

## Pop



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"See That Girl: 1979-2000" is a new compilation of songs from Kirsty MacColl. Her career included a brush with pop stardom, years of studio work and an openness to many different genres.

## Exploring a Singer's Musical Journey

A new boxed set celebrates the unusual and wide-ranging career of Kirsty MacColl.

By BOB MEHR

During a fitful 20-year solo career, the singer-songwriter Kirsty MacColl released just five full-length albums, achieving a modicum of success in her native England, and little notice in America. Yet MacColl — who died at 41 in 2000 — is omnipresent each holiday season: It's her voice offering tart rejoinders to Shane MacGowan in the Pogues' cockeyed Christmas anthem "Fairytale of New York."

But the woman with the soaring alto, whom Bono once called "the Noelle Coward of her generation," was far more than her best-known work. On Oct. 27, Universal released "See That Girl: 1979-2000," an eight-disc boxed set with 161 tracks that follows MacColl's musical journey — which included an attempt at teen pop stardom, years of accomplished studio craft and global musical exploration.

Those who knew her best, including the folk-punk musician Billy Bragg, have long extolled MacColl's fierce wit, spiky charisma and gift for sharp-detailed songwriting. "It was all about attitude with Kirsty," Bragg said in an interview. "Her personality came across so strongly in the songs."

But her career was sporadic and often secondary to her family obligations, and her untimely passing precluded the usual late-career reappraisal and appreciation. "See That Girl" not only recovers many of MacColl's lost recordings, but also puts her in conversation with bold female singer-songwriters of today who perhaps unknowingly bear her influence.

"Her songs were brilliant, funny, they broke your heart, had wonderful chords and these magnificent bridges — and they were about girls," said the actress and singer Tracey Ullman, who, 40 years ago, scored an international hit with MacColl's grand pop proclamation "They Don't Know." "I played that song at my wedding. I played it at my husband's memorial service. It's a song you can carry with you through your entire life," she added. "Kirsty wrote those kinds of songs."

Though MacColl often played a role behind the scenes and sometimes struggled with the challenges of being an outspoken woman in the pop industry, "She was never going to be standing in the background being ornamental," Bragg noted. "She shined through."

BORN IN SOUTH LONDON in 1959, MacColl was youngest child of the dancer and choreographer Jean Newlove and the folk musician Ewan MacColl, who left Newlove for another folk singer, Peggy Seeger, by the time Kirsty was born.

Her father was a famous folk purist, but MacColl rejected her musical inheritance. "I

would never dare say this in front of Kirsty," Bragg said with a chuckle, "but she actually had a great folk voice, that kind of Nora Waterson, Shirley Collins-type voice."

MacColl found her own musical passion in the pop hits of the 1960s. A severely asthmatic child with intellectual gifts, she would spend hours absorbing the complex harmonies of the Beach Boys' "Pet Sounds" and the finely etched lyricism of the Kinks.

After stints attending art college and working in a record store, the teenage MacColl started her career as England was in the throes of punk rock. Billing herself as Mandy Doubt, she served as a backing singer for the Drug Addix, a band angling for a deal with the iconoclastic Stiff Records. The label passed on the group but seized on MacColl; the Phil Spector-indebted pop anthem "They Don't Know," her first single, in 1979, got considerable radio play but had the misfortune of being released in the middle of a distributor's strike, which hamstrung sales.

She quickly began bouncing between labels, releasing her debut LP, "Desperate Character," for the major Polydor in 1981, featuring a twangy quasi-novelty hit, "There's a Guy Works Down the Chip Shop Swears He's Elvis." But she returned to Stiff soon after to work with an unlikely collaborator: the rising comedian and actress Ullman, whom the label hoped to turn into a pop star.

Ullman's version of "They Don't Know" — with MacColl stepping in to hit the song's climatic high note — was released in 1983 and became a smash on both sides of the Atlantic. "She couldn't have been more pleased," Ullman said in an interview. She went on to record several other MacColl numbers, including "You Broke My Heart in 17 Places" and "Terry," before moving on to TV stardom in America. "I was never going to do a pop career forever," she added, "but I was lucky enough to live vicariously through Kirsty's songs for a while."

In fall 1983, just as "They Don't Know" was peaking, MacColl went into a London studio to sing backing vocals for the Simple Minds' "Sparkle in the Rain," where she met the album's producer, Steve Lillywhite. "I fell in love with her immediately," Lillywhite said in an interview. He proposed within weeks. "I thought she was the most wonderful and opinionated person I'd ever met."

He soon discovered MacColl's outgoing manner hid various vulnerabilities, including severe stage fright. "Early on in her career she did a tour of Ireland that was really awful and affected her in a bad way," he said. "But she was great at a dinner party; she'd get up and start singing 'Lydia the Tattooed Lady,' the old Marx Brothers song."

