



lang, k. d. (b. 1961)

by Tina Gianoulis

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k. d. lang.
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Long before she came out as a lesbian in a 1992 interview in the gay newsmagazine *The Advocate*, and long before she appeared on the 1993 cover of *Vanity Fair* lounging in male drag in a barber's chair with Cindy Crawford hovering teasingly over her, lesbians had made k.d. lang their own. They were drawn not only by her gender-bending hairstyle and clothes, but also by her achingly beautiful voice and her intensely romantic singing style.

A country girl, lang, whose given name is Kathryn Dawn, grew up in the tiny Canadian town of Consort, deep in Alberta's farming territory. She came out as a lesbian while still a teenager and moved to Edmonton, where she joined a performance art group called GOYA, Group of Young Artists.

When she began to sing country music, it was part tribute to her country roots, part performance art, and part camp. But lang's rich voice and deeply felt interpretations gave her legitimacy as a country artist. She released three country albums, *A Truly Western Experience* (1984), *Angel with a Lariat* (1987), and *Absolute Torch and Twang* (1989). She won Grammy Awards for *Absolute Torch and Twang* and for her version of the Roy Orbison classic "Crying."

Although the country music establishment rewarded lang in spite of her eccentricities of dress and identity, the more conservative country audiences had a harder time accepting her, especially after she went public as a vegetarian and made an anti-meat television commercial.

The message, "Meat Stinks!" roused anger in the farming communities that love country music. Among the communities responding negatively to the commercial was Consort, and in retaliation her hometown removed the plaque that had identified it as the "Home of k.d. lang."

Lesbians, who had been sure for years that lang was one of them, were pleased when she became one of very few major celebrities to come out openly as gay. However, since lang stood virtually alone on the mainstream stage, her lesbian fans often expected her to represent every aspect of what they considered important about being queer.

lang, who does not view her lesbianism as the central factor of her life, found it difficult and often painful when she was criticized for not living up to the diverse demands of her audience.

However, she does stand up as a lesbian when she feels it is important. She has spoken and performed at gay demonstrations and AIDS benefits. In 1997, she joined another famous lesbian making the transition out of the closet when she guest starred with Ellen DeGeneres on two episodes of *Ellen*.

Along with her emergence as an out lesbian, lang began to expand and experiment with her musical style. In 1992, the same year that she came out, she released *Ingenue*, a collection of her own compositions in the style of the "torch" ballads of the 1940s. This departure from country would be her most commercially successful album, going double platinum and winning a Grammy for its signature song, "Constant Craving."

Lang followed this success with another original album in 1995, *All You Can Eat*; and in 1997, she released *Drag*, a compilation of old songs unified by the common theme of smoking cigarettes.

Between 1997 and 2000, she took a break from recording and performing to relax and gather her forces after her breakneck rise to fame. During this time, she moved from a farm near Vancouver, British Columbia, to a glass-and-wood "cabin" in the woods near Los Angeles. Also during this time, she fell in love with Leisha Hailey of the girl group The Murmurs.

Lang's sabbatical and her increasingly solid relationship with Hailey resulted in a newly successful return to music. In the summer of 2000, she released *Invincible Summer*, an album of original love songs with a breezy summery tone, reflecting the influence of Brazilian music and the Beach Boys. The album and its accompanying tour received rave reviews.

Lang's most recent albums are *Live by Request* (2002), recorded from the A&E television series of the same name; and, with Tony Bennett, *Wonderful World* (2003), in which the duo sings songs inspired by Louis Armstrong. For the latter work, Bennett and Lang received a Grammy Award in the category of "Best Traditional Pop Album." In *Hymns of the 49th Parallel* (2004), Lang performs Canadian songs.

k.d. Lang remains an anomalous figure in the music world, both because she is a lesbian and because she refuses to confine herself within a specific genre. Always an experimenter, she resists neat categorization. But her sincerity, charm, and compelling voice continue to attract a wide variety of listeners.

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Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.