

# Kirsty MacColl: a life in song

By Liz Smith  
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British singer-songwriter Kirsty MacColl was tragically killed by a speedboat on December 18, 2000, while on holiday in Mexico with her two sons. She leaves a musical legacy stretching over 23 years. Many will remember her for the Christmas duet *Fairytale of New York* she sang with Shane McGowan of the Pogues in 1987. To the tens of thousands of fans she built up around the world, she will be best remembered for her acerbic wit and treatment of everyday occurrences and feelings in a brutally honest but sensitive way.

Kirsty was born in Croyden, Surrey in October 1959, the daughter of folk singer Ewan MacColl. By this time Ewan MacColl had left Kirsty's mother, a choreographer, and played only a small part in influencing her musical development. In a recent interview she gave to blues musician Jools Holland, she explained that she started getting into music when she was about four years old. She recalled listening to a copy of the Beach Boys' *Good Vibrations* that her brother had bought: "I played it so much he just said 'Have it'. I was allowed to play it, and I played it incessantly for about twelve hours a day, working out all the different parts and harmonies." She was influenced by music as varied as Frank Zappa, the Beatles, the Kinks, the Shangri-Las, David Bowie, as well as Latin and classical music—Faures' *Requiem* being her favourite.

Growing up in the 1960s and 70s, the album that triggered her into thinking she should have a go herself was *Harvest* by Neil Young. But like many rock musicians and singers of her generation the first band she sang in—the Drug Addix—was a Rhythm & Blues band with a punk image. This was 1978. The latter years of the Labour government, which saw the introduction of the hated Youth Opportunities Programmes—work schemes for the growing number of young unemployed. It was also a period of growing industrial unrest, which during the "Winter of Discontent" in 1978/9, saw thousands of public sector workers engaged in disputes against national and local employers.

Against this background many young people embraced the angry protest of punk rock. Stiff Records signed up many new and exciting young bands and artists such as Ian Dury and Elvis Costello, for whom lyrics were as important if not more so than the music—dubbed the "new poetry" by Clash front man Joe Strummer.

In late 1978, the Drug Addix were asked to make a demo for Stiff Records and Kirsty was invited back to record her debut

single *They Don't Know*, which she wrote at the age of 18. Released in June 1979, the song is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, about a young woman's love for her boyfriend against the advice of others:

*No I don't listen to their wasted lines  
Got my eyes wide open and I see the signs  
But they don't know about us  
And they've never heard of love*

The vocal arrangements contain many of the layers of harmonies found in the Beach Boys and girl groups influenced by the sound of producer Phil Spector. Kirsty turns her own voice into a chorus of over-dubbed parts. In spite of the recording's superiority to the subsequent cover by comedienne Tracey Ullman, it was the latter version that went to number 2 in the UK record charts.

Her first chart hit was the witty, *There's a guy works down our chip shop swears he's Elvis*. Played in a rockabilly style, the song is about men who greatly embellish their lives in order to attract women. Kirsty saw Elvis as a state of mind, rather than about one man in particular:

*There's a guy works down the chip shop swears he's Elvis  
Just like you swore to me that you'd be true  
There's a guy works down the chip shop swears he's Elvis  
But he's a liar and I'm not sure about you*

Whilst bringing her into the limelight in the early 1980s, the song almost ruined her. Still inexperienced, she undertook a tour of Ireland, where she suffered stage fright and returned home vowing never to tour again. It was not until 1990 that she went back on the road.

In the intervening years, Kirsty developed her song writing and recording talents. Her 1984 recording of Billy Bragg's *New England* rose to number 7 in the UK charts. Between 1986-89, she became one of the most in-demand session singers, due to her distinctive and yet diverse vocal talents. She collaborated with many artists including Talking Heads, The Smiths, Robert Plant, the Wonder Stuff, Van Morrison, and the Rolling Stones.

It was also in this period that she worked with Irish ex-Punk turned electric folk singer Shane McGowan and his band, the Pogues—from whom Kirsty said she learnt how to sing folk music. She sang on their album, *If I Should Fall From grace With God*, from which *Fairytale of New York* was released.

