

K.D. LANG SINGS IT LOUD

THE SEXY CROONER GOES COUNTRY, MOVES UP-TEMPO AND REMINDS US WHY WE STILL CONSTANTLY CRAVE HER.

BY STEPHANIE SCHROEDER

"I THINK IT'S VERY EASY IN OUR SOCIETY TO BE LOST AS INDIVIDUALS IN VARIOUS LIFESTYLES AND FASHIONS, WHERE BOTH FINDING AND REMEMBERING WHO YOU ARE ISN'T NECESSARILY SUPPORTED," SAYS K.D. LANG. SHE COULD BE TALKING ABOUT HERSELF, OR ABOUT YOU AND ME, BUT SHE IS ALSO TALKING ABOUT HER NEW ALBUM, *SING IT LOUD*, HER FIRST WITH HER OWN BAND IN MORE THAN 20 YEARS.

Joe [Pisapia, lang's new writing and producing partner] wrote the title track, 'Sing It Loud,' about watching his niece growing up. I felt it was a beautiful sentiment to sing to everybody and anybody. It's really about where your moral compass is and what you stand for."

These days, lang's musical compass points to her roots. The country album she promised us when we spoke to her in 2009 has come to fruition. However, not wanting to be shoehorned into any genre, she refers to *Sing It Loud* as "alternative Americana."

"I never know what is moving and inspiring me at any given time, or what direction I will go in," she confides, as though she is allowing herself permission to try just about anything in the future.

Happy with her music and very confident in herself at the moment, lang, a Buddhist convert, ponders her current Zen contentment: "I don't know if it's a state I'm going to reside in forever. I don't have much to lose. I've got a lot of experience under my belt, but I've got a lot left to say as well." This attitude is evident in both lang's music and her stage demeanor. "Joe and I, when we met, agreed on the way we could best use our music. We wanted to make soulful

and positive music, not pretentious or particularly deep, but fun, smooth and uplifting."

Singing, like everything lang does, is spiritual. Her music and Buddhist practice are, she says, inseparable. "Everything I do as a Buddhist practitioner is spiritual," she states, dispelling

any notion that she is more invested in her Buddhism than she is in her singing career.

Although her sultry, sensuous voice has defined her since she came out in 1992, lang, who turns 50 in November, is philosophical about her enduring status as a butch lesbian sex symbol. "I don't consider myself a sex symbol," she says simply and without a trace of self-deprecation.

While lang may reject the title, we'll never forget her jaw-dropping appearance on the August 1993 cover of *Vanity Fair* featuring her wearing a man's three-piece suit and sitting in a barber's chair with supermodel Cindy Crawford "shaving" her with a straight razor. Within the lesbian community it ignited a libido firestorm, which still burns today. lang's publicly masculine appearance was roguely seductive as well as subversive. That cover was an especially shocking image for mainstream media and solidified lang's status as a cultural icon, broadening her power and sex appeal far beyond the lesbian community. The image sent a message to America that lang meant business and was here to stay.

Not surprisingly, lang has her own ideas about what's sexy. "I'm more comfortable with playfulness and curiosity—





that's what sexuality is for me, not the body of my being," says lang. Which is a healthy attitude, especially when it comes to the subject of aging. "Age is irrelevant because the mind is ageless. My favorite movie is *Harold and Maude*, and at 80-something Maude was the foxiest woman of all time."

We don't know about Maude, but lang's playfulness has always been alluring for lesbians, and most likely lead to her reputation as a lesbian lothario (she has been romantically linked to many celebs, including Leisha Hailey, and has openly discussed her views of non-monogamy, unusual for a lesbian role model).

However, lang has long since given up her lady-killing ways and settled down, in the best sense. She allows that minds change with age, likes and dislikes change, "but one's essential nature—and sincere, intimate interest in another person—is ageless." By "another person," she's referring to Jamie Price, her partner of nearly 10 years. "Jamie isn't interested in show biz, which is a nice balance. She's a very selfless person who volunteers all her time to nonprofits, substantially Buddhist organizations. Her work is more important than mine," lang says. She is not being modest.

She's serious. "I don't mean to demean music, but [Jamie's] work is so substantial."

The couple carefully cultivates privacy in the very public City of Angels. "Keeping the spotlight off our relationship," says lang, "has contributed to its longevity."

And while sadly, lang is off the market, she hasn't left the state. When lang is performing live, as she is this year for *Sing It Loud*, her butch cowgirl nature, along with her wit and intelligence, shine brightly. Playing to a mostly lesbian, sold-out crowd in April at Le Poisson Rouge, a small, extremely eclectic venue in New York City, it was classic bad girl lang as she teased and flirted with the audience. During her performance of "I Confess," lang provocatively drew out the line "I'll be your daddy," while flashing a knowing and playful grin—and the crowd roared—and swooned.

