



In 2002, from almost nowhere, Stephanie Kirkham was signed by Hut Records for an astonishing five-album deal that seemed certain to ensure a bright and rewarding artistic future. But when financial crises sunk the label shortly after the release of her acclaimed (and entirely self-composed) debut *That Girl*, taking all hands with it, Kirkham was left high and dry. The world, it seemed, had missed out on its chance to befriend this fresh new talent with her uniquely English sound. Until now, that is; Stephanie is back and more determined than ever to steer her own destiny. Her new album, *Sunlight On My Soul*, was self-released earlier this year, again to high praise, and she's not looking back. **TREVOR RAGGATT** caught up with Stephanie and her musical ally Johnny Dunne at the first of a series of low-key gigs around the London circuit.

One of the first things that strikes you about Stephanie Kirkham is just how

delicate she seems, both in frame and in spirit. As we sit down, she bristles with palpable nervousness before settling into interview mode and relaxing a little. The thought that springs immediately to mind is how someone who appears to be so sensitive managed to weather being cast adrift after Hut's demise. "It was such a quick thing," she remembers, "people were still expecting something to happen and suddenly it was over. It was a bit like a dream really. For a while I didn't know what to do but I had Johnny to lean on. I kept writing and then we started putting the demos together and started to work on the album. It was just a case of 'this is what I do and I can't stop because someone says sorry, we've closed the business'. My business has to keep going so that's what I did."

Of course, putting together an album to a professional standard takes a fair bit of cash. But with Johnny's expertise as soundman and producer and her own

determination to prioritise the music above all else, sacrifices were willingly made. As well as occasional stints behind the counter at the florists run by her mum, Stephanie would often retreat to the back of the shop and express herself through painting. What started out as more of a hobby – "a case of make a mess if you want to" – has now become a potential source of income with her recent acquisition of a publisher who first caught sight of the paintings on Stephanie's website and offered to help her to sell them. "I think painting's a good outlet for me," she smiles. "It's quite abstract, more about the feeling they give. A lot of the time I ended up painting over everything. I really wasn't expecting to sell any, it was just a release. Now I'll keep doing them!"

"I've never worked a nine-to-five job," she admits. "My writing is the most important thing. I might not have achieved things that other people have – a house, a family, a fancy car... blah blah blah. But I'd rather have this type of life and fulfil myself than get stuck doing something I'm not in love with."

Clearly, she's a lot tougher than she looks. The total disaster with Hut taught her a few things about survival in the music industry and there was no way that she was going to put more of her work into someone else's hands. She wasn't going to let someone else decide how the music should sound, how the production should be done, how the album should be marketed or whether or not it would ever even reach the shops. It was a smart move, one that witnessed the birth of SLK Records and set the wheels in motion for a triumphant return. "I suppose the wind had gone out of my sails a bit," she ponders. "I just thought it was too much of a risk. That at least if I did it and put it out there myself, well then I've done it and whatever happens from there can happen naturally. I felt that I needed to keep all my cards close to my chest – a kind of protective instinct – 'no one's going to stop me. I'm going to do it in a small way but it will happen!'"

However, it wasn't easy; without outside assistance, Stephanie and Johnny found themselves occasionally going a little stir crazy in the studio. The project meant so much to them both but their perseverance at working in tandem paid off in the end. Even without knowing these things, *Sunlight On My Soul* feels instantly more personal than the bigger budget debut. Stephanie agrees: "Usually you have other people coming in and giving their input, but there's always a bit of a price to pay with that because it's not being totally true to yourself. This way we

could just make something that was pure, organic and how I really wanted it. It was difficult sometimes but it's more special because of it. There wasn't any interfering; it was a lot freer."

That sense of freedom undeniably translated well into the songs, allowing them a greater depth of character. Several of the songs, and particularly the title track, positively burst with experimentation and daringly unconventional touches that push the envelope considerably further than your average humdrum folk-pop collection. Who said a shoestring budget was a creative noose? *Sunlight On My Soul* sounds as plush as you like, though Stephanie is typically self-effacing about her achievements. "Johnny's brilliant at sound," she grins. "He was responsible for the technical side and making sure the music sounded right. We'd talked about the stories, where the songs had come from, the feelings involved. He'd say 'what about this?', 'what about that?' and, well, he made it all into an album!"

