

# THE NEW WOMAN

by Leah Kardos

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‘Wuthering Heights’ – a profoundly unlikely hit, sitting as it did in the 1978 landscape of post-punk and dance-floor fodder such as Boney M – signalled the arrival of an unlikely pop star. Kate Bush had an unusually high and wide-ranging voice, a curious knack for melody and an unusual prosody [lyrical rhythm and emphasis]. The song, based loosely on Emily Brontë’s 19th-century novel of the same name, was released with an accompanying video, destined to become iconic, that was every bit as strange and arresting as the music. Somehow, at the tender age of 19, Kate Bush managed to achieve a level of commercial chart success in the UK that had eluded female singer-songwriters who came before her (Carole King, Joni Mitchell, Patti Smith). The mainstream music industry of the late Seventies was by no means an ideal environment for female artists to flourish in – musicians who also happened to be women were routinely objectified in the press, and their creative contribution was, if not ignored, at least often marginalized in the light of more ‘serious’ contributions from men. Yet somehow Kate broke through.

She was lucky in many ways: privileged with early access to musical tuition, familial support and plenty of encouragement. Crucially, she had well-respected men in the music business advocating for her during the early stages of her development. Her family helped her to produce a demo tape of original compositions, which was brought to the attention of Pink Floyd guitarist David Gilmour thanks to family friends with connections to the band. From there Gilmour would finance a second demo project – this time with full arrangements, recorded in a professional studio. This new recording would go on to impress the executives at EMI (Pink Floyd’s label) and secure the teenager a recording and development deal.

It was both talent and good fortune that opened those doors of opportunity, but once she was through them Kate would very quickly set about blazing her own trail towards autonomy and dominance in pop music’s notoriously male-dominated and controlled spaces. In the two years following her debut, Kate would quickly outgrow many of her initial collaborators, defy the wishes and expectations of her label, create her own publishing company, buck against stereotypical notions of femininity, and eventually find her seat in the producer’s chair, taking complete control of every

aspect of her music product. Across her first three albums, *The Kick Inside*, *Lionheart* (both 1978) and *Never for Ever* (1980), and including her first major touring production (the Tour of Life, 1979), we can track Kate’s evolution from a label-groomed pop-star project towards her emergence as a fully formed self-producing artist. The stylistic journey ran from relatively unadorned piano-led art-rock to expansive ambient, cinematic, dream-pop soundscapes. An intrepid singer-songwriter became a music technology pioneer, sound designer and uncompromising studio-based auteur exploring new territories of sonic self-expression.

It’s difficult to imagine how an artist like Kate Bush could exist, let alone thrive, in today’s coldly capitalist popular music industrial complex, which requires its new artists to arrive already fully formed, in possession of a substantial fandom, and somehow equipped to deal with the brutal realities of fame. Even in the late Seventies, Kate’s immediate success with audiences seemed unlikely and anomalous, given that the timing of her arrival occurred at the tail end of British art-rock’s popularity, at the very height of punk.

Punk rejected its antecedent, progressive rock, and the intellectualism, musical complexity and technical ability that were inscribed within the

style, since it was seen to represent cultural elitism in an era of widespread economic hardship and social unrest. American pop in the late Seventies was on a different planet altogether, concerning itself with notions of authenticity and cultivating a disciplined, precise production aesthetic. (Think of the polished sonic surfaces of Fleetwood Mac, the Eagles, the Doobie Brothers, Chic.) Kate didn’t possess the street-cool of the new wave; she emerged as romantic, literary, highbrow, middle-class – the privileged side of the art school. Despite the fact that she was in her teens, her first round of recordings was more akin to the generation of musicians who crossed over from the Sixties to the early Seventies – Pink Floyd, Roy Harper, David Bowie – and resembled nothing relating to the youth cultures at large in late Seventies Britain. From the start, Kate set out her stall as a mould-breaking individualist. At the time, popular music had fractured into warring cultural tribes (rock vs disco, bourgeois vs punk), scenes spawning genres branching into sub-genres. The capitalist mechanisms driving the music business were becoming visible and, worse, predictable; artists were categorized, then promoted to specific audience demographics and played on certain radio stations and not others. The highly diversified music market preferred new artists to

arrive with correct categorization. Of course, Kate defied categorization, immediately appearing entirely 'other' and out of step with the sounds, styles and themes of every artist around her.

