

The Musical World

A k.d. lang Rundown

k.d. lang is one of those "are they or aren't they?" types that have popped up recently (Tracy Chapman, Melissa Etheridge, and, until just recently, Michelle Shocked are other examples of this) about whom the listener is left wondering if she is someone who can be legitimately lusted after without the fear of her coming out straight. But aside from the obvious sex appeal of k.d. lang and the question of whether she is or isn't, we cannot overlook the spectacular talent she possesses.

No other performer in the past few years can boast the range and control of k.d.'s voice. But voice is not enough to make a performer. She (or he) must be able to be personable towards the audience, almost to become an actor and comedian rolled into one. k.d. lang is able to accomplish this quite naturally, and one is left to believe that she truly loves to perform.

I was first introduced to k.d. lang by an article in *Rolling Stone* about "cowpunk," a mixture of country/western and roots rock. Her band, the Reclines, was among those mentioned. A picture of her accompanying the article showed that she was no ordinary singer, what with the dress dripping with plastic dime-store charms and her outlandish cowboy boots. A year later, she released her first album of foot-stomping "cowpunk," *Angel with a Lariat*, to rather mixed critical reviews.

k.d.'s next album, *Shadowland*, was her breakthrough. Produced by Owen Bradley, whose has worked in the past with Patsy Cline and Loretta Lynn, the album was a throwback to the classic sound of country/western from the Fifties and Sixties, complete with an orchestra mixed in with the wail of a steel guitar. Unlike her debut, *Shadowland* gave k.d. an opportunity to show off that incredible voice.

The first song, a cover of Chris Isaak's "Western Skies," is an exercise in control, starting off softly and drawing toward the crescendo in a high pitch that never wavers but stays strong 'til she begins the reprise once more. The single from the album, "I'm Down to My Last Cigarette," is a song of lost love and loneliness given the k.d. treatment, where one actually believes she really is sitting in an empty bar with an ashtray nearby. (When she sang this song in concert, she professed to never touch cigarettes, even though "they make for great country music.")

Absolute Torch and Twang is the latest release from k.d., and this time around she is reunited with her band. Because of that, *Torch and Twang* is similar in feel to her first album in that there are more "kick-ass" songs, but the influence of *Shadowland* remains in songs like "Pullin' Back the Reins" and "Nowhere to Stand," the latter being her "message" song. Each of those songs gives her a chance not only to sing as strongly as she ever has, but to show how her songwriting has come a long way, from polkas to songs about abuse.

But albums are only half the story as far as k.d. lang is concerned. She must be seen and heard. Her concert is not so much a rundown of songs pulled from her albums, but an entertainment event. Each song becomes a sort of mini-skit. If it's one of her songs about smoking cigarettes, she'll be sitting down at a table with an ashtray full of them. Or, if the song is one of those 60's teenage laments a la Shelley Fabares about a wimpy boyfriend, k.d. will be all over screaming to the boyfriend in question until he actually "socks" her one.

Concerts are also a wonderful opportunity to see k.d. lang up close because heck, it does provide fodder for all sorts of fantasies...

Short, Sharp, Lesbian: Michelle Shocked

Only a short time after performing an energizing show to promote her *Captain Swing* album at Middlebury College, Michelle Shocked publicly leapt out of the closet and further into the hearts of the gay community by declaring herself a lesbian in an interview with Chicago's *OutLines* paper. Shocked, whose songs themselves often defy the traditional categories of folk, rock, or swing (a recent fixation of hers), is best known for her breakthrough album *Short, Sharp, Shocked*.

In the interview, Shocked bemoaned the fact that she was 18 years old before she "ever heard the 'L' word. It would have made all the difference for me had I grown up knowing that the reason I didn't fit in was because they hadn't told me there were more categories to fit into."

Chel, a.k.a. "Captain Swing," delivered a powerful set of material from all three of her releases at the recent Middlebury show. Backed by a strong band, she playfully incited the crowd to move to the music and invoked the revolutionary spirit of Emma Goldman to do so.

The most intimate moments of the show came when the band left the stage, leaving Shocked to accompany herself on a number of songs. Chel seemed somewhat shocked herself as the crowd sang along to "Memories of East Texas," a delicate ballad describing some of the singer's childhood recollections.

With the recent news of her coming out, Shocked has added new meaning to the memories many of her fans will carry with them of the Middlebury concert. We're already eagerly awaiting her return.

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