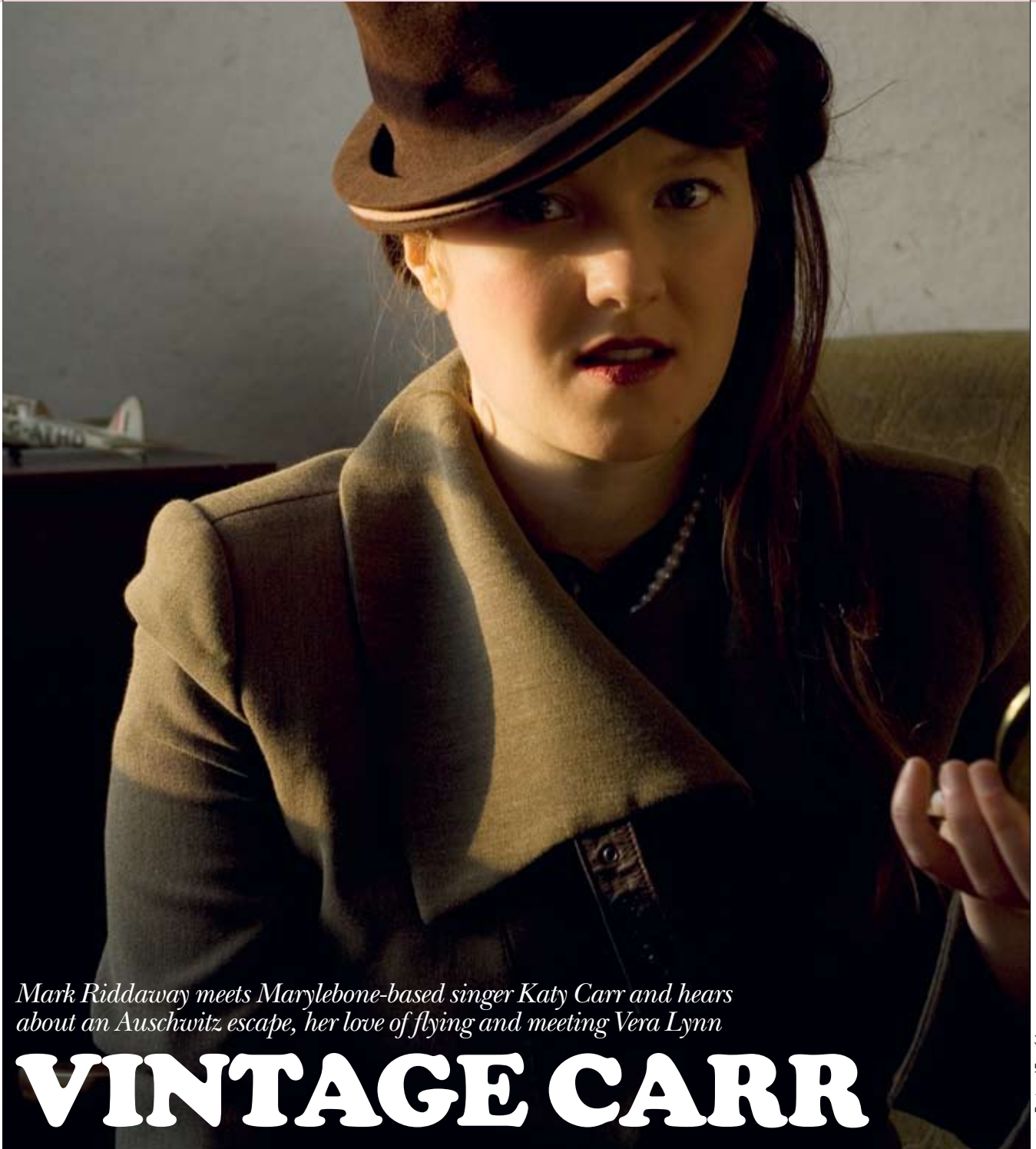


FEATURES



Mark Riddaway meets Marylebone-based singer Katy Carr and hears about an Auschwitz escape, her love of flying and meeting Vera Lynn

VINTAGE CARR



Katy Carr's new album began, she says, with her grandmother. "I've got a grandma, she's 96 years old. When she was about 92, and my grandfather had died, she got very lonely and she would sit in her house and say nothing. Then one day I happened to say, 'What was the war like grandma?' and she just opened up.

