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music

Torch and Twang: Take Two

k.d. lang revisits her early cowpunk with a refreshing retrospective.
Dust off your sequins, little doggies!

by John Polly

World-renowned chanteuse/cowgirl/vegetarian k.d. lang revisits the first decade of her work on the new album *Reintarnation*, a rollicking, rhythmic 20-song retrospective.

It's an imaginative, fresh and whip-smart soundtrack, spanning much of the 1980s and early '90s, which charges right out of the chute bucking and snapping and cranking with a festive cowpunk beat. In fact, much of the early part of lang's career—before she grew into the seasoned pop star with the grown-up, immaculately smooth voice that propelled the landmark album *Ingenue*, and before she took it further with sophisticated and sunny pop albums like *All You Can Eat* and *Invincible Summer*, or collaborated and crooned with Tony Bennett on worldwide tours, or cultivated a Canadian songbook with the acclaimed *Hymns of the 49th Parallel*—was spent as a country singer who charmed the socks off of the Nashville establishment with her clever reinvention of the musical genre that held such greats as Patsy Cline, Roy Acuff, Brenda Lee, Minnie Pearl and Loretta Lynn as its icons.

Yep, lang first rose to prominence as a fiery, fun-loving cowgirl, known as much for her cartoonishly sequined western apparel (you can almost call it cowgirl drag) and exuberant onstage energy as for her singular grasp of how to pay tribute to the sass and smarts of country music, while also reveling reverently in its hokier elements. (Song titles such as "Big Boned Girl," "Got the Bull by the Horns," "Hanky Panky," "Friday Dance Promenade" and "Cowgirl Pride" testify to the spunk that infused much of her honky-tonkin' oeuvre.) And somehow, as much fun as lang had recording her fun-spirited country tunes, instead of sounding like sendups, her music served as tributes to a genre she had grown to love.

Of course, no one was more surprised than lang when she found herself ascending the ranks of country music stardom. "Before I officially became a musician, I was not really listening to country," she admits of her early years in Canada. "Back then I wasn't interested in country; I was doing performance art. I was working with a group of artists who did art installations with found art and social commentary and this kind of industrial punk music, with tape loops and breaking glass and shit like that."

She laughs recalling that time: "But soon I started feeling anxious; I was looking for something with more structure and something more to hit my head against. For my 21st birthday, I'd been given two Patsy Cline records, and *Coal Miner's Daughter* had been out earlier, and there was this weird affinity growing toward country music in the gay

scene. My brother and sisters were really into it." (Both lang's brother and one of her sisters are gay, too. "My poor mother," she laughs.)

For a Canadian girl who grew up in the rural ranching and farming community of Consort, Alberta (population 650), she was already familiar with the lifestyle celebrated in country music. "I knew the essence of that mindset and that world," explains lang. "I may have been coming at it from a completely different perspective, but at the same time, as a singer I found that the genre gave me something really challenging, and it gave the vocalist a lot of room. And conceptually, there was a lot of room to play with the more traditional ways of thinking."

"Plus, it was a lot of fun in terms of fashion," lang recalls warmly. "I had fun getting really creative with the fashion, playing with a look in