MacColl gave birth to two sons, Jamie and Louis, effectively putting a pause on her solo career — but not before she scored her biggest hit with a cover of Billy Bragg's "A New England" in late 1984. "It revealed to people what you could do with those very spare songs of mine," Bragg said, "that they were capable of being made to great big pop num-

bers. That was all Kirsty."

In the mid-80s, as she focused on her family, MacColl's musical output was mostly limited to session work, singing on a series of Lillywhite projects with the Rolling Stones, Talking Heads and Robert Plant. "She used to think in harmony," Lillywhite said.

In 1986, MacColl sang on the Smiths' single "Ask" and became a close friend and collaborator of the band's guitarist, Johnny Marr. "I saw her as a kick-ass serious songwriter and musician," Marr said in an interview, "who balanced that with the business of bringing up two small children, while also being married to one of the busiest and most successful record producers in the world at the time. It was a real challenge."

Her contributions behind the scenes included sequencing U2's 1987 album "The Joshua Tree." "Everyone was so fired by the end of it, we didn't know what to do," said Lillywhite, who helped mix the record. MacColl

### Known for a holiday anthem but worthy of wider appreciation.

quickly knocked out a running order that everyone loved. Later, when asked how she came up with the sequence, she shrugged and said, "Well, I put the song I liked best first, and the second best, second . . . and so on."

Bragg laughed, recalling the anecdote. "That was her power," he said. "That's who she was — she was the woman who came in and put all the bokes to right."

A CAREER TURNING POINT for MacColl came in 1987, when she appeared on the Pogues' "Fairytale of New York," produced by Lillywhite. A duet about a bickering couple on Christmas Eve, the song was originally sung on a demo by the Pogues' frontman Shane MacGowan and the bassist Cait O'Riordan. By the time the group cut it, O'Riordan had left the band, and the track needed a powerful female voice.

"Steve took the song home and got Kirsty to sing the woman's part just to see how it would sound," said the band's Spider Stacy. "But as soon as we heard Kirsty singing, we knew she was the answer."

The song proved a hit on the U.K. charts that winter — on its way to becoming an enduring classic — and prompted MacColl to return to live performing, teaming up with the Pogues in Europe. "The reception she'd get every night was unbelievable," Stacy said. "She got a real lift from that. It helped get her past her nerves onstage."

The momentum pushed MacColl to resume her solo career in 1989, with the release of her second album, "Kite," eight years after her debut. "Kite," which included a cover of the Kinks' "Days," was considered her greatest work — and even won the approval of her most ardent critic, Ewan MacColl. "Kirsty's

father had dismissed her career as being 'pop,' in the same way he had dismissed Bob Dylan when he started playing electric guitar," Lillywhite said. "In fact, when I introduced Kirsty to Dylan at Live Aid, his first words to her were, 'Wow, your father really hated me.'"

During a playback of the album, the elder MacColl read through the lyrics and finally praised his daughter. "I'm getting quite emotional just thinking about that," Lillywhite said. "'Kite' was really the high point in our lives together."

Low points soon followed, however, and the couple eventually divorced after more than a decade together. Musically, MacColl went on to incorporate a variety of styles — trip-hop, Latin, even rap — on her next effort, "Electric Landlady" (1991), before delivering a darkly themed breakup record, "Titanic Days" (1993).

Over the next few years, she found further inspiration globally, and brought sounds from South America and Cuba to her self-funded and self-produced swan song, "Tropical Brainstorm," from 2000. "Much like the way Paul Simon integrated non-European music into his pop vision," Marr said, "it was a very skillful thing she did."

As the new millennium dawned, MacColl had found happiness with a new romantic partner, the saxophonist James Knight, and a renewed confidence in performing. In fall 2000, Spider Stacy joined her during a rowdy concert at the Shepherd's Bush Empire in London. "I played tin whistle on 'Fairytale' and danced around on 'Chip Shop,'" he said, before turning somber. "Must've been one of the last shows she ever did."

That December, MacColl was struck and killed instantly by a speedboat while scuba diving with her sons off the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico. The boat was owned and officially captained by the supermarket millionaire Guillermo González Nova; a deckhand, Juan Jose Cem Yam, said he was at the controls and was sentenced to nearly three years in prison for culpable homicide, but he walked free after paying a small fine.

MacColl's mother spent the next decade pursuing a "Justice for Kirsty" campaign, lobbying Mexican officials to reopen what had been a hastily concluded investigation. No other charges were ever filed, and the effort ended in 2009.

"I still have a massive sense of sadness," Marr said. "And like a lot of her friends, there's an anger about Kirsty's death that'll never go away."

The release of "See That Girl" has given MacColl's friends and fans an opportunity to reassess her musical legacy, as well as consider what might have been.

Ullman suggested she could have written songs in Nashville, or made a musical. "I could just see Kirsty doing all of that because she was such a great storyteller," she said.

"Whatever she would've done," Marr concluded, "she would have made it into Kirsty MacColl music."