Dunne comes over from finalising some technical details with the venue manager to gently but emphatically underline Kirkham's own contribution: "We did it, Stephanie. You too!"

But what about getting to grips with the finer details and mechanics of label management and promoting the album? The simple answer comes back. Taking everything day by day and ticking off achievements one by one; manufacturing, check! for sale on Amazon UK and iTunes, check! "I couldn't have done it without Johnny, it just wouldn't have been possible," she admits. "But anyway, it's out now and people are finding it. It's a mammoth task but I didn't want to give all the control away. If someone came in and wanted to license it now it's done, that would be great. They'd be able to raise awareness. Hopefully they wouldn't want to change the album."

The first single to be taken from the album was *Show Me What You're Made Of*, a jazzy little number and the last song written. "We'd sort of got the album finished," Stephanie recalls. "I suppose I started getting worried about whether it would ever be finished. Would we get it right? Are we capable of getting it out

there when we didn't know anything about distribution, licensing and all those things; it seemed like there was so much to learn. So then I wrote this song. I think it was like a little voice in my head saying 'you will get there, just get on with it!'. It just came out with that jazzy feel because that was the energy behind it, a carefree, happy feeling. Actually, all the tunes tend to just adopt a natural feeling and the styles just mirrored that. I suppose that's why the album goes a little bit all over the place.

"*Bad Dream* is a nightmare," she continues. "I worked in Japan a few times and it was strange coming back and forth, like a pendulum; today I have to be this, today I have to be that. Constantly swapping and being what people expect you to be – I'd had enough of it. So it had to have a dark Eastern feel to it. I was



worried it might be a bit too dark but my niece who's five loves it. She whispers it in the back of the car '...it's just a bad dream, it's just a bad dream...' and it's like some kind of scary story but she just loves it."

Nature is a recurring theme in many of the songs, and when I comment on it she grins. "I don't know why that is. You know, I don't know about past lives and stuff... you never know for sure, but I must have really spent a lot of time outdoors!"

The smile breaks into a cheeky laugh. "Of course, I did when I was a child. My mum was always pointing out the beauty in nature, making us appreciate it, draw pictures with all the colours in and smell things. She's really brilliant like that – she'll pick out little things that you've never really thought about. But I do have most of my ideas when I'm in nature, outside going on walks and stuff. I think

that's why you often think of stuff in the car because you're on the move. There's just something about being on the move, being free and getting outside."

As you might expect with a title like *Sunlight On My Soul*, there's a charming sense of innocence to Stephanie's songs. Certainly not the usual cynical singer-songwriter fare; doesn't she ever get really pissed off? "I've got a few really grumpy ones but everyone has, haven't they? I tend to keep them in but sometimes you've just got to get your emotions out. That's why music's so brilliant because you can write an angry song and then move on to something else. When Hut closed down I wrote a really angry one, but they're just phases aren't they? You soon go on to the next phase.

"Even if the songs are quite sad, I think the music really lifts them up," she adds.

"It's a good thing because you're still telling the story but you're not making everyone cry at the same time. Overall, it's quite cheerful. I really really love it!"

"I'd like to do another album next year maybe. I've probably got half of one written and I'll keep working on those. We're planning to take it as it comes for a bit. These gigs are important to me because it's still early days as far as performing goes. Beyond that, I don't know. Just going out and singing is a good step for me. We'll see what happens."

Of course, such a multifaceted album is tricky to reproduce when you're just an acoustic duo but Stephanie doesn't seem worried: "They sound a little bit more folky because they can't have all those instruments. There will come a time when they can and it'll be more of a true representation. I think for now, though, they're alright. You'll find out in a minute!"

Another smile lights up her face and she begins to get ready for taking to the spotlight. She's right, the songs are considerably more stripped down and folky but the audience are nonetheless delighted. By being unafraid to show that purity and vulnerable side that makes her such a likable person, Kirkham seems likely to continue to capture many a heart, and deservedly so. It's good to have her back. ■