



Sarah Jane Morris, singing in colour

by LUCY O'BRIEN

In 1989, when she was at a low ebb, Sarah Jane Morris met the late, great Dusty Springfield. They were both on the panel of the TV pop show *Juke Box Jury*, commenting on that week's releases. "Afterwards she took me aside and said, 'Don't worry darling, it'll be OK,'" recalls Sarah Jane. "It was a real sisterly thing. She'd had a troubled life, and it was as if she understood. She was a very sexy woman, very warm and flirtatious, with a husky voice."

At the time Sarah Jane was facing one of the hardest challenges of her career. She had recorded a lush solo album for Jive Records, complete with the song that has become a cult classic – her passionate version of the '70s Philly hit, *Me And Mrs Jones*. Everything looked right. She had caused a stir with the disco pop act of the 80s, The Communards. A tall, leggy redhead with a deep voice, she was the perfect foil for diminutive falsetto Jimmy Somerville. She had worked with top musicians in the US and the UK, and the press loved her – until a single (*Me and Mrs Jones*) from her first solo album, *Sarah Jane Morris*, was effectively banned in this country. "I was perceived as a glamorous lesbian, and every TV slot that was in place for me was pulled," says Sarah Jane. "I'd been everybody's friend, and suddenly no one wanted to know. Clause 28 had just taken effect, and it was years before kd lang came out. I'd been a political, outspoken woman up to that point, and people were afraid to take a risk."

Now, more than ten years, several record deals and three managers later, Sarah Jane still has that wayward, flame-red hair and natural exuberance, but she is more philosophical, more in control of her career. "It's only in the last two years that I started listening to myself, as opposed to other people's opinions," she asserts. "I'm doing what I want now, I'm not dependent on anyone else to develop me. It's exhilarating." This year she has a total of three albums out. Firstly, *I Am A Woman*, a "Best Of" CD that includes (of course) ...*Mrs Jones*, and a version of the Barry White classic *Never Gonna Give You Up*. In April she releases an album of guitar, voice and blues with Marc Ribot (of Tom Waits fame), to be followed in the autumn by her sixth solo album.

Sarah Jane's prolific output stepped up last year after the release of *Fallen Angel*, a complex album that was something of a breakthrough. She stretched her voice with avant garde rock influences as well as with soul and jazz. Many

of the songs were angry, edgy and sad. "It was about meeting my demons. It was an album I had to make." The inspiration behind these songs was her father, who died three years ago while she was recording it. In fact, she wrote the last song on the train going to his cremation. "It was about him going to heaven, if there is a heaven." His death marked the beginning of Sarah Jane's blossoming as a songwriter. No longer feeling the need to protect him, she was free to write about her real life in songs. She recalls with wry humour her unconventional childhood as the only girl in a family of six brothers. Her father was a "Walter Mitty character who lived by his own rules, an architect who secretly wanted to be a musician." When she was growing up they moved about 20 times. Her father got involved in strange business schemes – when she was 12, for instance, all the children had bubble cars, because he'd got a 'job lot' of bubble cars. They also had a helicopter, even though she and her brothers went to comprehensive schools and the bailiffs regularly came to the door to take the furniture away. They would also go on holidays in a black Maria that had nothing inside it but two swivel chairs and a paraffin heater. "It's given me a rich palette to draw from," says Sarah Jane, "But I wasn't able to touch it till he died."

Her mother ended up keeping the family clothed and fed ("It's a miracle she's not absolutely barking"), and Sarah Jane obviously inherited that resilience. Currently a big star in Europe (fans there embraced her after she was marginalised in the UK), she tours regularly. Though she lives with her male musician partner and her six-year-old son Otis, she has a devoted lesbian following. There is even a website dedicated to her by a transsexual who calls herself Sarah Jane Morris, has size seven feet, and dyes her hair red. "It's a huge compliment," says the 'real' Sarah Jane. She may lead a quiet life in rural Warwick, but her favourite place is still on stage. "When I'm singing I get possessed by something," she says. "I'm floating above, yet still in control. Music is my expressive side. It seeps through my veins."

● See music column for review.

● Sarah Jane is currently touring the UK until May. She is due to play the Candy Bar on 5 March. Check her website for details: <www.sarahjanemorris.com>