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KIRSTY MacCOLL

"KITE" may be Kirsty MacColl's American debut, but you have heard her before. Her stunning harmonies have graced tracks by the Rolling Stones, Robert Plant, Talking Heads, David Byrne, The Pogues, and Morrissey, among others.

And that's only part of the MacColl credit list. Kirsty wrote Tracey Ullman's Top Ten hit, "They Don't Know" and has herself appeared in the British charts with the self-penned "There's A Guy Works Down The Chip Shop Swears He's Elvis" and a beautiful cover of Billy Bragg's "A New England."

No, "KITE" isn't the beginning for Kirsty MacColl, but another feather in an already crowded cap. It's just taken a while for the U.S. to learn what England's known for years...

Kirsty's dad was Ewan MacColl, a pivotal figure in European folk and writer of "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face." But as for theories of Musical Family Heritage, Kirsty demurs, "the business he was in was quite removed from the pop industry. My mother (a choreographer) probably influenced me as much as anything because I grew up with her. She had the attitude that if you want to be a brain surgeon and an Olympic athlete, then do it."

What Kirsty wanted was to write songs and she had a fascination with choral harmonies from the time she got her first Beach Boys single ("Good Vibrations") at age four. "I played it over and over again," she recounts, still a fan. "I wanted to hear every part of it. I wanted to understand how it worked."

Following art school, Kirsty got a gig with a band which was asked by legendary indie label Stiff to do some demos. Stiff didn't like the results but, "when they heard I'd been kicked out of the band, they signed me." Kirsty's version of "They Don't Know" was released in 1979, when she was 19, and got great airplay though not big sales. (Ullman's cover came three years later.) The label, it appeared, dropped the ball. "I spent about nine months waiting for Stiff to release the follow-up, and they decided not to, so I thought I'd go elsewhere."

For Polydor U.K. Kirsty made an album and the aforementioned "Elvis" and Bragg hits, but reached another impasse when the label canned her second LP. The bad break coincided with one of her most influential moves -- into session vocals. "I had just spent the last three or four months working on something that hadn't been released. I was broke as well, so I didn't turn down offers to work. I was lucky that a few really good people asked for me.

One request came from Simple Minds, who were working on "**SPARKLE IN THE RAIN**" with producer Steve Lillywhite, master of the boards for artists from Joan Armatrading to U2.

It's not just Kirsty's voice that people wanted (and still request), but her vocal arranging and technical skill as well. She has the ability to slot her vocal lines in with the precision of a computer programmer, creating banks of lush harmonies that would do her old Beach Boys' record proud. "There's a glorious sound you get when you have a chorus of voices," Kirsty explains. "With me, it's one voice doing the choir."

Not only did Kirsty find a musical niche at the "**SPARKLE**" sessions, but romance, too -- MacColl and Lillywhite were married in 1984, and have been collaborating ever since.

Motherhood -- two kids in less than three years -- caused another brief detour in Kirsty's solo career but she continued with session work, including a few for The Smiths. There she met Johnny Marr, the ubiquitously brilliant guitarist, whom she credits for breaking a post-pregnancy bout with writer's block. "He'd phone me up fairly regularly and say 'what are you doing?' and generally wind me up. If you've got someone who you admire a lot interested in what you're doing, it spurs you on."

After one inspiring night "seeing all this crap going down" at a British music awards ceremony, Kirsty wrote the biting "Fifteen Minutes" and "once it started, I couldn't write quick enough." The songs on "**KITE**" range from the scathing indictment of Thatcherite politics, "Free World"; to the near lullaby of "You And Me Baby" (composed with Marr); the country accents of "Don't Come The Cowboy With Me Sonny Jim"; the touching "Mother's Ruin" and a cover of the Kinks' "Days" (Ray Davies liked it so much, he asked Kirsty to perform it on a Kinks' date last summer).

While Kirsty's lyrics range from the tender to vitriolic, the sound of jangly guitars (no synths, please!) is upbeat. "The music doesn't have to be depressing even if the song was something that got you down," she explains. "There's loads of singers like that - 'look at poor little me, I'm having a really bad time,' accompanied by one acoustic guitar. It's not the sort of music I listen to and it's not the sort of music I want to make."

Though MacColl plays various strings, she considers herself a songwriter, not an instrumentalist. "I can play anything fairly badly, but when it comes to recording, I can usually get hold of much better guitar players than me." A touch of understatement, that. Besides Marr, "KITE" features a sterling collection of Britain's best, including Pink Floyd's David Gilmour, Simple Minds' drummer Mel Gaynor, bass hero Pino Palladino and yes, Steve Lillywhite produced.

"If you can surround yourself with people who happen to be the best, and are also people that you get on with great, then you're in a much better atmosphere to work," says Kirsty. "I picked people that I can communicate with...and they get off on working with each other."

Now it's your turn to get off on "KITE", and to discover the multiple talents of Kirsty MacColl.

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