

Morris Majors
Glyn Brown

For singer and actress Sarah Jane Morris, independence is a big battered hat. Whether trilby, bowler or something so shapeless as to be unnameable, this lump of felt, together with an unwholesome pair of size 10 Victorian men's boots, is a statement and, as such, either rallies cohorts to the flag or repels. And repel isn't too strong a word.

"Wherever I go, people seem to feel they should collar me and berate me", she says, "and it's almost always a viewpoint I abhor". Cab drivers are prime offenders. "I had a journey not long ago during which sodomy came up - a subject not instigated by me". The chuckle is benign but laboured. "All lesbians and homosexuals should be shot, as far as this chap was concerned, because The Bible says so. Now, why do I get this?".

The treatment of Morris as a good-natured Aunt Sally, a female Charlie Chaplin or a very nearly glamorous drag artiste percolates through the entertainment industry, too. She could be said to encourage it, adding to her Medusa's curls and vault of a mouth - usually indelibly scarlet - the hat, the boots and one of a collection of men's suits she could take years to grow into. Being the only sister of six brothers ("until I developed breasts, I thought I was a boy") has paid off in sartorial spades, where comfort's concerned; but it hasn't made her any more acceptable.

What might be her new career direction. If her first solo single, "Can't Get To Sleep Without You", and selection of LP tracks are any sort of guidance, she will present a persona of sensuous, smoky-voiced charisma. The pack-shot alone will flummox detractors, showing, as it does, Morris in a bowler and a slapstick suit, unbuttoned to expose a silk bra. She also seems to be laughing her head off. Is this underwear business quite the ticket for a women's rights campaigner? And surely a man's suit worn this way is a somewhat sexy proposition? "Absolutely, but I'm a sensual woman, and I've never tried to hide it". A warning note creeps into her voice: "I'm not going to flaunt it, either, though".

Nevertheless, there's a stroke of perversity to some of the LP's lyrics, a sense of playing the press at their own cockeyed game. The cover version alone make intriguing listening. For a woman whose ambitious dress code and political sympathies have had her wrongly labelled lesbian to cover Billy Paul's "Me And Mrs Jones" - a classic of forbidden love if ever there was one - leaves a multitude of questions in the air. It also adds an extra nuance of defiance to lines ("We both know that it's wrong, but it's much too strong to let it go") which, originally, were standard hetero bluff. And throwing in the refrain from Kathy Kirby's Secret Love won't make the PR man's life any easier. "I don't say I'm singing that song to another woman", she says now, "but, at the same time, there's no reason why I shouldn't. If I were gay, there would be a lot more strength to it. But I can guarantee that, though male gay bands can get radio play, a lesbian one wouldn't stand a chance".

Morris knows a thing or two about the record industry, being no rank outsider. Her deep, almost mannish mezzo, guesting on the Communards' "Don't Leave Me This Way" took it from the gay club scene to number one in the charts and, with sales of 850'000, made it 1986's most successful British single. She remained with the band

(her personal friends) for a matter of months and then, at a time when anyone else would have been negotiating a very large mortgage, left to pursue other, mainly fringe, projects. "Don't Leave Me This Way' isn't typical of me", she said. "It's just a snap-shot".

Here is a history of outrageous ill-fortune. Daughter of a flamboyant father "who moved us all around a lot because he wanted to see the world" and a resourceful mother who could whip up a meal more or less from thin air, at 20 she was singing with a cabaret band to net an Equity card. All frilly shirts and medallions, they filled her full of Barbra Streisand and shoved her to the front. And then, halfway across the gruelling Northern club circuit, she made the discovery that "someone had booked us into a pub as a strip act. I don't know how, and it may not even have been deliberate; or possibly the venue got things wrong. What I do know is, we'd finished three numbers and I think I'd just sung 'Evergreen' when it was fists banging on trestle tables and 'Strip! Strip! Strip!'" . She laughs about it now; at the time, it was clearly terrible. "I just went on singing; I didn't know what else to do. But my knees were shaking, I felt dirty, though I'd done nothing".

As far as Morris is currently concerned, the women's movement and its attendant hoo-ha has done little to relieve situations like this, and she gets a bit impatient with those who say otherwise. "It hasn't made an ounce of difference where it counts, which is on the street. Who cares if a man opens a door for you? That makes no difference to your life whatsoever. But stopping them doing that is really as far as it's got".

She blames the increasingly provocative snaps in the tabloid press for much she finds deplorable in modern-day man, and the staff who work there have done little to relieve her anxiety. There's been tension since the first grubby guesstimates as to her sexuality, during the time of the Communards stint. Face-to-face contact, or almost, was finally achieved when she organised a march down Fleet Street during 1986's Women's Week. "And what did they think was very funny? They made a blow-up of Page Three and threw it down on top of us. It's a laugh, isn't it?".

Clinging gamely to her sense of humour and researching some interesting lines in millinery, Morris has sought refuge in the road and an endless round of benefit shows, supporting Artists Against Apartheid, Gay Rights, The Red Wedge Women's Tour and appearing earlier this year at the anti-Alton bill evening in Hackney's tumbledown empire.

Nearly every woman I know has been pregnant in her twenties and making the choice about whether or not to have a child in the years which are crucial to career, is something you never quite get over. Men are free to stay or to leave you to it, but they don't have to make that terrible decision, which is partly why they'll never quite understand us".

Morris is also an enthusiastic vocalist with The Happy End, an eccentric 25-piece big band with a persuasive line in political protest repartee. Yet even work, a central source of rejuvenation, isn't without its pitfalls, which brings us more or less, full circle. "I'm 29 and my current relationship is the first in which the man hasn't felt threatened by me or tried to take away what he was first attracted to, my strength. Somehow, there's always been jealousy about my career - mainly the fact that I get so much fulfilment from it". She considers for a moment, anxious to be quite fair about this. "But don't we all now and then, fall for things we respect and then try to change them?".

Sarah Jane Morris, to make it clear, is a woman of contradiction, an often ribald humour and undeniable forcefulness. She'll state categorically that "women will save the world, if anyone can" and then stands, heels together and long feet sprawled in opposite directions, making as if to hold up a cane and asking hopefully if she looks like Charlie Chaplin. Her eyes swim cartoonishly in her very brainy head when she's told that Mary Poppins springs to mind. It transpires that a "social comment 'Mary Poppins'" (the trick, it seems, would be in the casting) is something she dreams of producing and quite frankly, you wouldn't dare to stop her.

The pop pharaohs, with their recent indulgent interest in "right on" women singers, had better look to their cycle clips. The boisterous Ms Morris is on her way, aware of the pitfalls and maintaining the right to wear her bra outside her jacket.
