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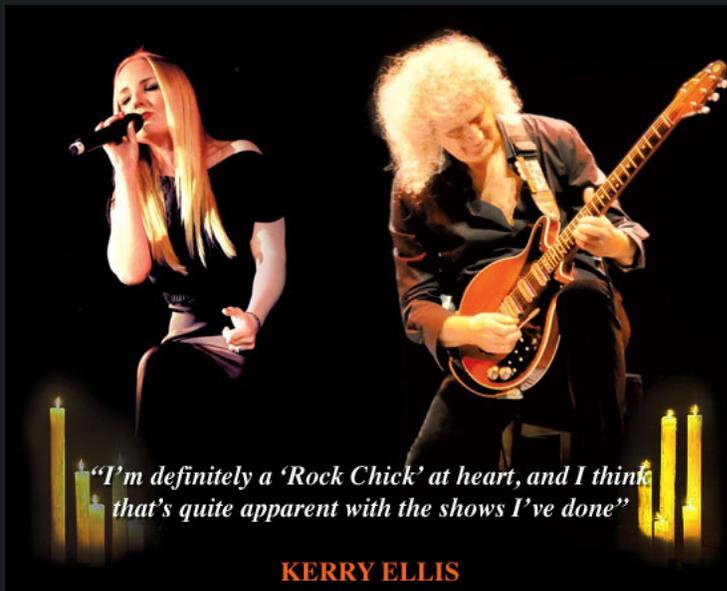
Interview with Kerry Ellis

ADDED BY ELECTRONIC BRAIN | 07 MAY 2014

KERRY ELLIS

Interview by James Gaden

A leading lady in the West End and a Rock Diva who performs with Queen's Brian May, Kerry Ellis has two sides to her soaring voice. She released her debut solo album 'Anthems' in 2010, a beautiful blend of theatrical Rock and Musical Theatre influences. Boasting percussive contributions from the likes of Taylor Hawkins from the Foo Fighters, Queen's Roger Taylor and Meat Loaf drummer John Micell, 'Anthems' was also given the signature sound of Brian May, who played all the electric guitar parts, as well as contributing bass, keyboards, writing five of the songs and producing the record. After an 'Anthems' tour, the pairing of Ellis and May continued with a series of intimate acoustic shows on what was dubbed the 'Born Free' tour. Now, a live album 'Acoustic By Candlelight' has been packaged with a DVD of the pair's performance at the Montreux Jazz Festival last year. The set, dubbed 'The Candlelight Concerts' sees May's inimitable guitar work and Ellis' versatile voice tackle everything from their own material, to Queen, Shirley Bassey, The Beatles and Kansas. **James Gaden** talked to Kerry about the partnership to date...



KERRY ELLIS

Lets just go back to how you and Brian began working together - I believe Brian approached you to audition for We Will Rock You after seeing My Fair Lady.

Yes, that's right. I was understudy to Martine McCutcheon and I happened to performing on the night Brian came along. It was quite by chance. He ended up asking me to audition for We Will Rock You and I did - thank God!

How did the idea of working with Brian first raise its head?

We actually found ourselves in a studio because Brian was recording a track to take over to Spain for the Spanish version of We Will Rock You. He was going to record 'No One But You' with a famous Spanish singer. When he'd put together the orchestration for the song, Brian thought it was so wonderful, I should record it first. I ended up doing it for him and after that time in the studio, he said that he thought I had something interesting and he wanted to record some more stuff with me, so would I be interested? Obviously, I jumped at the chance! It took a while to really find out what was right for us, which is why 'Anthems' took so long to make. We had to spend a lot of time figuring out what songs to include, what kind of sound it should have... and obviously Brian was really busy on other things and I was working. I'm really proud of 'Anthems' - I think it's still quite undiscovered, I believe it could still reach a lot more people.

What appealed to me about 'Anthems' was how you managed to take songs from so many different areas and make them work together. There are numbers from musicals, Queen tracks, well known songs like 'Diamonds Are Forever', as well as brand new material, yet it's a cohesive album. It's Rock, yet big and theatrical at the same time - for instance, the Queen numbers are more orchestrated and the Musical numbers have a lot of electric guitar and drums in to give them a Rock edge.

Exactly! It was a collection of songs from both my world and Brian's world like you say, stuff with a Musical background or a Rock background. We looked for songs which were influential to both my career and Brian's career, those songs made us work well together. That's why the choices are quite eclectic, we cover both sides of the spectrum and I think that's why it works so well, it uses our individual strengths. There is stuff we worked on which will probably go on another album, we spent a while trying out different songs, different styles, so there's a lot of stuff we haven't fully developed yet. The ones on the record were the strongest contenders at the time.

Most people don't expect a West End star to release a debut album with so much Rock music on it. Was that your preference or steered more by Brian?

Oh no, I'm definitely a 'Rock Chick' at heart, and I think that's quite apparent with the shows I've done - obviously We Will Rock You fits that, Wicked is fairly rocky and I get cast for those roles a lot because of the style I sing in. With 'Anthems' and 'Acoustic By Candlelight', we've got two very different feels to them. I think I have both sides to me, I'm a bit Jekyll and Hyde!

You come from a background where the norm for you is performing on stage in front of an audience every night. How did you find the transition of going into studio to record, especially with so many high profile Rock musicians contributing?

