

INTERVIEW

K.d. lang has never been known for being conventional. So it's little surprise that the 37-year-old singer would veer comfortably off the road she's traveled before to create her newest Warner Bros. opus, *Drag*, a torch song storybook devoted to the artistry of cigarette songs. The title is lang's coy play on words for her fascination with cigarette terminology—"fag" and "drag"—and its tie-in to gay terminology.

MUSIC

"I find it interesting how there are all kinds of connections. It's pretty interesting how cigarettes historically have been used in art, literature and music. It's very fascinating. And certainly, I love the link between references people make to cigarettes and those they make to the gay culture," lang says. "The subject is inspiring. I'm totally intrigued by cigarette songs. I'm interested in contemporary conversation of cigarette smoking. I felt it was a timely perspective."

Don't be alarmed. The avowed non-smoker, vegetarian lesbian is not promoting an unhealthy cause. Granted, from the outside *Drag* would seem to glamorize cigarette smoking, with its beautifully photographed cover, featuring a sensually poised lang, and its tobacco-laden ditties. But once examined and listened to, *Drag* is clearly lang's metaphoric way of examining addiction and its tie-in to relationships of amour.

"I'm no more glamorizing cigarettes than someone who writes an article about smoking or someone who has a photo essay about it. Anything that provokes thought is bound to come up against adversity," lang says.

"I'm not making a political statement with this album—either for smoking or against it. What I wanted to do was explore the idea of addiction and how powerless an addict is under its strong arm. The objective was to create an exploration by using cigarettes metaphorically. To me, *Drag* is a musical documentary of cigarette smoking through song," she says.

"With that said, it also boiled down to songs I liked musically and lyrically. I've always loved songs about cigarettes. 'Don't Smoke in Bed' is a song I've wanted to record for a long time and really was the impetus for this album," she adds. "On the lighthearted side, I hope people use my CD as a musical replacement for smoking."

And while she's never had any substance addiction herself, she admits to having had addictive behavior in relationships. "But also, part of being an artist is being able to create a character or a story," she says. "A filmmaker doesn't have to be a murderer to make a film about murder. I'm able to visualize and simulate emotion through imagination."

With minimal backing, lush strings and jazz overtones, lang sought out songs from the '50s through the '70s, including the campy theme from "Valley of the Dolls," to piece together this musical tapestry. She left behind her comfort zone of longtime producing and writing partner Ben Mink for the first time in a decade and hooked up with producer Craig Street, who previously produced jazz diva Cassandra Wilson.

From such material as Steve Miller's "The Joker," where she changes the gender (the original was written as a "very male, very macho" song) and "My Last Cigarette," a song about realizing you have an addiction and conquering it, to "Don't Smoke in Bed," which she relates to the

possessive power of relationships, and "The Air that I Breathe," about giving your all for love, *Drag* offers lang the opportunity to explore channels, vocally and artistically, that she never has before.

Drag is a departure from lang's previous two pop albums. But then this is nothing new for the chameleon-esque vocalist, who has shaped her entire career around being eclectic and unpredictable.

"People would be surprised if I didn't depart. For me, being eclectic is a compliment. It's about being free to express various sides. It shows an

sexy teddy, seductively shaving lang's face?) Her first album post coming out, the gorgeous *Ingenue*, sold 2 million copies and swept the Grammy Awards that year.

"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

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. 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 her 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, who at the same time came out on the cover of the *Advocate*, and a slap in the face to the radio programmers who turned a homophobic cheek to the singer.

"Coming out was the best thing I ever did," lang says. "It was totally liberating to take all the walls down. It took all the fears away. It was total emancipation."

While lang's two follow-ups to *Ingenue*—the soundtrack to Gus Van Sant's *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, which she calls her favorite album she's ever made, and *All You Can Eat*—failed to mirror that album's success, lang says she doesn't see them as the disappointments she did initially when the sales figures fell short of both her own and her record label's expectations.

"Of course you are disappointed when one album sells less than another, but that's strictly when you are talking about the number of albums sold. At first it was devastating. But looking back now, it was as satisfying and highly transitional for me as anything else I had done. It was very rewarding for me in the long run," she says. "All three albums are connected. They're all continuations of the other. They're expressions of me and show evolution and growth. To me, *Drag* is the after cigarette to *All You Can Eat*."

Lang is also beginning to look at other paths not yet traveled, including that of producer, for her next venture. The singer has just completed producing six tracks on the upcoming sophomore release by MCA recording artists the Murmurs, featuring lang's girlfriend, Leisha Hailey.

She may even try her hand at acting, having landed a handful of acting gigs over the last six years, including a cameo on the infamous coming-out episode of *Ellen*, which she admits to still not having seen.

"I'm proud of her [Ellen DeGeneres] on a personal level," she says. "But she is just one person in a huge struggle for equal rights. Her coming out is not the biggest thing, but it's not the smallest thing, either. She's one piece in a long, long road to freedom."

And as for her own role as pop music's first commercially successful lesbian, she coyly plays down her significance.

"I don't think my coming out is what's really important. I'm just one of the people who have helped to make inroads. There will be many more people after me," she says. "There have been people from the beginning of time who have struggled to help break down barriers through art, literature and music. I'm just one of many people. Things will begin to change when we see more people like doctors, steel workers, nurses, mothers, mailmen and so on come out. It's a huge struggle. It's everyone's struggle, gay and straight. People like me and Ellen and Melissa are just a few of the players. We're a positive part, but a small part. We still have a long way to go."

Jeffrey L. Newman (editorjeff@aol.com) is a New York-based music writer.



k.d. lang

openness to understand and be interesting," she says. "*Drag* is fairly intimate. It was recorded intimately. The subject matter is intimate. Its approach is intimate. It's a bit of a headphone record."

Drag is lang's first album since 1995's disappointing *All You Can Eat*, and her third since coming out publicly as a lesbian five years ago. (Who can forget the 1993 *Vanity Fair* cover of supermodel Cindy Crawford wearing a silky,

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 were 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.'")

Born Kathy Dawn Lang in Consort, Alberta, in Canada, the singer began playing the guitar