

k.d. language of love

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author stroll hand-in-hand into the moonlight. "I have pictures of k.d. everywhere, and I fall asleep looking at her so she'll star in my dreams," another fan writes.

This doesn't terrify lang. "I've been to the extremes of loving an artist," she confides. "But it's a hard thing to understand about yourself, your own appeal."

Although she says she used to check in on some of the many Internet sites devoted to her, she stopped because "It's not about me, it's about them." And thanks to the role the Internet plays as a fire-breathing, rumor-fueling monster, lots of misinformation also floats around in cyberspace. As lang told *Entertainment Weekly Online*: "I try to ignore all that, because even if it's not true, it can affect you negatively and take the wind right out of your sails. Why bother with it?"

But in fact, lang as a lesbian icon is such a phenomenon that she is studied in academic circles. Sociologist Louise Allen has written a fascinating book, *The Lesbian Idol: Martina, k.d. and the Consumption of Lesbian Masculinity* (Cassell, 1997), in which she dissects every aspect of lang's appeal and demonstrates her larger value in lesbian culture.

How do we love k.d. lang? Let Allen count the ways. Probably first and foremost for many queer fans is lang's sexual magnetism. "The relationship between k.d. and Martina [Navratilova] and their fans is not one of simple identification, but is specifically informed by sexual desire," Allen writes. As evidence, she cites this fan: "I dream that her life will only be complete when she meets me and we become lovers."

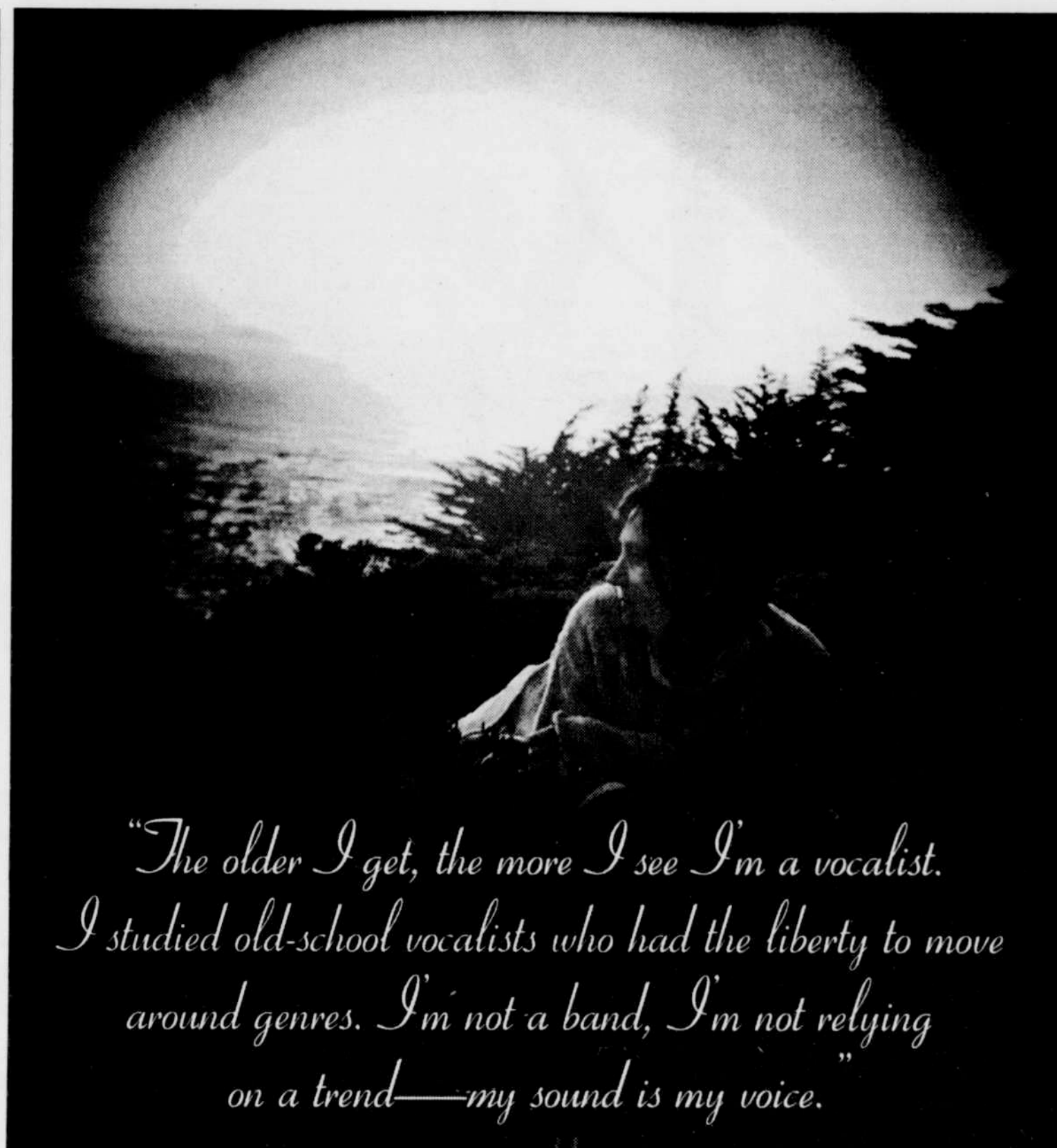
Although she thinks the worship of celebrity is weird, lang also understands it firsthand. "I've certainly revered other artists to that extent in my life—I can remember sitting in the lobby of a hotel for 15 hours waiting to get a Peggy Lee autograph," she recalls. "I've been there, so I can't judge people who do that to me."