*The Kick Inside* (1978) is a collection of expertly arranged, neatly realized pop songs flavoured with a generous dash of the strange and unexpected. Its production values are generally unremarkable – quite safe and genteel compared with the sound of other music coming out that year from the likes of Blondie, Gerry Rafferty and the Jam, and in the previous year the first two albums from Bowie's Berlin Trilogy. Its magic originated from two places: Kate's unique approach to song composition and her singular vocal delivery. Melodies sung in the upper head voice and coloratura registers, normally reserved for opera and classical singing, but crucially performed with the falsetto timbre – a little bit Joni Mitchell, Philip Bailey, Eddie Kendricks, very un-rock'n'roll – lend a curious, childish quality to the lead vocal as it leaps and swoops impressively across a four-octave range. There's her choice to open the album with recorded whale song, its significance in the context of a piece about her dance and mime teacher, Lindsay Kemp, remaining a mystery. There are disorientating time-signature changes that could leave any listener who is tapping along completely and pleasantly wrong-footed. Chord changes that jump between unrelated tonal centres provide unexpected, surprising colour – the kinds of harmonies that could sound like a mistake if they weren't so confidently rendered. You might hear them in prog rock or folk, so very far away from the

well-worn blues structures and repeating chord cycles of disco, funk and riff-based rock. The lyrics are wildly romantic, loaded with literary references, speaking with frankness about a range of female physical experiences. These include not only the sensual and exciting ('Feel It'), but also the mundane, such as period pain ('Strange Phenomena'). And there are the nightmare scenarios, like the incest pregnancy described in the title track, or becoming a wraith doomed to haunt the ex-lover, destined to suffer out in the cold.

The breakthrough single 'Wuthering Heights' exemplifies these unusual compositional approaches and fully showcases that ethereal, elastic voice – unnaturally high, pure in tone, with a feeling of underlying eroticism. The performance serves up a new kind of hyperfemininity not heard previously in pop music. It's sensual but also a bit manic. Simultaneously soft and hard, floating and shrill. Beautiful. Also, a bit frightening.

At the age of 19, Kate Bush earned the distinction of becoming the first female songwriter to debut at number one on the UK singles chart. 'Wuthering Heights' stayed in that position for four weeks. Kate would go on to win an Ivor Novello Award for the lyrics to 'The Man with the Child in His Eyes', reportedly (and almost unbelievably) penned when she was only 13. Listening today, it's difficult to imagine this musical and lyrical complexity coming from such a young mind. When I look back at the poems and songs I was writing as a 19-year-old music undergraduate, it seems even more miraculous that Kate's output from this period is

so sophisticated, literate and original.

*Lionheart*, released in November 1978, is very much a continuation of *The Kick Inside*'s core style and approach. Reportedly, these recording sessions were less carefree than the *Kick* sessions of late 1977, with tensions bubbling between Kate and the producer, Andrew Powell, over how things should be done, and how long should be spent getting things right. Kate's perfectionism and the specific ideas she had about fine-tuning the arrangements were hamstrung by a restrictive schedule and a somewhat rushed release that aimed to capitalize on her initial flush of popularity. These songs are broadly dressed with the same gentle, bordering-on-functional prog-pop production, though there are moments where she leans in further to the curious qualities of her aesthetic; the elongated, unnatural emphasis of the syllables from 'Wuthering Heights' ('let me in through your win-do-ho-o-ow') is now stretching out a wide-eyed, ecstatic 'Wow' for 12 beats, rounding off with a perfectly upturned shriek.

*Lionheart*'s songs are themed around characters from stage and screen, and it feels as though the compositions were deliberately fashioned with performance in mind – this particular clutch of material forming the inspiration for the following year's Tour of Life. The narrative-driven songs have distinctly contrasting moments of light and dark built in; swift changes of mood, perspective and scene; new characters and ideas suddenly entering stage-left and pulling focus; and a thespian-style emphasis on certain words and sounds. She is now exploring the full expressive possibilities of her vocal

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range – ‘Hammer Horror’ charts the extremities, and some of the later ‘wows’ in ‘Wow’ sound almost masculine in their depth, which is fitting for a song (and album and tour) concerned with role-playing and performativity. The beautiful ‘Oh England My Lionheart’, with its floating, stacked vocal layers, recorders, harpsichord and folk harmonies, is a reminder that Kate’s music owes nothing to the much pillaged American music traditions, the blues, rock’n’roll, and R & B. This is as indigenous as British pop music gets.

