where she used to go with her friends after school. 'I have to pinch myself – you know, this morning I was getting up and I just felt really tired and I thought "I'm supposed to look like a rock star, he's not going to recognise me!" It's really odd.'

Odd indeed. Stephanie has spent the last few years looking for her niche, in a trip that's taken her from art college in England to modelling in Japan to stained glass work in Edinburgh, among other occupations. This variety wasn't so much indecision as a need to make exactly the right one. 'I was

That Girl, Stephanie's debut album, landed one day in the **etc.** basement along with the usual crop of promos, press releases, and the downright bizarre. When we put the CD on, it didn't go straight into the ever-increasing 'thanks but no thanks' pile. In fact, slowly but surely, her crystal clear voice and the folky-poppy tunes started to grow on us.

The album is not the kind of thing you usually hear in 2003, but there's room in your life for it. Largely acoustic but quite varied in musical style (from freak-out-with-great-hook to ballad-by-candlelight), the songs deal with love, loss, pleasure, pain, square pegs in round holes, beauty, butterflies and running along beaches with the sun on your face. 'Train' and 'telephone' are about the only bits of the modern world to feature in the lyrics, which in themselves are a step up from most of the rest of today's crop, and often sound surprisingly personal.

Anyway, we saw a review or two, which mostly said 'Hmm, she might just get really big, you know...', which was pretty much what we had been thinking too. And so one day in October we decided to track her down.



determined that I would find a job where I could be happy,' she tells an approving **etc.** 'You give so many hours of the day to your work: there are so many people that are unhappy doing it.'

Very true, but music isn't one of those things where you just walk into a conveniently advertised position: how did it all begin for her?

The songlines

'I've been writing songs for years,' she says. 'I write the songs in my head. I can't play anything. It's the old folk way, really – coming up with a melody, then whatever's on my mind at the time, they're the words. I only ever really sang them to my mum and my brother. And my dog, Gemma – she was my first audience.'

etc.'s brother used to do that too, but

etc. and the dog had a hard time telling if the songs were any good or not. Did Stephanie think her songs had a certain something?

'It's hard judging – it's like a painting. It can be quite personal. A song can take literally three minutes to write, but it could be about some experience that's been brewing for, like, a year, and how do you put a price on that? So no, I didn't know if any of them were worth anything or not. I know it's therapy for me, that it's my way of sorting out my problems and trying to get to know myself – that's what it's all about, but maybe someone else could benefit from it.'

That's not quite the same as starting a career, though. You've got to do more than just decide to call yourself a singer...

'I had absolutely no confidence whatsoever to stand up and sing in front of people. The thought of that absolutely petrified me, so much that I'd forget my words, lose my breath – it became a physical panic.'

'I was really down, because secretly I really wanted to do it – you know, you should be able to do anything. If you've got a dream planted in you, then how unfair is life to, like, put that there and then not give you the confidence or whatever it is you need to fulfill it? I knew I had to break out of my comfortable little hideaway set-up: I made myself get up and sing.'

So this was no 'I've always wanted to be famous' kind of career path. Stephanie eventually made a couple of cassettes and sent them off, and got more reaction than you might expect an acapella demo would generate. After some interest from Parlophone, she had her first taste of the ways of the music industry...

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'I just didn't trust anybody. The managers I met seemed to be pretty money-oriented. Some of the producers were just name-dropping all the time, which meant nothing to me because I don't know anybody. A lot of the people I was meeting, I thought "these aren't the kind of people you could sit down and have a cup of tea with and just talk about nothing."

'I came back to Preston and backed off, I needed to take stock and see if this was really right for me. I worked with my mum in her flower shop, and kept writing songs.'

The family and the dog kept backing Stephanie, and after a while she felt ready to have another go at getting somewhere. Off went some more demos, and what happened next was the stuff of dreams.

