

Pop Talk: Lily Allen not afraid to speak her mind

by *George_Varga*

To say Lily Allen's reputation precedes her is like saying Paris Hilton enjoys going to parties or that Snoop Dogg has a fondness for sampling varieties of a certain hemp plant.

This, after all, is the same trash-talking, controversy-spewing Lily Allen who seems to create a new outrage every time she opens her mouth or posts a blog on her Web site, www.lilyallenmusic.com.

LILY ALLEN - Lily Allen's smart mouth has gotten her into hot water, yes, but her smart work more than makes up for it. CNS Photo courtesy of Derrick Santini. "I've never hesitated to say what's on my mind," she said from a tour stop in Houston.

Indeed, she hasn't.

Witness this 21-year-old English singing sensation's tart comments about such music-industry celebs as Madonna ("The most overrated person in pop history"), drug-abusing Babyshambles frontman Pete Doherty ("He has to be exterminated") and her "favorite" member of the frothy pop vocal group Girls Aloud ("Nicola, the ugly one. For that reason").

And then there's Allen's smart, sly debut album, "Alright, Still," which made her an instant star in Europe last summer and was released here in January to rave reviews. The dozen-song release mixes upbeat ska, pop and hip-hop with witty lyrics that target everything from her former boyfriend's inadequacies ("Not Big") and her younger brother's marijuana-fueled lethargy ("Alfie") to her grandmother's idiosyncrasies ("Nan You're a Window Shopper").

"My grandmother probably hasn't heard it. But my brother wasn't very happy about the song 'Alfie,' at all," she said. "He's fine with it now."

Candid to a fault, Allen has called herself "(expletive) lazy," while describing her late teen years as "such a blur; I couldn't do a day without smoking an eighth (of an ounce) of weed - I was (expletive)."

But that was before last year, when - after apparently having switched her pot habit for liquor - she became one of Europe's biggest new pop phenoms.

Along with fellow London singer Amy Winehouse, Allen has become a media favorite in her homeland, where the press has branded her as both a "Pugnacious Pop Pixie" and a "Loudmouth Star."

Or should that be: "Loudmouth Star With a Knack for Causing Trouble?" During a recent tour stop in Australia, she threw a bottle at the drummer in the band Jet, an incident that prompted her to blog: "This is precisely why I shouldn't drink."

Could this possibly be the same Lily Allen who spoke demurely throughout a recent 30-minute interview, during which she uttered not a single profanity and sounded more like a wallflower than a holy terror?

"Part of that is my fault. Because when I'm doing my interviews and am out in public, I feel like I put on a front," she said. "Whereas if I'm more relaxed, I don't put on a front. It's something I'm really trying to learn. We'll see."

Allen sounded very relaxed as she answered questions about her budding career, which ignited last year after she posted some of her songs on her MySpace page. At last count, her MySpace "friends" tally of 150,000 exceeded U2's.

But matching the career longevity of U2 is not something the airy-voiced Allen craves. Nor does she have any veteran musical role models whose artistry she hopes to emulate.

"No, I'm not very courageous in that sense," she said. "I'm doing what I'm able to do, right now. I don't really think I'll do this for a long time. I want to get married and have children. That's the most important thing in my life."

Allen's future days of matrimony and parenthood will, she hopes, be much more calm and settled than her own tumultuous upbringing.

Her father, actor Keith Allen, left Lily and her siblings (an older sister and younger brother) when she was 4 years old. She was raised by her mother, film producer Alison Owen, whose credits include "Proof," "Shaun of the Dead" and 1998's "Elizabeth" (which earned two Oscar nominations and featured Lily in a bit part).

The future pop star attended more than a dozen schools. She dropped out for good at 15, one year after making her public concert debut singing with ex-Clash leader Joe Strummer, a close friend of her dad's, when Strummer's band was the opening act on a tour by The Who.

"I sang 'I Fought the Law' and 'White Riot' with them, and it was amazing," she said. "I was really nervous. I'd never been on stage before and it never clicked. It still doesn't click. I can't really explain it. But you have to have a job, and I'd rather do this than anything else. It's better than waiting tables or shucking shells."

After dropping out, Allen briefly supported herself, at least in part, by selling drugs on the Spanish island of Ibiza. Once back in London, she did various day jobs before discovering music was a healthy way to channel and chronicle the upheavals in her life.

"Every human has some kind of emotional upheaval," she said. "For it to be convincing in a song, you do have to back it up in order for people to believe it.

"Part of my problem with an artist like (U.S. teen-pop vocalist) JoJo singing about love is that she's barely 16. She hasn't had the experiences. When I listen to music like that it doesn't mean anything."

