

# Manchester Evening News

3rd  
Thursday  
edition

Thursday, April 13, 2006

www.manchestersonline.co.uk

35p



## LOOKING FOR A NEW JOB?

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## IS THIS THE FUTURE CALLING?



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# BAILIFFS SENT FOR GRAN'S 5p DEBT

**A DEBT collector turned up at an 80-year-old woman's house demanding rent arrears – of 5p.**

Grandmother Alice Nelson has lived in Marsh Green, Wigan, for 45 years and has never been behind in her payments.

But that didn't stop her receiving a visit from a Wigan and Leigh Housing debt collector insisting she pay the 5p he claimed she owed.

They have since apologised "unreservedly" for the upset. The whole incident is said to have terrified her.

After the visit Alice's family went

**BY JOAN HANLEY**

through their mum's receipts and discovered that because of a small error she did in fact owe the 5p which she handed over to the debt collector. But there had been no warning letters before the bailiffs visited.

Mrs Nelson's daughter Julie Foster, 45, from Rosley Road, Hawkley Hall, Wigan, said: "We couldn't believe it. I received a call from my mum who sounded completely terrified. She didn't know who this man was knocking on her door – he could have been anybody. We didn't know if it was a joke or whether he was trying

to get into her house to steal something.

"I spoke to him over the phone and he explained he'd been sent around to collect my mother's arrears. I couldn't understand it as my mum had always been up-to-date with her rent in the 45 years she has lived there. "We're all just stunned that someone would be sent out to collect such a small amount."

The whole episode left the pensioner frightened and anxious.

Julie said: "The worst thing about it was how terrified and worried my mum sounded on the phone. What would you do if a man turned up unannounced and

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## The rise of the internet pop star

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**GIRLS ALOUD ANNOUNCE ARNDALE CONCERT – SEE DIARY PAGE 7**

# Life & Style

Feisty female singers are taking control of their image and breaking free from the popstar mould – with the help of the internet. **HELEN TITHER** meets two women who are finding chart success on their own terms

# Go-getting popstars take the DIY route



**J**UST a few months ago, Sandi Thom was trekking up and down the country in her clapped out car, squeezed alongside her band and being hit on the head by stage equipment – playing gigs for as few as five people. But how things have changed.

This week, no expense was spared as the 24-year-old singer/songwriter was whisked up to Manchester for an exclusive music showcase by her record label after she became the hottest thing in pop in a matter of days.

Earlier this week, Sandi signed a £1m record deal with RCA/Sony BMG live on the internet. It was the crowning moment of a whirlwind few weeks which started with the then struggling musician staging her own gigs on the web – only to become a cult phenomenon.

Broadcast from her basement with basic

computer equipment, the three weeks of live gigs – which she called 21 Nights From Tooting – started off with just 70 fans logging on to hear her folk-music shows. By the 12th night, she had a worldwide audience of 182,000 (more than twice the capacity of Old Trafford). Now, with her debut single I Want To Be A Punk Rocker, getting precious airplay on Radio 2, her career is well and truly on its way.

Her internet-fuelled success follows in the footsteps of the Arctic Monkeys, whose album was propelled by their online

fans to become the fastest-selling debut LP in history. The internet is proving particularly useful for women looking to break free from the pert popette stereotype.

Sandi is one of a growing number of female singers rejecting the music industry's penchant for girls in skimpy skirts who will pose for lads' mags and learn to dance like Girls Aloud. – other recent successes including KT Tunstall, Corinne Bailey Rae and Katie Melua. By going alone, she has been able to have more control over her image.

"The internet is great for artists who want to do their own thing," says Sandi. "It definitely helped me forge my own image. To be honest, I think that was the best thing that could have happened to me."

"We set up some gigs from the basement of my flat and that helped me establish my style with my fans. Performing on the internet is just between you and the people out there – there's no middle man."

"The great thing about getting signed up now is that I have already built up an image and the record company are cool with that because they know that's what has worked, that's part of my appeal to people."

A former student of Liverpool's Institute of Performing Arts, Sandi has been writing songs and playing music since she was 12. She's had several chances to hit the big

time but turned them down to pursue her goals.

"I put on loads of showcases when I was at university and hounded record labels to come and watch," she says. "There have been opportunities for me to join bands or whatever but I don't think I could do that. I always preferred to keep struggling on."

"There have been lots of things my mother couldn't believe I turned down. But I'm happy I insisted on being me – it's paid off in the end."

**M**anchester model Stephanie Kirkham is also embracing the freedom of the web to sell her material.

Having previously been signed up to a mainstream record label and even releasing a single back in 2003, the stunning singer decided her career was not going the way she wanted.

A fan of independent female singers such as Kate Bush, she found she was still being moulded into a pop clone so she set about founding her own record label with boyfriend Johnny, and making her own album – Sunlight On My Soul – which is now on sale in 18 countries through iTunes and Amazon.

The practicalities of going it alone may have been a nightmare, but she reckons it has been worth it.

"The first time round I just sent some of my songs off and got signed up for a five-album deal," explains 31-year-old Stephanie, who modelled with the Boss agency in Manchester. "But I got dragged into the machine and it eventually spat me out."

"There are no guarantees with a major label. I thought they might want to change my image and go down the Girls Aloud route – my style is quite pre-Raphaelite and romantic. I just wanted to be myself but they sent me for dance lessons which were absolutely awful."

"There are singers who are performers as well, like Kylie, but some others are just taken seriously for their music. It really wound me up. I'm glad I did it, my own way so I could be authentic."

Softly-spoken Stephanie, who was born in Preston, set about writing a new album, having the final say on exactly how each song would sound. She has also had control of her image and says, after years spent modelling and doing what other people told her to do, she is glad she did.

"At first it seemed a bit of a big dream to dream," she says. "I wondered if I should have taken the album to other record labels but what worried me was they might not have had the same vision as me."

"I think it's been a real achievement to get the songs out there."

"I didn't really know anything about the music business – but now my album is on sale around the world, through the internet!"



■ WEB OF INTRIGUE... Main, Stephanie Kirkham and, right, Sandi Thom, have control of their popstar images

**"There have been opportunitites. But I'm happy I insisted on being me – it's paid off in the end"**

For all the latest in beauty, fashion and shopping, see Style every Monday