Kirsty also began writing songs again. The *Kite* album released in 1989 reflected her musical diversity, with cover

versions of *Days*, originally by Ray Davies of the Kinks, and in Cuba or New York, but chose instead to record in the traditional *Complainte Pour Ste Catherine*. Kirsty also wrote and sang the wonderful country ballad *Don't come the cowboy with me, Sonny Jim!*, in which she rails against the coldness and loneliness of men and women who use each other for sex, but recognise the difference in someone who has bit more feeling.

*Oh don't come the cowboy with me Sonny Jim  
I know lots of those and you're not one of them  
There's a light in your eyes tells me somebody's in  
And you won't come the cowboy with me*

The hard-hitting *Free World*, a scathing attack on Thatcher's Britain, was also on her *Kite* album.

A year later she sang a most beautiful interpretation of Cole Porter's *Miss Otis Regrets* at the Red Hot and Blue AIDS awareness project.

Her greatest strength was that she could embrace and recreate differing musical influences in her own style. The struggle for artistic honesty and integrity was an issue close to her heart. In an interview with the *Guardian* in 1991 she explained, "I don't want to be presented as something I'm not. The pop world packages women. You're either a dolly bird bimbo or a soapbox sociologist. So many songs are written by men for women to sing and they obviously have a pretty strange string of women around. Dopey cows in frilly dresses singing, 'Oh Baby I Can't Live Without You'. It's capitulation. I've done that shit for years..."

Around this time she recorded the rhythmic *My Affair*, which very much expresses this mood, "Who I see is up to me/It's my affair". This was recorded mostly live in New York with Cuban musicians and was the beginning of her final and most profound shift in musical direction.

Kirsty MacColl made her first visit to Cuba in 1992, the first of many. She later explained that for three years she played only Cuban music at home, citing Celina Gonzalez as her greatest musical influence. She also took Spanish lessons so she could talk to people and have a greater understanding of *santeria* and the African origins of Cuban culture. She also saw this as a political allegiance and became a supporter of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign. On *Galore* —a compilation of greatest hits released in 1995—there is a picture of her wearing Cuban army fatigues lighting a huge Cohiba cigar with a dollar bill.

After saturating herself with Cuban music, she learnt Portuguese and went to Brazil—rediscovering classic songwriters like Milton Nascimento and Gilberto Gil. Whilst there she recorded the bossa nova track *Celestine* (which she wrote travelling on the plane there) for her last and best album *Tropical Brainstorm*.

Arriving in the wake of the massive popularity of the *Buena Vista* album, from Wim Wenders film about Cuban music and musicians, *Tropical Brainstorm* was a surprising yet welcome development for many of her fans. She could have made the

London, merging the Latin influences with a her own style. This proved to be one of her most refreshing compilations. The lyrics to all the songs bring out Kirsty's witty storytelling at its best. Most notably *In these shoes* and *England 2 Columbia 0*. Others, like the sad *Autumn Girl Soup* and the reflective *Wrong Again*, reflected Kirsty's strong melodic tones. The singing and saxophone accompaniment on the final track *Head*, about a woman's total infatuation with her lover, evoke the headiness of such a burning passion and echo the intensity of Billy Holliday's singing.

I was fortunate to see Kirsty perform at her best, in what was to be her last tour of Britain. With a seven-piece backing band made up of percussion, drums, guitar, sax, trombone and trumpet, Kirsty presented the entire repertoire of *Tropical Brainstorm*—as well as gutsy renditions of her classics from the 1970s to the present day. A packed audience danced and sang along with her during the two-hour concert. *Wrong Again*, a song about betrayal accompanied by a solo classical guitar, brought a lump to the throat.

Her ability to express the most intimate feelings in a non-sentimental or cynical way was a true talent. Kirsty, like one of her best contemporaries Ian Dury at whose tribute concert she sang, once said of herself, "I've never been fashionable, but I've never been unfashionable, either."

After years of denying that her father had any musical influence on her, she acknowledged that the one thing she learnt from him was, "that you can have a successful career as a songwriter regardless of pop fashion. If you've got good songs it doesn't matter if you've got a crap haircut. You're always going to be all right."

Kirsty said she always treated each album as possibly her last, as she did not want the obituary writers to say that her last album was "not very good." As a result, she never made such an album. The fondness and respect in which she was held—vividly expressed in the tributes on a special BBC web page—bear out the fact that she possessed that rare ability wholly absent in many contemporary artists—to speak the truth and, in doing so, make all those who listened to her songs feel that she was one of them.

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