It was tough actually, like you say, it wasn't familiar to me. I had been in a studio before, but it was different, I'm so used to singing live and it being about the performance. Recreating that in a studio, that magic of being on a stage, that is really tough in a little recording booth when there's just four walls and a microphone. That was another reason it took a while to complete 'Anthems'. We had to spend time in the studio discovering what worked - I think it's interesting that our second album is a live one. We simply recorded all the shows on that acoustic tour and picked the best numbers.

The Candlelight Concerts' package contains two disks. The first disk, the CD, is from the 'Born Free' tour of 2012, stripped right back, just guitar, vocal and a little keyboards. Was it a big adjustment to make after being used to orchestras and big theatrical scores?

I found it was really liberating. We performed like that a couple of times in South Africa and both Brian and I really enjoyed the simplicity of it. That was what inspired the tour. We enjoyed doing something completely different to what either of us had done before. It was quite exposing - people can hear everything! You can't get away with anything because you can be heard at every moment. We absolutely loved it and we've done five tours now - it's obvious it's struck a nerve with both Brian and I. Putting out the '...Candlelight' set is something else I'm really proud of. It's the essence of what Brian and I do.



Photo: Jamie Cooper

I particularly enjoyed how the Queen songs sounded unplugged - especially 'Life Is Real', which I thought you nailed. A lot of people missed that one with it been on 'Hot Space', one of Queen's less popular albums. Was that a song you were familiar with?

No, I hadn't heard it before, Brian brought it to me. I love it now. We like those undiscovered, or lesser known songs - we now do 'Is This The World We Created' which is working really well. Because there's just Brian, myself and Jeff Leach on keyboards, we have the ability to change the set every night. We can try different things or put in different songs, and to be able to do that is lovely.

Moving on to the second disk, the DVD, that was recorded at Montreux last year - the set list there has a bit of rejigging, with Brian plugging in the Red Special for a chunk of the show. Was he getting bored having to stay acoustic?

(Laughs) I think, especially for the DVD, there's an expectation with Brian. The Red Special is like a limb to him, he doesn't feel right if he doesn't play it! People see Brian and they expect to see him play the Red Special - a bit like when people who know my work expect me to belt certain numbers. You have to give people what they want and it felt right on the DVD - there's not too much electric guitar for an intimate gig, there's a flavour. Even though there are only three of us on stage, we can create different sounds and scenarios. The audience responded really well to it as well. We're scratching the surface, I think we've a long way we can go. People do come to the shows and might be a bit... not necessarily skeptical, but Rock fans will come or Musical Theatre fans will come and they think 'Well, what is this going to be?' - yet they come out loving it!

When I saw the set list on the DVD and saw 'Somebody To Love' listed, I thought 'How on earth can that work with just guitar, keys and vocal?' Yet it works brilliantly!

I think Brian really enjoys doing the Queen songs in a different way too. He's a big believer that songs should be performed live and be out there, in whatever form. It's nice for him to rediscover songs he maybe hasn't played for a while and be able to change them up a bit.

Do you get a big say in the set list, or is Brian very much the musical director and shaper of the show?

Oh no, I'm encouraged to be vocal and have my say in the content, what I want to sing - it's a combined effort. That's something that has changed. When we first started working together twelve years ago, I was a young girl, I was inexperienced in a studio so I needed Brian to guide me when it came to getting the best out of me. Now though, all those years on, I have a lot more experience and I have a lot of input, which I think is good for the show. It's not too heavy on Brian, it's not too heavy on me, it's a good blend of the two of us.

The reason I asked about the set list was because on the DVD, you mentioned the inclusion of 'The Kissing Me Song' being dropped on you on that tour, literally the night after it had been written, and you had to read lyrics from your phone. Does Brian do that to you a lot?

(Laughs) Yeah, he does do that! I think it's because he likes to push the boundaries. What we do is very real, very fresh and it's exciting that we can throw new things and just try it. There's no backing tracks, no synthesizers, nothing, just us, doing what we do. If we decide on the night "Hey, let's do an Elvis song" or "Let's do a Beatles song", then we can. I also think people really enjoy the stories between the songs too. Brian has years and years worth of stories and people love to hear them. I think it makes for an interesting show and album.



Photo: Steve Gouldie

Speaking of albums, you're making a new one and you're doing it by the PledgeMusic route.

I am, yeah! Brian's going out with Queen + Adam Lambert in the summer. I did my own one woman show last year at the London Palladium and it was great, I really loved it. The response I got was amazing, I had a lot of people asking me if I had recorded the show, was there an album of it... I didn't record it at the time, so I thought while Brian was away, I'd put together a record of what I did at the Palladium. It works out quite well, Brian can go off and do Queen and I can do this and then we can reconvene and work together again. PledgeMusic is great too, it gives you total ownership of your album and the input of the fans. It's a good way to basically be your own label. I've worked on albums for other people and worked with Brian with his people, so it's nice to take control myself this time and see if I can do it.

And you're going out on tour in October too.

That's right! I'll be performing what will basically be the Pledge album. I'm going to take what I did at the Palladium on the road and have a few weeks on tour in October. I'll add a few surprises, maybe some duets... actually, one of the perks I offered on the Pledge campaign was people can buy the chance to duet with me on tour! I'll be joined by a whole host of different talents on the tour, there will be choirs, maybe some of my friends might turn up... it should be fun!

Kerry's album on PledgeMusic is currently at 89% - to donate or purchase one of the perks offered, visit ...

http://www.pledgemusic.com/projects/kerryellis?exclusive=incentive94911&utm_medium=share

Full ticket details for Kerry's October tour - <http://kerryellis.com>

Brian May & Kerry Ellis – 'The Candlelight Concerts' CD/DVD set is out now on Eagle Records.

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