The Tour of Life, in 1979, remains Kate Bush’s only live tour (in the strict sense of the term; 35 years later, in 2014, she would return to the stage for the Before the Dawn series of concerts, but that 22-night concert residency was staged in a single venue, the Hammersmith Apollo in London, for the entirety of its run). The Tour of Life was a full-blown travelling theatrical production complete with dancers, multiple costume changes, elaborate lighting and staging, and a tightly choreographed set list with no room for chat, no slipping of the mask. The audacious scope of its undertaking turned out to be physically and creatively exhausting for Kate. While it was successful overall, she drew criticism from some members of the press for what seemed an overly indulgent project, one that was certainly not in tune with the prevailing anti-egalitarian spirit in 1979 (the tour having started just a month before Margaret Thatcher swept into Downing Street).

It could be argued that we have the exhaustion and tedium caused by touring to thank for Kate’s decision to abandon live gigs altogether, in favour

of exploring the music studio’s capacity to express theatrical ideas through sound. She retreated to the studio to create a kind of sonic theatricality, a virtual staging in the mind’s eye, where the communicative power of sound and music alone conjures up images, and where costumes, sets and backdrops aren’t required to achieve the full effect. Like when the Beatles quit playing live and spent most of the remainder of their time together in Abbey Road with Sir George Martin completely reinventing the sound of rock’n’roll, Kate’s move to the studio opened new creative possibilities for her. And it provided a means to engage in obsessively meticulous production practices at the start of a fresh decade. From here on, her music would become more intricate and challenging, her imaginative worlds rendered in greater, more elaborate detail.

Prior to the release of *Never for Ever*, in 1980, Kate had set up her own company, Novercia (Latin for ‘the new woman’). She had renegotiated her original contract with EMI to include publishing rights ownership of her own material, and creative control of her album art and associated imagery. In this New Woman’s era of autonomy, Kate was able to make important decisions without seeking label approval. For example, she commissioned a painting of herself with a horde of fantastic creatures billowing from the front of her uplifted skirt, to use as cover art for her next release, *Never for Ever*.

That album was to become Kate’s first number one album in the UK, and the first solo record by a British female artist ever to achieve this. Even more mind-boggling is the fact that it was the first studio album

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by *any* woman to reach number one in the UK (not counting ‘greatest hits’ compilations). Continuing her run of historic firsts, it was also the first of her albums where she is credited as a producer (co-production and engineering credits going to Jon Kelly, who also engineered on *Lionheart*). Andrew Powell, producer and arranger for the previous two albums, has left the building.

In handling her own arranging duties, Kate summoned a substantially larger instrumental ensemble – piano, of course, but now supplemented with a range of interesting keyboard tones from Fender Rhodes, Yamaha CS-80, Prophet and Minimoog synths, and the cutting edge Fairlight CMI digital sampling synthesizer. We hear for the first time Del Palmer’s soon-to-be-familiar fretless bass tone that would become a staple feature on her records all the way to *50 Words for Snow* (2011). Her brother Paddy brought a delightful collection of objects that can be strummed, plucked and/or bowed – sitar, balalaika, koto, psaltery, mandolin, banshee, even a musical saw. A standard drum kit here would not be enough, so we also get full orchestral percussion, timpani and bodhrán. Throw in electric and acoustic guitars and the session personnel list swells to 21, not counting the members of the Martyn Ford Orchestra.

Where in *Lionheart* Kate was feeling rushed and pushed to work quickly, in *Never for Ever* Kate would take her time to get things just right – more than five months were spent at Abbey Road between September 1979 and May 1980. If that meant repeating a single take for a full day until

it was captured perfectly, then that was what happened. The result is a new feeling of deliberate expansiveness; for any interesting detail you might pick up on as you listen, you can be sure it was put there for a reason.

