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ESSEX LIFE

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April 2011

Power People

Essex movers and shakers with the most influence

Branching Out

Ensuring a bright future for everyone in Epping Forest

Romance on the run

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DAYS OUT
TO ENJOY

WIN

a double stay
with Milsom
Hotels Group



Sara Mitra

Why this Harlow singer is
a hit with Jamie Cullum



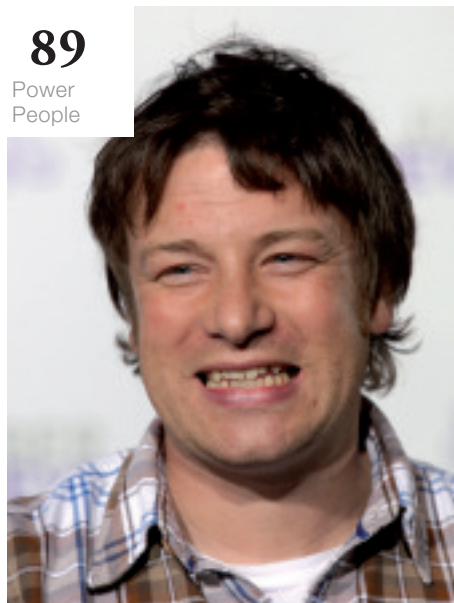
Royal Wedding Special

Opening the Windsor family album with
The Sun's top snapper at his Hutton home

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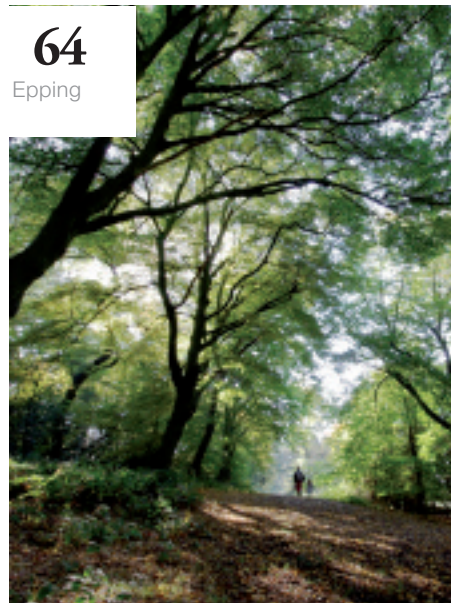
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Stephanie Delaney

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Pitch perfect

As an exciting, pioneering female talent on the British jazz scene, Sara Mitra reflects on her sudden emergence and why she's proving a hit with Jamie Cullum, and others

IT IS JUST 24 hours on from recording a four-track session for Jamie Cullum's Radio 2 show at the renowned Maida Vale Studios in northwest London when I meet Sara Mitra for a chat, but her radiant, Cheshire cat smile is still evident. For the 30-year-old, Harlow-born jazz singer-songwriter, the previous day had provided one of those pinch yourself moments as she recorded in the legendary venue which oozes musical history.

'I was so excited, it was like Christmas, thinking about it non-stop the night before,' says Sara with a smile. 'The studio was much bigger than I envisaged. They've got pictures of all the artists that have performed there and there was a plaque on the wall, which moved me, stating that this studio was where the great Bing Crosby performed his last recording before he died. I just sat there taking in the vibes, as you can really feel the calm presence.'

Proving to be one of Sara's most beneficial advocate's, established British jazz star Jamie Cullum's role in her breakthrough has been invaluable, championing her material to a vast mainstream audience via his weekly Radio 2 show.

Following a jovial album launch bash at The Vortex in London late last year, Sara's debut record, *April Song*, has gone on to deservedly receive wide critical acclaim, most notably being listed as one of Cullum's Album's of

the Year 2010, as well as receiving the accolade of a Mercury Prize recommendation.

Born in Harlow of an eclectic heritage, consisting of an Irish mother and Indian father, it's fair to say Sara's observations in these adolescent years growing-up in neighbouring Bishop's Stortford, provided ample songwriting material.

'The childhood I had was very loving and secure, but was isolated. Growing up with mixed heritage in a predominantly white town was an experience that wouldn't happen nowadays. To come up against people's prejudices made me feel very alone, but it gave me the skills to observe as an outsider. Not being part of the status quo made me who I am.'

First signs of her promising musical shoots emerged as one of the initial members of the Cantate Youth Choir, a group that still runs to this day. 'Drawn from Essex, Cambridge and Hertfordshire, it was an amazing way for children to take all their energy and put it into something useful on a Saturday afternoon,' reminisces Sara fondly. 'Learning songs and putting on concerts instilled in me the dedication and interpretation of music. I have great memories of that time. I listened to various music genres as a child, not jazz as such, but a lot of folk, rock and soul. My love of folk came from my mother and my father liked Pink Floyd, Moody Blues and blues singers.'

