

KT Tunstall Biography

KT Tunstall is a sparkling new songwriter with Chinese blood, a Scottish heart, great legwarmers and a cool name – “well, it’s got a bit more attitude than Kate which just says farmer’s daughter to me,” she laughs. KT celebrates classic singer-songwriting in the tradition of Rikki Lee Jones, Carol King and Fleetwood Mac with an articulate, accessible, immediate brew of rootsy sass, wistful quandary and after-hours atmosphere. The latest in a line of outstanding contemporary Scottish songwriters including Texas, Fran Healy, Teenage Fanclub and The Beta Band, KT’s unique perspective offers a rare emotionally connecting intensity through it’s gripping lyrical bite and heartfelt melody.

She grew up in the university town of St Andrew’s (“beautiful but sheltered, a little bubble”), always knowing she had been adopted at birth. “I grew up knowing I could have had a million different lives. It makes your life mysterious and your imagination go wild.”

Her debut album ‘Eye To The Telescope’ is the creative consequence of that inquiring imagination. “My songs examine and explore little specific emotions or situations or stories,” she explains. “They’re kitchen table songs, like a conversation between me and one other person. It’s almost like an alien has been sent to get emotional samples from human beings and put it all together on a record.”

KT spent her childhood up hills and under canvas with her outward-bound parents. Music was never really part of the equation until her older brother discovered the joys of hair metal. “I would sit outside his room and record his music through his door.”

Her first album was the Never-ending Story soundtrack, but her favourite, reassuringly, is David Bowie’s ‘Hunky Dory’. “Its sound really touched my love for songwriting and spacey stuff,” she says. “I was really into sci-fi books as a kid. My dad is a physicist and he used to take my brothers and I into his lab when we were little. We played games with liquid nitrogen and Van de Graaff generators. He had the keys to the observatory at St Andrew’s University and he’d get us up in the middle of the night to show us Halley’s Comet. That’s partly why the album is called ‘Eye To The Telescope.’”

The young active KT took up piano, then flute and gradually her singing voice developed its earthy individuality, “I’m pretty certain that I learned how to sing because someone gave me an Ella Fitzgerald tape - she was my singing teacher.”

By her mid-teens, KT had started writing her own songs, “but I was just coming out with this schmaltzy love nonsense. It was a complete vomit of puppy love. But I thought I was rocking.” At 16, she took up the guitar, teaching herself from a busker’s book. Schmaltz was junked; a musical epiphany ensued.

Hungry for experiences and independence, she gained a scholarship to Kent School in Connecticut, New England and absorbed gigs by The Grateful Dead and 10,000 Maniacs. She also formed her first band, The Happy Campers, and played a host of informal gigs. “By the second week of playing an open mic slot I was their ‘special guest from Scotland!’,” she recalls.

Next stop on her personal odyssey was a music course at Royal Holloway College, where she tried and failed to form another band. “I managed to win Battle Of The Bands with one mandolin player! It was me and eleven goth bands and I won.”

After vanquishing the goths, KT returned to St Andrews and became immersed in the grassroots scene which spawned The Beta Band and the Fence Collective, forming a group with Fence’s Pip Dylan and honing her tastes with an ambrosial diet of James Brown, Lou Reed, Billie Holliday, Johnny Cash and PJ Harvey.

A few years and bands later, it was crunch time for Tunstall. She hit London again where, finally, things started to fall into place. Working relationships were forged, deals were secured. She began writing projects with Swedish songwriter/producer Martin Terefe and London-based Orcadian Jimmy Hogarth and London’s Tommy D. With over a hundred songs in her pocket, set to work on her debut album with her new band and legendary U2/New Order/Happy Mondays producer Steve Osborne at the helm.

“Steve was producer and engineer - he did everything. He even invited me to stay with him and his family so we could work longer. We recorded the album in this gnarly little studio in the woods in Wiltshire. It was this disabled guy’s house. The vocal booth was the wheelchair ramp between his bedroom and the control room. So you could either sing going downhill or uphill. It was perfect, so raw. He’s got this little shack in the garden where all the local bands rehearse. It was like Deliverance.”

Minus the psychopathic locals, presumably. And no duelling banjos either. "I didn't want to take too much equipment into the studio because it's when you have to be inventive that you get interesting music. Tom Waits said if you want something to sound like a cardboard box being hit with a boot, then hit a cardboard box with a boot."

This lo-fi, visceral, boot-wielding approach was inspired by KT's recent conversion to the hiss and crackle of early blues. "On the whole, I'm a positive, skippity-la-la person but I love the dark side of music and I will always want to explore that. It's a positive-sounding album but there's stuff underneath for sure."

Since completing 'Eye To The Telescope', life has been a blur of gigs, first as support to Joss Stone, then a tour of Europe, singing with 'klezmer hip-hop' band Oi Va Voi, who ignited the Avalon Stage at Glastonbury.

"It was blazing sunshine and I went on in a turquoise neck muff, glamorous dress and muddy boots and just had the best gig, really emotional. I've had emails from people saying that they cried. They promised it wasn't the drugs."

Now KT is raring to channel all her infectious energies into her own music. "I'm not exactly sure what has driven me so hard," she says. "I've never questioned it. I've never had a back-up plan. I was never going to do anything else."