



Strictly

Antonia Couling catches up with the face behind a voice that fills our living rooms every Saturday night, *Strictly Come Dancing* vocalist Hayley Sanderson, to talk about her new CD release and life as a *Strictly* singer

SO, THAT *STRICTLY COME DANCING* PROGRAMME. DON'T KNOW IF YOU'VE HEARD OF IT? BIT POPULAR. DO WE KNOW WHY? LET'S BREAK IT DOWN:

Saturday night light entertainment which reminds us older viewers of our childhood Saturday nights, with old Bruce in charge; the sequins; the dance element, of course, with the judges' exacting standards; the compelling and often surprising journey that many competitors make to rise to those standards; the sequins ... the fact that it's live, and, more importantly, the fact that the music is live.

For many of us, this last element is key to the exciting atmosphere of the programme, not least because to hear live vocals, with full orchestra, is so rare in TV-land these days. Add to that the range of musical styles from all eras and you have a platform for excellent singing such as we have not seen for quite a while. On top of which, that range helps to form a bridge between the generations watching – not to mention supplying a vocal history lesson for the nippers.

Naturally, the soloists on the programme need to know their stuff. One of them who has stood out for me is Hayley Sanderson. This talented young singer is often given the more classic songs to sing, sparking the *News of The World* to comment in 2008: 'Unsung resident Hayley Sanderson's wistful and (fully live) "Moon River" blew away anything "that singing show" on ITV1 has offered us this year.' Too true.

Intrigued as to how she found herself on that sparkly stage, I met up with her to find a woman who not only knows her stuff but cares passionately about the quality of song-writing with an integrity which I have rarely

encountered – something her newly released CD *Just Songs* is testament to.

Thanks to an early involvement with the theatre work as a youngster and a musician uncle who introduced her to a love of jazz and soul, she soon decided where she was headed career-wise. Even at the age of 12 she was going into a recording studio on a regular basis, learning how to mix tracks and arrange songs. Despite auditioning for colleges, she decided to forgo the experience as she was already being offered a fair bit of work as a singer. 'If the work is there,' she reasoned, 'you should take it because people forget quite quickly – there's always someone ready to jump in on your job. So you have to keep at it and take anything that comes along at any point – BV work, adverts, wedding gigs ...'

Strictly came about thanks to doing a few adverts with the programme's bandleader Dave Arch, and after a vacancy arose three years ago. Having experienced the programme as an audience member this season as an added bonus in preparing for my interview with her, I was able to witness first-hand just what goes into producing a live show like this. It must be a fabulous thrill performing for it? 'It is,' Sanderson concurs, adding, 'It's awfully scary! Because you don't know what you're going to get for starters, and then when you get the songs you have to learn the exact phrasing. Improvisation is something that comes naturally, so when you've got to copy someone else's, it's quite difficult to make it sound your own – when you have to keep to the same phrasing and notes, because otherwise the dancers will get confused. Later on in the competition, when you've got better dancers left, they can cope with just count-

ing so you can free up a little bit, whereas in the early stages the celebrities can't count, so they're moving off your words and it has to be very exact.'

What is the selection process for choosing the songs? 'It's a mix between the dancers and the BBC and they have a pool of songs they put together of what they would like to do. Then, once the songs are chosen they are edited down to one minute thirty. And then we're sent the tracks – anything from a week before to three days before.' Although they have no leeway to make the songs their own, the songs are apportioned between the singers according to vocal suitability. 'Sometimes I get to do some soul, but usually it's jazz or the quieter, Eva Cassidy-type things. And the bubblegum pop. The scary ones are the '80s, because in the '80s everybody really belted – and it wasn't a quick run-down afterwards, they hold on up there – it's awful actually! I really dread the '80s songs.' Can she say no then? 'There's not much choice if there are only two [female] singers. Like this week, there's going to be just me as the female vocalist and there's not enough time for Dave to change the keys, because that would be a full arrangement rather than just transcribing.' So the singers get together in the morning of the show day and check their harmonies and then go in for their (only) rehearsal with the band. 'And Dave will tell us we've got it wrong usually! And then we do the dress run and then we're live.'

The reaction to the versions of the familiar songs is interesting. Sanderson explains: 'It's odd how often people don't understand it. Some people say "That David Bowie song wasn't very good ..." But in reality, David Bowie wouldn't get up and sing his song and then do Michael Jackson's "Thriller" in exactly the same way, in exactly the same key, in the same arrangement and sound anything like Michael Jackson. He wouldn't be able to do it – and vice versa. You would make your own version up. Whereas we can't do that. The job we do – I'm quite proud of myself and the other singers. I think we do our very best to emulate as much as possible.'

AND WHAT MATERIAL WOULD YOU EXPECT TO FIND ON A CD BY THIS FINE *STRICTLY* SINGER?