"I couldn't stop her speaking. It was just something she really wanted to talk about. Then we got onto talking about the songs of the era. At that time I'd just got into the ukulele and I was able to sit with her and play her these songs - things like *Painting the Clouds with Sunshine* and *George Formby and Sunny Side of the Street*, *Cheek to Cheek*, *Sally*, all these songs from the 40s. And that's really where it all started."

Pop music has long had a habit of looking backwards, but while a glut of 20-something singers are currently mining the 1980s for synth bleeps and shoulder pads, Katy's musical nostalgia is for a far earlier and less fashionable era. With song titles such as *The White Cliffs*, *Berliner Ring* and *Army*, and subject matter that embraces *Marlene Dietrich*, *Spitfire pilots* and an escape from *Auschwitz*, the 29-year-old singer's third release, *Coquette*, is that rarest of beasts – a second world war concept album that's not by Vera Lyn.

Songs about Nazi death camps rarely trouble the charts, but Katy, it's fair to say, is not overly concerned with following the herd. Everything about her exudes a gentle and hugely appealing eccentricity, from her conversation to her clothes. When we meet for a cup of tea in the fitting surroundings of *Alfie's Antiques Market*, she arrives looking as though she's just stepped from the set of *Brief Encounter*, and she talks with the same wide-eyed enthusiasm about her 1925 American banjo and

troop movements during the battle for Warsaw.

And Katy's interest in warfare and military history is by no means some arty affectation. She has always been fascinated by flying, and when she was a teenager she set out to join the air force. "I had piano lessons and a few singing lessons when I was growing up, but I didn't really think I wanted to be a musician," she says. "I wanted to be in the RAF. I joined the Air Training Corp when I was 13 years old. I thought the entertainment business was absolutely rubbish, and there was no way I wanted to join it."

When she did eventually go to music school it was on a scholarship from the RAF, with the intention of returning to the military after her degree was completed. But her time at university changed everything. "Something snapped," she says. "I couldn't go back into the military after I discovered the creative world. It was a complete 180 degree turn. The creative world is about wanting to share joy and love with the world, and the military is something very disciplined and contained."

The vocations of music and the military are clearly not natural bedfellows, unless you're into the whole bearskins and brass instruments thing. But flying fighter planes and performing on stage do share an element of thrill seeking, of personal courage. "When I went for my university interview," says Katy, "I'd only written two songs, and the teacher said, 'You haven't got many songs,' and I said, 'But I'm a pilot.' And he said, 'Really? Well that's very similar to music.' And he just signed me in."

Her time in the air force also imbued Katy with a touch more backbone than your average winsome folk singer. "If you have that ability to be a little bit disciplined, it helps – if you have that determination that

the military gives you, that strategy." Emerging from college, Katy's single mindedness and drive were essential. Like so many talented young musicians, she found herself cut adrift from a conservative and risk averse music industry. "Major labels – in fact most labels – will ignore you a little bit if you're not part of a musical scene or if you don't fit in." And Katy quite clearly isn't an easy fit with mainstream scenes. Rather than give up, she set up her own record label and began releasing CDs under her own steam.

"It's been quite a journey," she says. "The first record, *Screwing Lies*, was made on a complete shoestring. I recorded it in a converted toilet block in Epsom. The men's toilet was the studio booth and the ladies' toilet was the recording booth where all the instruments were. I was getting in money in whatever ways I could. I was handing out fliers outside London clubs to pay for it. For the second album, *Passion Play*, I got a loan from the Prince's Trust, and I managed to wheel and deal and save to put the latest one out from the sales of the others."

