



SOLO FLIGHT

Being the daughter of John Dankworth and Cleo Laine - Britain's best-known jazz couple – has had its virtues and drawbacks for Jacqui Dankworth. It made a stage seem like a natural place to be. But the singer still had to find her own way around it, as she explains to JOHN FORDHAM

'SOMEWHERE BETWEEN Norah Jones, Julia Fordham and Cleo Laine' was Candid Records' publicity soundbite on Jacqui Dankworth when the company launched the singer's superb label debut *As The Sun Shines Down on Me* last year.

Dankworth was undoubtedly delighted to find a prestigious jazz label embracing her new identity as a bandleader. She might also have been happy to be lined up alongside those three famous vocalists, including her mother Cleo Laine. But she has had to listen to that particular comparison plenty of times in her life. A more directly generous comment came in *The Observer*, which welcomed the maturing of 'the most flexible and expressive voice of her generation.'

In the past year, Jacqui Dankworth has triumphantly emerged from a chrysalis that perhaps detained her for longer than it should



have. Her voice undoubtedly does echo her mother's a little, in its sweep from a rich, insinuating low-register throb to vaporous, flute-like high sounds. But with that Candid debut, it was coupled with a very personal choice of material, and the most sympathetic of bands.

For a front-line partner as lyrical and responsive as another singer, Dankworth had discovered Mike Walker's sensational guitar pupil Mike Outram. Restrained and subtle underpinnings provided by her bassist brother Alec and drummer and long-time friend Roy Dodds also ensured that the songs, and Dankworth's understated and intimate delivery of them, were never distracted or overwhelmed. It sounded as if she was singing right inside your head. And despite the singer's three favourite pianists taking turns with the band in this year's follow-up, the same delicate magic is woven around 2004's *Detour Ahead*.

'Less planning went into all this than you might think,' Dankworth says, with the silent laugh turning into a guffaw that often turns up in her conversation if she's on the verge of a serious deliberation. 'That first album for Candid was a spontaneous piece of music-making on my part. I was in a bit of a trough in my life, my marriage had broken up, and I didn't know what to do with myself. The drummer Roy Dodds, who's a dear friend, said "come on Jacqui, get up and let's do something". So I organised that recording with him, paid all the musicians myself and made this little album. I guess it had a simplicity that was all about where I was at at the time. Roy's keen on that very intimate sound, we got it round at his

Photographs: © Ashley Goodwin

house with simple equipment. But I didn't send it to Alan Bates at Candid until about a year and a half after it was recorded. I couldn't believe it when he rang me up and said he really liked it.'

Outram's partnership with Dankworth was a crucial ingredient of the album. The two transformed 'Blue Moon' into a folk song, distant and fragile at first, finally intense and mysterious; they also performed 'In A Sentimental Mood' as an evocative duet, and Stevie Wonder's 'Knocks Me Off My Feet' in a state that could only be described as reflective ecstasy. The same thing happens on the new album, notably on the yearning Bonnie Raitt classic 'I Can't Make You Love Me', and on standards including 'But Beautiful' and 'My Romance'. Outram is as musical as ever, notably on Paul Simon's boogieing 'Train In The Distance' - a rare hint of a Dankworth fondness for a more emphatically grooving music and the occasional strutting blues or Latin swinger. They currently surface

the UK scene. But a familiarity with how jazz works goes a very long way back into childhood with Dankworth, and she always listened as openly to instrumentalists as singers.

'Jazz was the music I grew up with,' she points out. 'But I've listened to a huge cross section of music. When I was a little girl at boarding school, obsessed with acting and playing the flute just about equally, I listened to Miles and Chick Corea and the MJQ, Sarah Vaughan - and Al Jarreau was my singing hero, if he wanted me to perform with him I'd drop everything and go even now. But I also listened to Stevie Wonder and Earth Wind and Fire, all those things were parts of me. And I listen to much more recent things, from what's in the charts - I really like Norah Jones and Amy Winehouse - to Jah Wobble playing with Pharoah Sanders,

long enough to see the other side of it.'