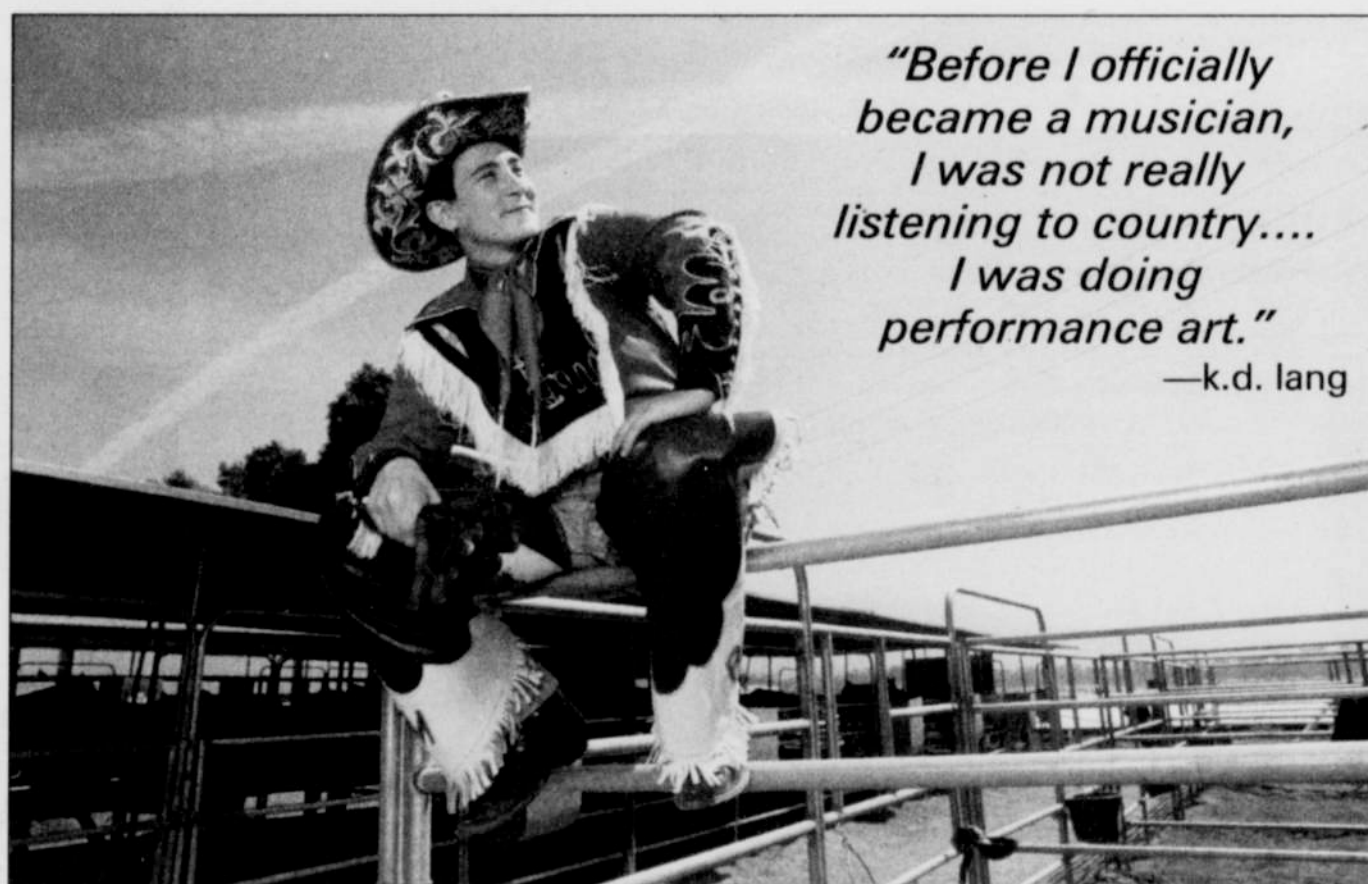
ed lang more country hits and her first Grammy for Best Female Country Vocalist.

And as anyone who was around in the early 1990s recalls, lang achieved even greater fame when she came out as a lesbian in a cover story for *The Advocate*. Before even she could fathom it, she was on the cover of *Vanity Fair* and being named "One of 1992's Most Important People of the Year" by Barbara Walters. *

"I had always thought I was pretty out," chuckles lang. "From the start I was singing songs like 'Bop-a-lina' and 'Polly Ann,' songs that seemed obviously gay to me.... So it didn't really occur to me to come out officially. But then came AIDS, and around the time of *Ingenue* the group Queer Nation was doing its thing, and it was becoming a very political issue to be out. So I just thought: 'Well, I'll

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—k.d. lang



which I could incorporate my really boyish demeanor and haircut and attitude, while at the same time wearing these crazy dresses. It was all a lot of fodder for my creative energy."

But as much fun as she had tailoring her hyper-Nashville persona, lang never veered into parody. "It was like a kind of performance art for me," she notes. "But the thing was I had a real, true love and respect for the artists I chose to follow, and I ended up being a student of those icons, like Patsy and Loretta. There was humor in it, but that had also been incorporated by people like Minnie Pearl and Cousin Joe and String Bean before. And I loved that self-effacing humor; June Carter Cash was another good example. I just kind of combined all of those things."

Of course, she had some skilled help along the way, as her major label debut, 1987's *Angel with a Lariat*, was produced by roots-rock icon Dave Edmunds. On its follow-up, *Shadowland*, lang teamed with the iconic Owen Bradley, who'd produced her forbears Cline, Lynn and Lee. Then came 1989's *Absolute Torch and Twang*, which yield-

just come out. It's not like it's a big jump."

After the subsequent, stylistic turns her career has taken, it's a testament to the skillful execution that went into her early music that the torch and twang of *Reintarnation* doesn't sound at all dated. These timeless country nuggets could have been recorded last week, rather than up to 20 years ago.

For the most part, the trip down memory lane has been fun for lang, as it will be for a fan. "It was something of a sense memory," she says. "All of a sudden all of these pictures and places and styles of dress came flooding through. It was like looking at a yearbook. I remembered all of the passion and the energy that I had to take on the world and to really fuck country music up."

"The only thing that's the same," cracks lang, "is my hair. I mean, maybe it's a little better.... Seeing the haircuts—that's been the only scary part." 10

K.D. LANG performs 7:30 p.m. Aug. 27 at Britt Pavilion, 350 S. First St. in Jacksonville. Tickets are \$25-\$57 from www.brittfest.org.