

# Diva With A Cause

## Big in Italy, Sarah Jane Morris spreads her wings here

by Kerry Doole

Score a big one for the Italian music audience. They have shown remarkably good taste in boosting English songstress Sarah Jane Morris to genuine star status there. Elsewhere, Morris earns rave reviews and retains a faithful, if small, following. She put those different levels in perspective during her recent *Tandem* interview.

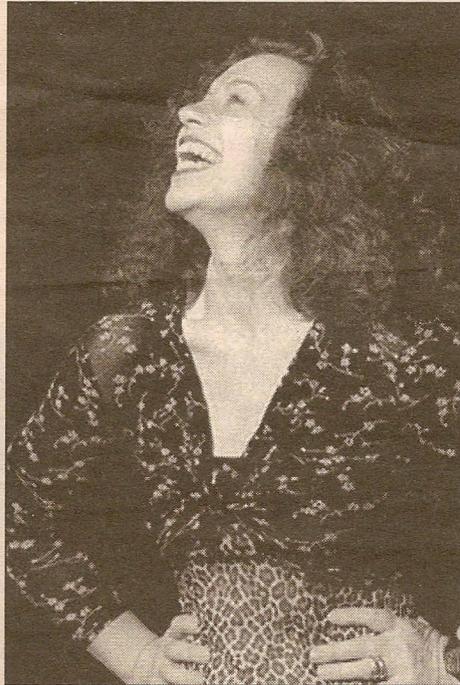
"In Italy, I have had lots of hits and can headline concerts for 3 to 4,000 people. Here in England, that figure is more like 500. Thank God for Italy, as far as my career is concerned. They have welcomed me with open arms. I'm able to go there to have my ego stroked, then come back to anonymity here. And what could be a more beautiful country? The wine, the food, and they are a very passionate race. They are wonderfully contradictory, and I love it."

Morris calls it "my second home," but adds "I don't know if I could live there, because of Berlusconi. He runs everything. Every part of one's artistic career is linked back to him, and that is scary. I'd probably tear my hair out, or get in a lot of trouble!"

She loves playing historic venues in Italy. "One of my biggest buzzes was playing in the Venice Opera House, alongside Placido Domingo, before it burned down. I played in the Verona Arena too. They gave me the keys to the city, but I found out too late that meant I could have stayed and eaten there free for the whole year!"

Her funniest story dates back to her victory at the Sanremo Song Festival. "Grace Jones made off with my trophy there, and people were too scared to challenge her about it. I was devastated at the time, but now it seems funny. It is probably used as a doorstop at her record company now!"

Morris won via a collaboration with Riccardo Cocciante, and the victory boosted



Singer Sarah Jane Morris.

her Italian profile. "I was already known there as I had supported Simply Red on a tour, and then had a hit with 'Me And Mrs. Jones' [ a controversial gender-switching version]. But winning Sanremo makes you a household name. Grandmothers get to know you!"

It is no surprise to hear of Sarah Jane's antipathy towards Berlusconi, as she has long been outspokenly feminist and leftist. She was a key figure in the activist Red Wedge movement in Britain in the 80s. "That is when I was most active politically and musically," she recalls. "I was in most of the political bands going — The

Republic, The Happy End, Test Department, The Redskins and the Communards. There was a reason for that, as we were fighting capitalism and Margaret Thatcher."

As a member of the Communards alongside Jimmy Somerville (of Bronski Beat fame), she sang on the biggest British hit of 1986, a remake of the disco hit "Don't Leave Me This Way." It showcased her stunning voice, one so strong and soulful it has often been mistaken for that of a black American singer.

Morris still interprets the songs of others, and with the skill of the trained actress she is. *Live In Montreal* (recorded at The Montreal Jazz Festival) covers material by Nick Cave (album highlight "In Your Arms" and a version Cave loves), Leonard Cohen, Curtis Mayfield, and John Martyn, but she is especially proud of her growing skill as a songwriter.

"That is why I am pleased at being introduced to Canadian audiences now. It is a time when I know who I am, I'm writing my own material and I am confident in who I am."

Her previous studio album, *Love And Pain*, explored those topics and life as a woman in her 40s. Sarah Jane explains that the new one she is making will "again be about the contradiction of being a woman, but it will also definitely be more political than I have been for quite a long time. I felt it was about time I got back to saying what is on my mind politically in these ugly and terrifying times."

A passionate and compelling performer, Morris will be accompanied at her Toronto shows by two guitarists, including Neill MacColl ("my musical main man"). Highly recommended. ♦

*Live In Montreal* is available via [sarahjanemorris.com](http://sarahjanemorris.com). Sarah Jane Morris plays *Lula Lounge*, October 19-21.