Jacqui Dankworth was torn between singing and acting at first, and much of her early singing experience was in stage plays and musicals. She has found the transition harder than she expected, but battling demons has been a part of her life she's come to terms with, and the effort has added ambiguities to her voice and depth to her expressiveness.

'Maybe there's an aspect of acting that allows you to hide', Dankworth reflects. 'To be yourself, as a singer, you can no longer pretend to be another character. It's taken me a long time to find that relaxation, at first you do feel very naked. I still get nervous. But now I've found a way of grounding myself - breathe deeply, if you panic, let it go and move on.

All the things you teach in a workshop. And of course the band helps immensely. Bands are like families, you have ups and downs, but deep down, the right one supports you. But you can't put everyone on retainers in jazz, you have to live in the real world. When Mike Outram can't do it I ask Mike Walker, who taught him - they're both geniuses in their own right. I'm lucky. I love the musicians I work with.'

She looks back with mixed feelings to her emergence some years ago with the genre-crossing Field of Blue, the project she shared with her former husband, the composer Harvey Brough. 'I still feel comfortable with some of the songs we did then, Harvey's writing was great, and maybe I can revisit them one day. But that was the trickiest time of my life, very painful - I can't lie. When the marriage broke up, it felt like I'd been run over by a bus. It was a scary thing to do, and I'm only beginning to feel now that my instincts were right. Perhaps it had been a refuge for both of us - we were neither of us shining in our own right. But now we're both developing in our own ways - and we've become friends again.'

Those new developments have also included singing with the classical Brodsky Quartet, with Sara Coleman and Liane Carroll in The Passion, and guesting on Courtney Pine's Devotion gigs. Have such varied musical experiences taken Jacqui Dankworth any closer to answering the unanswerable question - what is the true identity of the jazz singer?

'I think it's living in the moment,' she ponders. 'Rediscovering the songs each time you sing them, reacting to how you feel from day to day, the audience you're with, the musicians you're with. And it's a particular feel for phrasing. I guess a lot of these influences go a long way back with me, and I'm grateful for it. Now I just want to put it all to the best use I possibly can.'

Jacqui Dankworth performs in the Candid Jazz Week at the Pizza Express, Dean Street on November 10 and 11; also the Minerva Theatre, Chichester (Nov 8), and the Plough Arts Centre, Devon (Nov 28).



Jacqui Dankworth - developing the legacy of parents John Dankworth and Cleo Laine (inset) her own special way.

more frequently in live shows than on disc.

'I felt on live gigs I could go into fifth gear a bit more', Dankworth says. 'I wondered if I could get that quality on the album. Adding a piano seemed like one way, so my three favourite pianists - Malcolm Edmonstone, David Gordon and James Pearson - are all on there. It's like a patchwork quilt, doing this. Finding the days all the musicians you want are free, then choosing the songs you really want to do, recording a day here and a day there, trying to keep it focussed. But I knew I didn't want to do the same thing as the first album. Singers are often very dependent on producers, perhaps presenting them with a hundred songs and leaving it to them to whittle down the choice, define the album as a concept. But I haven't done that. I don't know if I ever will.'

Jacqui Dankworth recognises that, in launching a solo career as a jazz-based singer mixing standards, contemporary songs and originals, she's joining a very crowded marketplace. She's also unreservedly generous about the work of her vocal contemporaries on

or Kurt Elling, or Jamie Cullum because he's enthusiastic and fearless. There's so much really interesting stuff around, and you soon realise there's a lot going on that isn't inside the jazz purist category at all, but is still beautiful.'

She threatened John and Cleo once with the desire to become an opera singer. It seemed the only way to register a childhood protest against an upbringing in the UK's First Jazz Family.

'That did make them go a bit pale,' she says, laughing. 'I remember asking "why are they called straight singers when they sing so wobbly?" I guess I was trying to find my own way, even then. It has been hard sometimes, because there are other singers I consider on a level with myself, but people always compare me with Cleo. So perhaps that has held me back a little, made it harder to find my confidence and my own style. It's a tough call. But I've always been a late developer. And Cleo knew something me and Alec didn't, about the business, and how hard it can be. John and Cleo have done really well, of course, but they've also been around

Photograph: © David Sinclair