

INTERVIEW

BIG-TONED GAL

The golden-throated k.d. lang gives voice to her views on Melissa, Madonna and coming out

by Jeffrey L. Newman

Watching k.d. lang wander down Collins Avenue on Miami Beach through the throngs of models, sun-soaked bodies and made-up faces is like viewing an oxymoron in action. Wearing no makeup and cropped hair, lang is a marked contrast to the parade of trendoids and high-fashionites that frolic on South Beach.

But the singer is happy that way. Her individu-

Music

ality is one of the things that has separated her from her peers and allowed her to flourish in an industry that is known for churning out one-hit wonders as fast as it does one-hit records. Another thing that has separated lang from the rest is her status as one of a handful of openly gay mainstream recording artists.

"People continue to want to focus in on that, but I'm a lot more than just that.... I am an artist, number one, who just happens to be a lesbian," says the 35-year-old singer. "But I understand. It's how the pop media works. The subject is topical. And [my coming out] is a piece of history in our culture right now. Hopefully, it will be my music that will come to the forefront, because eventually what will maintain me will be my music."

"It took me 10 years to [come out]. It was a very tough decision. I had to decide if it was necessary to draw the distinction between myself as the singer and myself as the private person. Or if it was worth putting my family and my career in such a compromising position," she says. "At the time no one had come out in the pop music scene. I didn't really know how it would affect my career. It could have ended it. Homophobia was wreaking havoc on any forward movement and there was a big backlash on gays and lesbians by the right wing. But I felt that if it was a tool that was going to be used against me, I would be the one in control of it.... I also felt a responsibility to the gay and lesbian community to be honest, to say, 'I am gay, I am a lesbian and that is who I am.'"

It certainly didn't work against her. Her then newly released album *Ingenue* swept the 1993 Grammy nominations (netting Best Female Pop Vocal) and subsequently sold more than 2 million

copies in the United States—triple that of any of her previous albums.

Born Kathy Dawn Lang in Consort, Alberta, Canada, the singer began playing the guitar when she was barely 10 years old. By 13, she had reduced her name to lowercase initials and was writing and performing her own music.

In the early 1980s lang formed her own band, k.d. lang and the reclines, and released a country album. That landed them a contract with Sire Records. The subsequent country releases, *Angel with a Lariat*, *Shadowland* and *Absolute Torch and Twang*, each went gold and earned lang a healthy cult following. But the country music establishment refused to embrace lang because of her androgynous appearance and sexual ambiguity. So the singer abandoned her roots for a more pop sound. The result was *Ingenue*, a slick collection of love-torn songs. It was a sweet victory for lang and

bian and gay rights.

"I don't mind being one of the sources of information to help shed light on the subject. For the gay culture it's a support, for all other cultures who don't know anything about it, it will help to increase their tolerance," she says.

But that responsibility has its limits. Indeed, lang's position as an internationally known, openly gay musician affords her a greater amount of power to affect the masses. But she points out that it doesn't mean she's responsible for the entire gay rights movement of the '90s.

"I feel a certain sense of responsibility. But I'm not a politician. It would be like a politician who can sing constantly [being] asked to sing a song, all the time.... Somehow it became a political thing to be lesbian. But I'm not a politician, and my stage is not a platform."

Lang is not entirely alone. Shortly after her

it's friendly. I wouldn't say we are rivals," lang says. "There are times and instances that I feel a certain amount of pressure, and it makes it easier having Melissa out there sharing the load. Having both of us out there shows people how different lesbians can be. No one [person] can represent a whole culture, especially one like this, because it is very diverse."

One of lang's closest gal pals and an influence on her career is pop singer Madonna, who has been a vocal supporter of the gay community.

"She's really a great person. She is very down to earth for someone who is in her position, very open," lang says.

"Madonna has done a lot for gay and lesbian people too," adds the singer. "She's opened dialogue to educate people, which is very important. I wouldn't call her straight, more bisexual. But it's very important that people who are straight or bisexual are open to include gay issues in their lives, just like we have to include their issues in ours. Madonna's done it very graciously. As has Roseanne."

Lang has her detractors. Some people have questioned her motives for coming out, saying it was a publicity stunt. Others, including openly gay popster Jimmy Somerville, have said the singer doesn't do enough for gay rights and merely wears her lesbian status on her sleeve. Lang debunks most of it.

"People will definitely say those things. But then they don't have any understanding of what it takes to put it on the line and to stand up and say that they are a lesbian to people who are going to hate you for what you are," she says. "It is a publicity tool. That's how the modern media works. But it's also my life. It's also my family. It's also the people who are looking at me every day and judging me. It's also a reality.... I'm not a professional lesbian. I'm an artist. Everyone has a completely different way of doing things. Everyone tries to do their best."

The way to deal with it all, lang says, is just not to take it all too seriously.

"It's all so surreal. Everything is totally true and everything is totally bogus, that's how I look at those things. I don't expend that much energy [on what others say]," she says. "Criticism is a good thing. It forces you into action. But it can be harmful.... Every individual has some misconception about me. I don't worry about that. All I care about is that they come to my show and listen to my music. That is what makes me happy."



PHOTO BY LINDA KLEIVER

a slap in the face to the radio programmers who turned a homophobic cheek to the singer.

With lang's coming out came a certain expectation among gay people that she was representative of the whole community. In one fell swoop she immediately became the poster child for les-

coming out, rocker Melissa Etheridge announced that she too is a lesbian. Contrary to some reports, the two are not enemies.

"Melissa and I are completely different stylistically. She plays completely different music. Sure, there is a certain sense of competition, but

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