

# A free spirit whose

**Carole Ann Rice meets a singer and actress with a rare talent but down-to-earth outlook.**

**T**he worst thing you can ask a musician is "who do you sound like?". Pigeon-holing becomes an occupational hazard when you're trying to get a handle on a performer's musical influences, but it's about as useful as compiling a psychological profile of somebody by the biscuits they eat.

Categorisation is anathema to Sarah-Jane Morris, if not an impossibility. Her live CD *Rises to The Night* (Ronnie Scott's Jazz House) recorded in Ronnie Scott's, London, is testament to her originality. And to add heavyweight hip-hop to her undefinable uniqueness, the collection includes a Paul Weller song that was written especially for her. File under D for Diversity at least.

Her prestigious pedigree in the pop world has provided plenty of musical influences. She worked with the Communards' Jimmy Somerville on his 1986 Number One hit *Don't Leave Me This Way*, and has supported Simply Red.

Not just a great pair of lungs and a wondrously honeyed four-octave voice — which has had *The Daily Telegraph* spouting "her excellent voice falls and swoops with the agony and ecstasy of the Delta" — she is also a fine actress who is best known for her 1991 award-winning London performance in *The Beggar's Opera* and her starring role in the BBC thriller *Thin Air*.

Despite her cultural accomplishments you'll not find the striking songstress arranging roses courtesy of a love-lorn stage-door Johnny in a chic Hampstead pied a terre worrying about the shade of sequins Vivienne Westwood has chosen for her next stage outfit.

Instead she can be found striding out with her eight-month-old baby in a papoose on her back, street chic, at home and at peace living on the fragrant and often menacing mean streets of Brixton's front line.

Sarah-Jane Morris may be heading for her place among the constellation of stars but her true heart remains at grassroots level. Here is a singer for whom conscience and left-wing politics are in perfect harmony.

"I no longer call myself a socialist but a humanist. I'm more of a realist now that I've had my baby. Things have changed," she says.

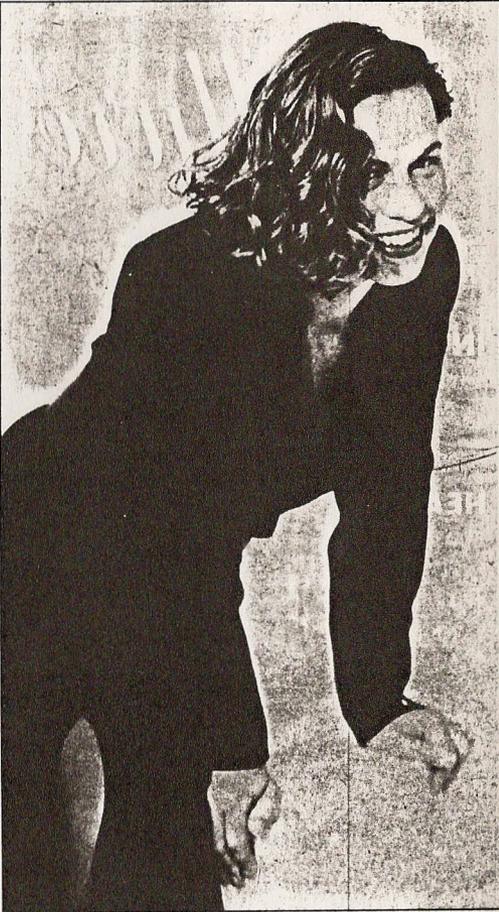
"When you have a child you want to give the very best, and this role can sometimes clash with hard-line politics. It has to come second because I'd rather stand back than be a contradiction. Now I'm just a dabbler but I still link myself to the Labour Party."

Mary-Jane Morris was born in Southampton to Bohemian parents who she says taught her to be a free spirit, and since then has always lived in an artist's world of the educated and the bohemian.

From the very start Sarah-Jane had a passionate approach to life — "we are here to perform and to create."