Well, as proof of her integrity as a singer and commitment to quality song-writing, Sanderson has produced a CD that one could class as brave in terms of its pared-down nature. *Just Songs* features sparse accompaniment – acoustic, mainly piano and guitar.



song



The tracklist does include a couple of songs from the show that Sanderson is partial to – ‘Moon River’ and ‘Angel’. ‘But the idea was to do something quite exposed – A) for the simplicity of production and B) because I’m very into songs – anything if it’s well-written. And it’s actually very hard to find songs that work just acoustically and vocally that have strong enough lyrics and melody that stand up on their own without any production. We picked people I liked – Paul Simon, Bob Dylan, the Beatles – and tried to keep away from female singers, so you’re not compared to them.’

Her long-standing experience of the recording process stood her in good stead with this recording, her involvement in it being pretty integral to the process. ‘In the past I’ve spent a lot of time watching and learning, but with this one I really felt it was time to make decisions of my own about the sounds and how we recorded and what I liked and didn’t like. I love the last track [‘I’m Yours’ by Jason Mraz], because we added some more instruments in, but if we’d done the whole album like that we probably wouldn’t have it finished yet!

‘I’m so into the song that has to be more important than what either the instrumentalist or I am doing. It’s not about us showing off – it’s about showcasing the song and the lyric. I’m quite passionate about that because I think that anyone can show off and sing, but if it’s not honest, not true, that isn’t good.’

So many singers simply throw lyrics away without connecting with them or thinking about them, without telling a story, something that irks us both equally, we discover:

‘I even find that when people are changing the melodies all the time – it’s nice to embellish things sometimes – but if a writer has written something – like Cole Porter or Sam Cook – they’ve specifically written that melody to evoke some kind of emotion at that point. The words are matching where the melody’s going. And when people change everything all the time it really winds me up if there’s not a reason behind it.’ Also because whatever they are singing is going to sound the same. You don’t get the different textures of the different composers if you’re going to do that to every song. ‘Exactly. Don’t get me wrong, because it is your personality being involved with the song, but some people can overdo it.’

I wonder where she stands on the tendency within the industry to create carbon copies of singers and singer-songwriters that have gone before – such as when Eva Cassidy broke out, or the popularity of Amy Winehouse’s vocal style at the moment? ‘I think that’s what happens when music becomes business. If they have a formula – like at McDonalds, where they have the same burger but with different names – they are going to sell it again and again. I think it’s really unfair, even for the original artist. I do think that Amy Winehouse is amazing – unique tone and phrasing – I just love her. And I think that people trying to emulate her and even comparing themselves to her is not appropriate.’ It also stops a lot of fresh stuff coming through. ‘Definitely. I don’t think there’s enough different stuff. I don’t think people are taking enough risks. What I like about music is freshness. Neil Young – every single album just is really

different. Nowadays it’s not cool to do covers, it’s not cool to work with other bands. Everything’s separated, which is a shame – it should be about finding new music and being allowed to experiment. Even with David Bowie, with his first single he was still allowed to work a bit more – and look what he created. Whereas nowadays if you don’t hit it first time round ... There’s no development.’ And her own version of Bowie’s ‘Life on Mars’ on the album, incidentally, is really something else, doing everything that she talks about aiming for.

So which vocalists does she listen to? ‘I listen to everything. A lot of old gospel – Mahalia Jackson. I love anything with passion. It can go from anyone like Ella Fitzgerald to Billie Holiday, even though they are quite extreme vocalists, I love different parts of their voices. Same as Neil Young and Joni Mitchell – they’ve got a raw ability that’s just stunning and quite vulnerable sometimes in Neil Young. But then with Ella, she’s so technical it’s unbelievable – she sings like she’s an instrument – Sam Cooke as well. So I like a lot of different voices for completely different reasons. I think that can be confusing when I’m trying to pick songs or write songs. Because as a session singer, one minute you can be doing soul and the next minute you’re doing folk and you have to separate them. I think when I’m doing my own I’m ... not trying to join it together, but using bits that I like from everything I suppose.’

There’s a danger as well in doing session work and particularly doing something like *Strictly* that one can actually lose one’s individual sound. Does she fear that? ‘Yes, definitely. But luckily this summer I’ve spent a lot of time not doing that, not doing the sessions. That sounds awful, but I think you do need to take time out to find out who you are. I’ve always kept in touch with old, old friends who I used to play with for fun and they keep me who I am. Because great session players do the same as you do – “what style are we doing?” – whereas when I’m back with my old friends, you just play and you just sing and it just happens.’ For keeping fresh and keeping it real, Hayley Sanderson gets a resounding 10.



Hayley Sanderson’s album *Just Songs* (LSM008) is out on the IMWP Music label

www.hayleysanderson.com