According to Allen, another strong appeal is lang's innate gender ambiguity and how she plays with her public image. As one fan interviewed for the book says, "I fantasize about having sex with her, but I think mostly about her face...how lovely her face is—so boyish and androgynous...that ambiguity is very appealing, like the naughty feeling of holding hands in public with someone everyone assumes is your boyfriend, but is your girlfriend."

But lang's overt masculinity is what often gets engines roaring. Her fans relate to the lang yang because she embodies an idealized butch dyke. In fact, as a young girl lang idolized Canadian roller derby queens for the same reason. "There weren't many gay role models at that time, and roller derby was a recognition of butch women, and I wanted to be that!"

Allen states: "The stardom of k.d. and Martina as famous masculine lesbians must alter how we think about the notion of 'woman,' because these are women who are idealized and idolized for their masculinity. This dynamic changes both the notion of masculinity and the category of woman."

Allen reminds us that fans also love lang for her feminine attributes, especially her beautiful singing voice, which can sound so pure and lilt-



"The older I get, the more I see I'm a vocalist. I studied old-school vocalists who had the liberty to move around genres. I'm not a band, I'm not relying on a trend—my sound is my voice."

And lang herself readily admits she loves to explore all facets of herself simultaneously, often wearing lacy lingerie beneath her tailored suits. In fact, she's even coined a term for it: High Concept Living, or HCL, a subject she wrote about earlier this year in *Jane*: "I love embracing both the male and female energies of life—and having a very male exterior and a very female interior is the way I do it.... It's about ignoring the traps of stereotyping and expectation."

When I ask lang for another example of HCL, she says, "It would be inviting Ellen DeGeneres and Laura Schlessinger to the same dinner party." Which leads to a riff on George W. Bush and how he's an example of the opposite of HCL. "My mum and I call it capping the value system—never evolving or challenging your belief system."

Rocking the boat of preconception is another thing fans love about lang. From her early days as a hybrid punk/cowgirl performer, queers have identified with lang's otherness. Her humble economic and rural origins contribute to her otherness, as does her exotic mixed ethnicity: Irish, Icelandic, Dutch, Sioux, English, Scottish and Russian Jew. "I'm a hodgepodge," she says with a laugh.

Another appealing thing about lang is the vicarious thrill her fans get witnessing her rise in show business and her increasing power. To a group that often is marginalized, seeing one of their own being accepted on the larger world stage somehow validates their own progress.

"Lesbian fandom as a subculture in itself is a fairly new phenomenon," Allen writes. She documents how lang's coming out affected countless other women who then were emboldened and how just seeing lang on television changed one woman's life: "It has taken me a while to realize that I am attracted to women—and now I realize that I always have been. I feel I'm a different

person now, and it's almost as though k.d. has given me so much, and she will always mean a lot to me."

To further gauge lang's influence, Allen notes how implausible it would be for a female fan of Barry Manilow to realize she was heterosexual from watching him perform!

Allen pinpoints the moment k.d. lang achieved iconic status: the infamous *Vanity Fair* cover and article from 1993 featuring the mock seduction of lang by a scantily clad Cindy Crawford pretending to shave lang's face. It's impossible to convey how subversive that cover was and what a shock it was to be found in the checkout

line at the supermarket! In the article, lang ventured even further with this statement: "I have a little bit of penis envy, they're ridiculous but cool."

Gay men, too, can relate to the controversial androgyny. "In her pinstripe suits and slicked-back hair, it's easy for me to think of k.d. as a hot guy, and the deep register she can go to with her voice also helps," confides Bob Wilson of Beaverton. "I'm a really big fan; I'll probably see several of her concerts on this tour."

And Angela Jones, who attended lang's recent concert in Portland, says: "When she came out it was a confirmation, it was an empowering experience. It showed the genuineness of her."

And that comment probably would make k.d. lang smile, because she's made it her mission to relate better to the real people she encounters. As she sings on *Invincible Summer*, "Truth is delirious in love's great atmosphere."

A mellower lang also talks about her soul: "I've always tried to approach my songs from an open place and incorporate my spirituality in that." She names "Simple" as the song on her new record with the deepest personal significance. "I think of it as a mantra, a prayer or a hymn. It's about how love is really a simple thing, not nearly as complex or complicated as humans make it."

And on the final cut of the album, lang sings, "With every drop of life inside us, with every heart we've left behind us, everywhere you'll find it's only love brings you back around." For someone who just a few years ago was on the brink of burnout, that song sums it up. As lang says, "It's about how love is really the only thing that can both kill you and bring you back to life."

■ **ORIANA GREEN** is the *Entertainment* Editor of *Just Out* and can be reached at oriana@justout.com. She would walk through the snow barefoot—for a few blocks, anyway—to see k.d. lang.

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