She began by training as an actress at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London, but it wasn't until she left drama school that she discovered she had a voice.

"I needed to get my Equity card and the easiest way I could see of doing that was



■ **Passionate** — Sarah-Jane Morris believes in living life to the full.

by singing on the cabaret circuit. At this time I heard the work of Billie Holiday for the first time and I started singing and found I had a low, interesting voice. I built up a repertoire from there.

Following her heart she moved to Italy when she was 21 and joined a band called The Republic, who were the hottest thing this side of Georgia asphalt for a while.

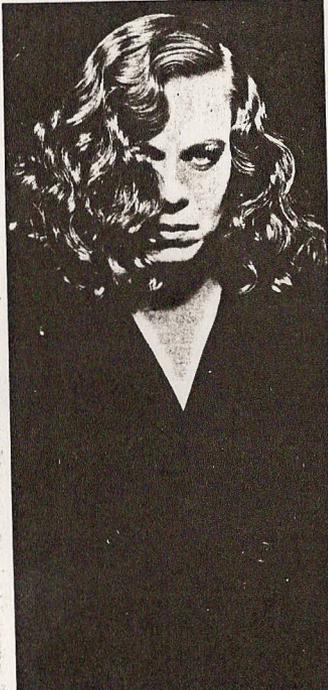
The ten piece Latin/African/Caribbean set-up were on the World Music caravan

singing political songs and getting documentaries made about them and being told they were the new big thing.

"We made a couple of albums but we were ahead of our time. We broke up. If we were going now we'd be hip and happening," she sighs.

It was through Annie Whitehead, trombonist with, among others, Fun Boy Three, that Sarah-Jane met Jimmy Somerville, and the next thing she

# star is soaring



**'I don't make a lot of money and I'm not interested in the highly successful end of the industry. As long as I've got enough money and I'm not starving or in debt I'm happy. I'm in a television movie and I'm off to Prague next year. I'm happy because I'm not a pop star. I'm free to do what I want and be who I want to be.'**

knew she was on a world tour. Music and politics are interlinked as far as Sarah-Jane Morris is concerned.

Her music represents her politics, which reflect her own beliefs. She chooses her own special brand of fire and optimism to try to change things she sees as either unjust or just plain unfair.

It would take a very brave mainstream radio DJ to risk playing her own bitter-sweet version of the Billy Paul classic *Me and Mrs Jones*, a song destined to become a hit as the last smooth groove at gay clubs up and down the country.

In Italy she has been voted Best Foreign Female Vocalist, and one performance earned her the prestigious award of The Keys To Verona. As her success in the fields of both music and theatre races inexorably forward, Sarah-Jane remains an old-fashioned gal when it comes to her private life.

"My family is my life. I've been with my husband for ten years and had three miscarriages before I had Otis in February. He's especially precious. I'm still breast-feeding and a friend holds him while I do a set at Ronnie's and feed him in between performances. I have a good life," she enthuses.

Her husband is musician David Coulter

of The Pogues who, she says with a degree of pride, can play 15 instruments and is a "world-class didgeridoo player". She is a woman blissfully happy with her lot and benevolently concerned about those whose life is less privileged.

"I don't make a lot of money and I'm not interested in the highly successful end of the industry.

**"A**s long as I've got enough money and I'm not starving or in debt I'm happy. I manage myself and have written for television.

"I'm in a television movie and I'm off to Prague next year," she says peering into her bright future.

"I'm performing the works of Kurt Vonnegut with the Liverpool Philharmonic and I've just presented a five-part series on jazz for Radio 3.

"I'm happy because I'm not a pop star. I'm free to do what I want and be who I want to be."

Categorise Sarah-Jane Morris? That would be as easy as putting handcuffs and a strait-jacket on her and telling her to vote Tory. She'd like to see you try.

■ Sarah-Jane Morris is appearing at Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club, Broad Street tonight until Saturday.