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‘There’s not a lot of room to sing jazz in a new way. It’s like trying to have a crack at a canvas after looking at Picasso’s work. Where there is left to go is proved by Sara, to sound totally as yourself’

Jamie Cullum



Fast forward to now, with Sara’s catchy opening single *Baby and Me* released in April, and she reflects back on a whirlwind past few months. ‘I couldn’t believe it. I just smiled and smiled. I’d been trying to keep a hold on my feelings for so long, because it was taking a while. Then it was launched and the reviews began coming in, so to have such positive feedback was overwhelming. I was jobbing away and had hopes, but wouldn’t have imagined this at all five years ago.’

Airplay on Cullum’s show opened the floodgates and Sara rapidly became one of his favoured crop of exciting young artists to listen out for. ‘When I first heard about the album, I didn’t know who Sara was,’ Cullum admitted. ‘I have the luxury of presenting a jazz show, so I’m in a unique position to hear how much new talent there is out there. Believe me, it’s a very healthy scene at the moment.’

‘I knew a lot about Impossible Ark Records, as well as the producer and all the musicians on the album, so I was very excited to hear it. A release with this level of musicianship on this

record label had my interest even before I’d listened to it.’

Immersing herself with a stellar cast consisting of other hugely talented BBC Jazz Award-winning musicians, such as husband Tim Giles (drums), James Allsopp (saxophone), Ross Stanley (organ) and composer Riaan Vosloo, Sara’s *April Song* proved the culmination of a handful of complementary ingredients.

Works such as *April Song* demonstrate that the British jazz scene is very much alive and Sara unselfishly hopes her success will now draw worthy attention on others in the same mould. ‘Female singers in the jazz area fall into two extremes, cabaret versus artistic and experimental. There are many that fall into middle ground and don’t satisfy either camp, but there’s now an audience that is ready for that, with something for everybody.’

‘If one person succeeds, it lifts up those around you and there’s a huge flourishing scene of other musicians. I’m only here because of those who put the energy into helping me, so I want to make sure that everyone else can achieve too.’



A fan of the likes of Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Billie Holiday and Anita O'Day, the latter's influence on Sara's music is evident to Cullum's ears. 'I can definitely hear that she's been listening to her. What's great about Sara is that she has an element of tradition about her, while sounding very modern at the same time. Unaffected really says it for me. She's not dressing things up. She sounds modern just by sounding like herself.'

'It's very nice to have people say they like what you're doing, but they could have easily taken it apart'

'Sara has a really conversational style of singing, that is immediately unflashy, the opposite of what you hear on the *X Factor*. She tells a story without ramming it down your throat. In order to sing that simply and that unaffectedly, you require heaps of technique and a great deal of the groundwork needs to have already been done. It's not easy to sing with no frills.'

For many female musicians, having a child results in taking their foot of

the gas a little career-wise. However, pregnant throughout the whole album recording process, remarkably Sara bucked the trend. 'We wanted to have a family and I also wanted to record my album, it just so happens that the two coincided. After Eleanor was born and I had a few months to recover, I began putting the finishing touches to the album. Cradling and singing to her, she wouldn't cry and it would calm her, so it was really magical.'

Of course with the success of *April Song* comes with it the raised expectation for her now eagerly-awaited sophomore release, a factor Sara's already taken into consideration. 'It's very nice to have people say they like what you're doing, but they could have easily taken it apart. Provisionally we'll be recording around August, live onto tape like we did at the BBC session. It makes me nervous, but the sound quality is better than digital. After all, old

recordings sound fantastic. I want to keep exploring on a similar path to *April Song*, but vocally I'm stronger now, as the way I had to adjust my singing approach takes away all the vocal gymnastics, stripping it down, singing as naturally as possible.'

And that seems exactly what this success is built on. With many female artists feeling the weight of history following on from American jazz giants such as Betty Carter, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday and Nina Simone, it is very hard to develop a sound that does not really mimic those unique singers.

'There's not a lot of room to sing jazz in a way that's particularly new,' adds Cullum. 'It's like trying to have a crack at a canvas after looking at Picasso's work. Where else is there left to go? Where there is left to go is proved by Sara. To sound totally as yourself.'

READ MORE

You can learn more about Sara Mitra's upcoming appearances and music releases at her website, www.saramitra.com