Allen's tart wit is readily apparent in her songs, which find her rhyming "weight loss" with the name of reed-thin model Kate Moss one moment, then reciting her own failings the next: "I wish I had qualities like / Sympathy / Fidelity / Sobriety / Sincerity / Humility / Instead I got lunacy / Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah."

But underneath her humorous exterior is a more sensitive and thoughtful soul, however much she tries to disguise it.

"Part of it is that I do want to get a point across, like: 'Hey, I'm feeling really sad and upset about this.' But I can't do it in a serious way, so I have to surround it with humor to express what I'm feeling. I guess it works out well. It's meant to be very ironic," Allen noted.

Growing more serious, she admitted that she smokes too much and drinks "a bit." There wasn't a hint of irony in her voice when she contrasted her relatively wholesome visual image with that of the bump-and-grinding Pussycat Dolls.

"They are incredibly irresponsible," Allen said of the Dolls. "In this day and age, all it does is demean us and probably make young women think they won't get anywhere in life unless they take their clothes off and dance in a seedy way. I think it's really awful.

"They're going back in time, rather than forward, and basically saying: 'We're sex objects, so come and get us.' And also: 'You can be rich like us, if you act like you're a slut.' My live shows are the complete opposite of everything they do and stand for. I don't like feeling like a product."

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Lily's jukebox favorites

At 21, Lily Allen is not a vocal powerhouse who can bowl you over with her multi-octave range or earthshaking technical prowess. But she's an engaging singer with personality to spare. Her diverse tastes range from ska and 1970s pop-rock to jazz and hip-hop, and her music collection consists mostly of vinyl albums, not CDs.

Here's a look at four of her musical favorites:

The Specials: Along with Madness, English Beat and Selecter, The Specials spearheaded the racially mixed "2-tone" movement of the late 1970s. The band's brassy, dance-happy mix of punk and Jamaican ska was as infectious as the band's anti-racist lyrics were sobering. The Specials scored five consecutive Top 10 singles in England before imploding in 1981. A revamped version of the group was launched in 1994, and members of No Doubt and Rancid appeared on The Specials' "Guilty 'Til Proved Innocent!" album in 1988. "I love their sound," Allen said. "I imagine my mom dancing around to it in the 1980s."

Suggested album: "The Specials" (1979, EMI)

Dizzee Rascal: In 2004, this then-19-year-old London upstart beat out heavy favorites Radiohead to win England's prestigious Mercury Prize, which honors leading cutting-edge artists. Rascal (real name: Dylan Mills) traded a life of crime for music, in his case grime, a gritty fusion of hip-hop, Jamaican toasting, techno and industrial that somehow manages to sound both claustrophobic and liberating.

Suggested album: "Boy in da Corner" (XL Recordings, 2003)

Squeeze: Formed in 1974 in London, this band expertly combined pop, rock, soul and more into a spunky yet sophisticated blend. In Glenn Tilbrook and Chris Difford, Squeeze boasted one of England's finest songwriting teams since Lennon & McCartney. The band, which also featured Jools Holland, broke up in 1982, then reunited three years later. A tour of England and Scotland is scheduled for this fall. "Probably one of my favorite songs is 'Up the Junction' by Squeeze," Allen said. "It's one of the songs I heard earliest on in my life."

Suggested album: "East Side Story" (A&M, 1981)

Ella Fitzgerald: One of the greatest jazz singers ever, and the most prolific, this tireless music icon recorded nearly 2,000 songs from 1936 until her death in 1989. Hailed as America's "First Lady of Song" and the "Queen of Scat," she brought joy and musicality to all of her work, which retained a girlish lilt even at its most svelte. "I love Ella and Blossom Dearie," Allen said. "It's not my path in life, but I studied jazz improvisation in school, and it's an incredibly important part of my songwriting."

Suggested album: "The Complete Ella in Berlin: Mack the Knife" (Polygram, 1960)

Cutting up with Lily

Lily Allen's buoyant singing and snappy lyrics have made her pop music's newest sensation. But her sharp wit suggests she could have a fruitful future doing stand-up comedy - or writing withering dissers on her blog. Here's a sampling of some of her past remarks about ...

Herself: "I'm like a gay man in a woman's body!"

How often she smokes: "It depends how boring the interview is."

Fellow English singer Corinne Bailey Rae: "Why did Corinne Bailey Rae cross the road? To get to the middle."

Live Aid co-founder Bob Geldof: "A sanctimonious prat."

Madonna: "She may have meant something once, but I don't know many people my age who care."

Marrying a soccer star: "I can't rule it out, if there was one less idiotic than the rest, and I fancied him."

Rock festivals: "If you can't get drunk and behave like a bitch at a rock festival, when can you?"

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