She knows how to please an audience and her bold presence on stage captures the essence of butch bravado, except with lang it's not simply bravado. "Butch is so hard to define," she says. "With so many straight women working out, some are really butch. I think Madonna is so much more butch than me," she laughs. "Really, I just feel

more comfortable and natural being butch and it suits me more,” says the charming chanteuse about the role that we love, and which fits her so damn well. “I would look like a drag queen otherwise. I am much more comfortable with a butch aesthetic.”

While lang has often spoken about her mentors and elders in the music community, she’s becoming somewhat of a pillar in the lesbian community, herself—not to mention that in her early (controversially butch-presenting) career she was at the forefront of the new gender discussion. As such, she is the perfect person to ask about today’s ever-evolving definition of gender. “I find the gap between genders is closing. Men are more effeminate and women more masculine. I think women are threatening to begin with, but a woman in men’s clothes is even more threatening. However, femininity is ultra powerful,” lang says with relish.

Her view on the many divisions within the lesbian community is simple—and wonderfully inclusive. “You wouldn’t want a community to move all in the same direction—to be all the same, like the Republicans. Alternatives are what make up the diversity of our community. I think we should celebrate that. It’s an indefinable, ever-changing and diverse culture—again, something to be celebrated.”

A crossover artist (in so many ways), lang says her musical aspirations have been the same from the beginning—and are likely to surprise you—her endeavor is to be *mainstream*. Not in the worst sense, but in a positive way. To have a truly broad-based appeal. “Walking the middle line is the epitome of eclectic. I’ve always wanted an indefinable demographic and a broad-spectrum audience: Imagining an 85-year-old Republican woman from Texas and a butch dyke from New York City who is 21 sitting together at my show makes me happy. Music is a peaceful way to bridge difference. It has always been part of my manifesto for my music.”

In the aforementioned issue of *Vanity Fair*, lang stated she thought she would be ostracized by Nashville and the country music industry when she came out. It didn’t happen. She actually gained popularity and her music sales

persisted. It was when she appeared in an ad for PETA that Nashville disowned her based on pressure from cattle ranchers and the beef industry.

Lesbian country music singers have lang as a formidable forbear and most say it was her grand entrée into the country scene that budged open the closet door. It wasn’t that queers were suddenly welcome in Nashville then (or now—just ask Chely Wright, who regularly gets death threats and hasn’t seen the Grand Ole Opry stage since coming out); just that lang’s irrefutable talent, larger than life presence and innate subversive sexiness overshadowed the ingrained homophobia in that particular music scene. It’s been rumored—though not documented—that lang took Nashville so completely by surprise that she couldn’t be categorized—or contained. By returning to her country roots with *Sing It Loud*, she is disproving the rumor that she was rejected by Nashville because she was “too much.”

“The thing is, I always knew I wasn’t a ‘country singer.’ My musical influences were very eclectic. My initial liaison with Nashville was voluntarily short and at arm’s length,” lang says, dispelling the rumors that she had no control over that portion of her career. “My intention was to pay homage to those who influenced me—Patsy [Cline], George [Jones] and Tammy [Wynette]. But my real influences were Joni [Mitchell] and classical artists. I was not in Nashville that long and I didn’t want to fit in. In fact, I don’t want to be pigeonholed into any genre. Being seen only as a gay singer makes me uncomfortable. I am so much more than my sexuality.” Then she jokes, “Maybe Nashville was too much for *me*.”

Unlike many manufactured mainstream artists, lang has always insisted upon a creative freedom that is now rare in the industry. “Music is much more exciting and more diverse than the mainstream music media portrays,” lang points out. “Seventy to 80 percent of a page in a newspaper is spent on *American Idol*, so all other artists fight for the remaining 20 percent of the space.”

“Would Bob Dylan or Joni Mitchell win *American Idol* today?” lang asks. “They wouldn’t even make it past the auditions.” (kdlang.com) ■

ROB CAMPBELL (AN HORSE), BILLIE JOE CAVALLARO (BITCH)

101 ESSENTIAL LESBIAN MUSICIANS

‘If there is one thing that lesbians are passionate about, it’s their music, which is why there are so many amazing lesbian, bisexual and queer-identified musicians today. So many, that there just isn’t enough room in our pages to do justice to them all—or for that matter a quarter of them. So we’ve assembled a list of 101 gay-of-center ladies and girl groups (in alphabetical order) who belong on your must-listen music list.

1. An Horse
2. Antigone Rising
3. Joan Armatrading
4. Sandra Bernhard
5. Sarah Bettens



6. Bitch
7. Alicia Bridges
8. Monique Brumby
9. The Butchies