'It was so exciting that day: Hut's A&R man called me in the shop and said "This is weird. I never open the mail but my secretary's off this morning so I opened it, saw your picture and your CD's been on repeat all day..." He said he loved it and wanted to know more about me. So they came up to Preston and we went across to the pub, had some food, then they came back home and I sang them some new ideas. They were just really nice people, and my dog didn't go for them, which was good, as she was a

good judge of character! It was such a good day – and they seemed pleased to have found something that was real: in this day and age it's a bit hard, isn't it?'

Best not to get **etc.** started on that... So were you ready to sell your soul at that point?

'I said to them "There are two things. I won't wear anything I don't want to wear, and I won't dance because I can't." They were like, "OK, that's fine..." I've always thought I'll either do it my way or not at all, and that's not because I'm stubborn or a bitch, it's just that if I make a pedestal I'm going to fall off it.'

Making tracks

Then it was time for Stephanie and the people at Hut to turn the tunes she had in her head into the kind of things you can put on an album. For the girl from Preston, it was a brave new world...

'The studio was in Dublin. I took the car on the ferry and just went, it was just so brilliant – I was so excited, I'd never been on a ferry before. I was on my own, and I felt really invincible, like Boadicea or something – I'm starting a new life, it's really happening, it's coming true now – I was petrified as well...

'I watched more than I participated

in the studio, because you have to when you don't know what you're doing. But I loved it, I really did. Although I couldn't say "I want this instrument" or that sort of thing, because I don't have that knowledge, I had the knowledge of the feelings I had when I wrote the songs so I had a pretty clear idea of how they were *meant* to sound. And next time it'll be better, as I'll have the confidence to speak up even more.'

'Inappropriate', the first single from the album, was released in August. It didn't make the Top 40, but it did get some very favourable reviews, and some good airplay on national radio. The next single, 'Garden of Dreams', is due out in February. Between now and then, the plan is for Stephanie to get more comfortable performing, starting with a six week residency at the Gardening Club in Covent Garden.

Not surprisingly, she's not attracted by the hectic world of the wannabe popstar, and probably won't be photographed leaving the Met Bar in a 'tired and emotional' state any time soon. 'I do need to be outside. That's my favourite sort of time – just being somewhere natural and green, you know...you've got to, it's food for your soul. The whole point is you don't do anything, you don't think anything, you just *be*, in yourself. It drives me mad when people talk all the time – it is nice to just have silence, isn't it?'

That's a funny thing for a singer to say, but Stephanie Kirkham, as you may by now have noticed, is not the most conventional of singers. **etc.** certainly hopes that her alternative approach will pay off, as she's a great ad for a lot of things we believe in. If, on the other hand, it doesn't, she'll probably just go off and do something else she enjoys – which is as good a definition of success as you'll ever find.

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GOOD ADVICES

Stephanie has clearly spent a long time working out what makes her tick, and **etc.** was interested to know whether she had any useful tips for anyone, pop hopefuls or otherwise. She's quite clear on this:

'Ignore what people tell you to do, and spend some time on your own. Think about from when you were a child, to this point now, and write a list of your favourite days and what you did on those days. When was it that you felt good, and why did you feel good?'

'One of my favourite days was at this country show, and I'd made an edible necklace and a decorated doily, a miniature garden – all these little things, and I won loads of prizes and I was so excited! It was one of the best days of childhood: I'd created stuff that I loved to do, and someone recognised it. I was thinking about this when I was depressed – what was it that drove me that day? The things I came up with were enthusiasm, freedom and enjoyment, and I thought "well, I can

apply those to any job I do."

'Or look at all the lessons at school and think which you enjoy. For me it was Art and English – I love writing stories and I love drawing. There's this book called *The Prophet* [by Kahlil Gibran, *essential reading for anyone – etc.*] where he's talking about work, and he says "work is love made visible", and I think that's brilliant. If you love what you do, you're going to be happy. So you've got to find a thing that you love. It doesn't matter what it is, and it doesn't matter how much or how little money it brings in: if you love it, then you're on the right path. If you do a good job on it, then you've achieved something – you don't have to have someone give you a prize, you just have to feel good and you can be proud of what you've done that day. Find what you want to do, and do it well.' **etc.**

LINKS

Hear and see more at www.stephaniekirkham.com – art by Stephanie, website by her brother