A key component of Kate's sound during this period was the Fairlight CMI sampler, at that time an eye-wateringly expensive bit of kit and only really accessible to art-rock stars such as herself and her friend Peter Gabriel. *Never for Ever* was the first commercially released album to feature the instrument, and Kate became something of an electronic-music pioneer at a time when very few women (besides those working in academic music settings) even had access to such instruments. The Fairlight sampler allowed Kate to explore her expressionist tendencies to their farthest reach on 1982's *The Dreaming*, and it would be integral to the aesthetic of her 1985 masterpiece *Hounds of Love*.

The studio environment itself became an instrument of creativity, and during the *Never for Ever* sessions Kate discovered a new way of working. 'Army Dreamers', her first track to be completely written and realized in the studio environment, is an anti-war song told from a grieving mother's point of view. She wonders whether her son's death could have been prevented if, say, she had bought him a guitar when he asked, or if he'd continued with his education instead of joining the army. The bleak subject matter is cleverly locked into a waltzing time signature, anathema to the one-two military march, and is punctuated with sampled sounds of cocking guns and someone barking orders in the distance.

The effect is like some macabre stately dance. The emotional drama of the song's content and setting is further juxtaposed with the most delicate of instrumental arrangements, Kate's lilting vocal delivery effortlessly wrapped around an ornate twirl of melody. Without being overly preachy or heavy-handed, the song questions the waste of young lives from war, and pokes an irreverent finger at the pomp and ceremony of militarism ('Give the kid the pick of pips / And give him all your stripes and ribbons / Now he's sitting in his hole / He might as well have buttons and bows').

One of my favourite moments from the album comes at the start, with the second track, 'Delius (Song of Summer)'. As the smashed glass from 'Babooshka' shatters into tiny, sharp pieces that you can hear (and feel) ricochet, a slowed-down calypso beat appears, along with Paddy on sitar and background basso profundo vocals. (The calypso beat is credited in the liner notes to Roland, which is not actually a person but one of Roland's first manufactured rhythm machines.) A tribute to the English composer Frederick Delius, its loose themes centre around Delius being paralysed and blind in later life as a result of syphilis, yet still composing music with the help of his assistant and friend, Eric Fenby. 'Delius (Song of Summer)' is minimalist and weird, with only a smattering of lyrics to form a loose grip on the theme (Delius/syphilis/genius). This is not a composition that could have started with a text, or with chords and melodies at the piano, but only through experimentation, and the subtle calibration of timbral combinations, dialling into the hypnotic

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groove of electronic drum loops, cooking it up like a stew. When listening to it, one can hear the full recipe for dream pop that the Cocteau Twins would go on to perfect in their album *Blue Bell Knoll* (1988).

*Never for Ever* concludes with 'Breathing', another impressive and affecting slice of studio composition that incorporates production techniques inspired by Pink Floyd's *The Wall* (released a year earlier, in 1979), lush stacks of multi-tracked vocals in the manner of 10cc, and featuring synth pioneer Larry Fast on the Prophet 5 synthesizer. With Kate later describing it as her 'little symphony', the song's narrative focuses on the thoughts and experiences of an unborn child, absorbing nuclear fallout through its mother's womb. The verse starts melodramatically – stark piano and voice, distant howling guitars and hesitant, stuttering machine-gun snare drums. By the time the chorus rolls around, the claustrophobic tension gives way to a gentle bath of lullaby Rhodes keyboards, gently throbbing synth notes and half-time ballad drums. We feel like we are floating helplessly beside her, trapped in that warm, potentially poisoned place, breathing rhythmically 'out, in, out, in, out, in, out, in'. The song's extended bridge is a spoken radio-style broadcast describing the blinding flash of a nuclear bomb, after which the final, terrifying section begins as the infant becomes panicked and afraid. The music grows heavy with low overdriven guitars, crashing cymbals, Kate's escalating screams and Roy Harper's background vocals chiming in with both question and answer: 'What are we going to do without...?' 'We are all going to die without...' At the

apex of this crisis there is a sharp filter sweep that sounds like air escaping from an airlock, and we are left suspended with a single piano note. Thirteen seconds later, a final bass note, a body slumping over, left to stillness for another 15 seconds of silence.