Along the way, Katy's alt-folk style has evolved significantly. Her earlier work, although clearly blessed with an abundance of talent, sometimes sounds a bit meandering and nebulous – a beautiful voice drifting around in search of the right songs. *Coquette*, on the other hand, is taught, forceful and coherent. "When you're trying to find your feet, with the first two albums I had no idea how to release records. I was just learning as I went," says Katy. As she has matured, so has her music.

The lead single, *Kommander's Car*, is a case in point. Driven by the tense, urgent scratch of a percussive guitar, the song melds strings, piano, a raw bassline and Katy's haunting voice in a breathless, uncomfortable four minute

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tale of a man in mortal danger.

“Kommander’s Car is a very significant track because it is written about a Polish chap who escaped from Auschwitz in 1942,” she says. “He is called Kazimierz Piechowski and he was put in Auschwitz not because he was a Jew but because he was a boy scout. On 1st September 1939 the Germans invaded Poland. They made it to his house on the 3rd September. They rounded up the teachers, the academics, the boy scouts, took them into the town square and murdered them. Kazimierz managed to run away from the square, but the SS caught him on the other side of the town and took him to the Gestapo headquarters and basically said to him, ‘We have something worse than being shot for you.’”

Piechowski was sent to Auschwitz in June 1940. In June 1942, after two years of living in the closest place to Hell that humankind has ever constructed, he and three of his fellow inmates managed to escape, dressed as SS officers. “This song is only about five seconds of someone’s life,” says Katie. “It’s the end bit of the escape. The escape was very complicated, but it is the very last part. It was the most important five seconds as it was life or death. Either he got out the gates or he died.”

In August, Katy, who is half Polish and has visited the country many times, was able to meet with Mr Piechowski and play him the song. “It was the most moving experience,” she says. “He listened to my song and told me why it was such an important piece of work. He talked about it being very dramatic and that when he listens to it he feels like he was back in that time, he was back in that car when he was leaving Auschwitz.”

Katy was clearly deeply affected by the meeting. “He is 90 years old now, but there are things that you cannot forget - being a prisoner in Auschwitz, seeing so many people murdered and the level of darkness, the level of evil in a place like that, never escapes you.”



Lili Marlene was a German song, but it was sung all over Europe. I could sing it to any nationality of that generation and they will know the tune

Is it not strange, I ask, to want to examine such a dark period of history. “I have had a Polish lady, 90 year old, say to me: ‘Why do you not learn songs of your own age?’ But then another lady said: ‘The songs of our age are so much more melodic and so much more expressive, so that is probably why she is interested in this era.’ I have really wanted to take stories from the past and bring them into the contemporary – that’s something that is very interesting to me, taking historical stories and bringing them to a new generation. There is a responsibility to that as well.”

There are touches of light relief on the album, not least Katy’s beautiful, soaring version of the wartime classic Lili Marlene – a song that showed how music can transcend cultures even while bombs are falling all around. “It was a German song, written in 1908, but it was sung over the whole

of Europe. It was translated into every single language. I could sing this song to any nationality of that generation of people and they will know the tune.”

One of the best known English versions of the song was sung by Dame Vera Lynn, a heroine of Katy’s who she met earlier this year.

“Somebody gave me a tip off that Dame Vera was going to be signing books at a London book store in Piccadilly. She never really comes to these public signings very often, as she is 92 years old, so I wrote to her publisher and they forwarded my message to her. Her daughter, Virginia Lynn, answered the email and we started a discourse. When I met her they were really lovely people, Virginia and her husband Tom, and we have stayed in touch. I’m going to be playing at all the Vera Lynn events next year.”

Dame Vera recently became the oldest person to have a number one album in the UK. Does that restore some of Katy’s faith in the modern world? “It does a little,” she says. “It is a wonderful era that we are living in. We can appreciate all different types of music. It is really heart warming.”

LINKS

Katy Carr
katycarr.com