When considering tracks like 'Breathing', 'Babooshka', 'Army Dreamers' and earlier songs such as 'Wow', 'Hammer Horror' and even 'Wuthering Heights' as words and music on paper, none of them looks like it would ever have the potential to be a successful single. It's amazing to think that Kate Bush maintained her ground-breaking commercial successes throughout this period of personal and artistic growth. In the short time between 1977 and 1980, Kate was racking up a list of historic 'firsts' for women in traditionally hostile, male-dominated spaces: positions in the charts, positions of authority in the studio, and positions of power in the music business as she stood up to and dealt with her record label. Therefore, it isn't surprising when Kate Bush is cited as the matriarch and inspiration for any new female artist who demonstrates talent, originality and self-determination. Kate shines as a bright and hopeful beacon in the pop-culture landscape, where female producers and music technologists are grossly underrepresented.

The role of music producer within the mainstream popular music industry has been traditionally seen as a job for white men and has long been associated with ideas of power and control. Efforts to remedy and repair gender imbalances in these fields are still ongoing, though things have improved since the Seventies and early Eighties, when Kate had

to deal with the social politics of the studio and music business. There are, however, still problems with deeply ingrained biases throughout the industry. In pop and rock music environments, men are considered fit to naturally inhabit arenas of expertise, technical mastery and power. Women are most often expected to fulfil the role of performer (singer, usually – or, if not that, then other acceptable options would be the piano, folk-style acoustic guitar or a delicate orchestral instrument such as flute or violin) or accessory. Any woman who deviates from these expectations is usually marked as an aberration (the band with the female drummer, you know the one, or that female guitarist you saw once who was attractive but who could also *really play*). Sometimes these women are even ascribed unflattering masculine comparisons, because, as the logic goes, if a woman can play rock music as well as a man, or take charge of a studio, she must be domineering or a bit mannish.

From the start of her career, Kate Bush seemed to be conscious of how gendered expectations in popular music could define the boundaries within which a woman could freely express herself in the late Seventies in Britain. Through her songwriting she found safe ways to tackle taboos and feminist material by inhabiting the characters of her own creation. When you step into the shoes of another person, you are free to explore the world from that perspective. This is the same musical theatre trick that Bowie had found so effective during the previous decade, when he created characters in his songs that he would then embody in performance,

like an actor. In many of her music videos Kate appears in costumes and sets designed to reveal the psychology of the song's characters. Her numerous personae – manic ghost in 'Wuthering Heights', pregnant incest victim in 'The Kick Inside', paranoid wife of 'Babooshka', mourning mother of 'Army Dreamers', slowly dying foetus in 'Breathing' – all explore very different and far-reaching aspects of femininity. Few of these were or still are considered suitable material for a teenage pop star. In a message to fans around the time of the release of *Never for Ever* in 1980, Kate described each song as having 'a very different personality, and so much of the production was allowing the songs to speak with their own voices'.

Of the many wonderful strange-girl artists that emerged in the mid-Eighties, Elizabeth Fraser of the Cocteau Twins stands out as someone who took inspiration from Kate's ethereal, unusual vocal style, adapting and pushing it to ridiculous extremes of melodic gymnastics and microtonal melisma [a group of notes sung across one syllable], deconstructing the act of singing into something more akin to mouth music. The piano-driven songwriting of Tori Amos similarly borrowed heavily from Kate's early period, in the uneven metre and unusual prosody, the melodies that touch the extreme edges of vocal range, and, from the album *From the Choirgirl Hotel* (1998) onward, the character-driven narratives – personae that Tori would embody herself in performance, replete with individual physical tics, regional accents and dialects. Björk's restless trailblazing innovations,

love of tech and creative autonomy as a self-producing artist of left-field pop owe a lot to Kate Bush's legacy. And so many more came after that, with direct descendants including Joanna Newsom, Florence Welch, Enya, Alison Goldfrapp, Amanda Palmer, Bat For Lashes, St Vincent, Grimes and Kristeen Young.

Kate Bush continues to inspire us with her individualism. She embodies the richness of English music culture as well as our home-grown brand of eccentricity. She blows apart your hit song formula. Her creative labour is given only on her terms, demonstrating from the very start that you can engage with uncomfortable topics and still be successful. Kate gives you permission to follow your muse relentlessly, uncompromisingly. She writes songs about female experiences, and through them allows us to feel closeness and empathy with the world around us, and each other.