

# **Obituaries & Tributes to Kirsty MacColl**

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# HOT PRESS

**Kirsty MacColl (1959-2000)**



**Philip Chevron remembers**

South Of France, 1988: The jacket, with its silver and black chevrons, had pleaded with me from the window for two days, like some whimpering puppy in a pet shop. Finally, the jacket and the contents of Monsieur's wallet changed hands. On parade in the dressing room later, Kirsty took time out from the ritual, therapeutic construction of her hairdo to cast a doubtful eye over the garment. Her face brightened as she isolated the cause of her unease: with a single tug, the eminent designer's name, ostentatiously attached to the left sleeve, was among the debris in an adjacent ashtray. "Now," she announced, "you got yourself a jacket!" I still have.

In The Pogues. we were fortunate that Kirsty accompanied us on tour as often as her priorities (her boys, Jamie and Louis) allowed. Unmistakably, the tour bus was a classier joint with her on board, as she genuinely brought out the best in everyone. Hotel bars at four in the morning were good too: a solicitous Kirsty holding forth - to whichever Pogue she had not yet managed to drink under the table - about the dangers of The Lifestyle.

She shared our insatiable musical curiosity and our appetite for hair-brained schemes. A folk-punk opera, say, or an all-Pogue recording of West Side Story. We did get as far as doing a brace of Cole Porter songs together for her husband, Steve Lillywhite's Red, Hot And Blue

project. She performed Miss Otis Regrets like an Antipodean death-ballad and made it sound like that had been Porter's intention all along. And then there was her strangely irreplaceable performance of Fairytale.

"I could have been someone..."

The rueful sound of Shane MacGowan cursing the emigrant's luck. This was it, the moment when, every night without fail, the tear ducts would do battle with the heartstrings. Two thousand, ten thousand voices raised in reproach, united with our flame-haired cheerleader, our big sister, the Maureen O'Hara of our brighter dreams:

"Well so could anyone!!"

I would try to catch her eye in the midst of the moment and would sometimes be rewarded with a conspiratorial wink: it was an open secret that chronic stage fright had long since separated Kirsty from her public. Now, kidding herself that she was somehow camouflaged by this octet of ramshackle guys she became, well, Kirsty Galore. She made short work of the nightly challenge of waltzing with Mac during the duet and then added her warmth to Dirty Old Town, a song which, since it was written by her father and not Brian Wilson, she'd had to learn just like the rest of us.

The apple doesn't fall very far from the tree, or so they say. But perhaps it was her need to undermine that very assumption that drove Kirsty to forge quite such an original and unique place for herself as a songwriter. Ewan MacColl, though he wrote many a fine song, did not have the sort of suburban-London worldview that could produce You Broke My Heart In Seventeen Places (Shepherd's Bush Was Only One), Don't Come The Cowboy With Me, Sonny Jim or There's A Guy Works Down The Chip Shop Swears He's Elvis. How great a songwriter was she? Just ask MacGowan, Morrissey or Billy New England Bragg for a start: those guys thought she was the best. Lesser writers thought she was not bad for a girl.

Like Billy, Shane, Joe Strummer and myself, Kirsty began her recording career in the Seventies at Chiswick Records in Camden Town. She was singer Mandy Doubt with the Drug Addix, Croydon contemporaries of The Damned and Johnny Moped who were also, indeed, on the label. But her lustre did not really become apparent until They Don't Know, her first solo single for Stiff Records. The exact moment I fell in love with Kirsty MacColl was just 113 seconds into first hearing that record on the radio...

"BA -I-BE-Y!!"

.a moment so perfect in pop music that when, four years later, Tracey Ullman covered the song (reaching No.2 on the charts), she did not trouble herself to compete with it; she simply had Kirsty do it again.

Fast forward to Kirsty's final single, the wonderful In These Shoes, and she's still a tough act to follow, as Bette Midler's oddly mirthless cover of the song confirms. Galore, a 1995 collection of the best of 16 years of Kirsty's pop masterpieces, finally gave her something like the album sales she deserved. But some of her other albums, in particular Electric Landlady and Kite, are indispensable.

If you'd dropped in on her at home in the past few years, you'd have found the kitchen table stacked with countless Cuban music CDs along with advanced Spanish and Portuguese grammars. A passion that began with the single *My Affair* in 1991 was about to blossom into the astoundingly accomplished *Tropical Brainstorm* album. It was not quite her swansong, though.

For some time, Kirsty had been enthusiastic about a stage show myself and Declan Lynch have been writing, called *Jack Rooney: In Person*. Last month, with characteristic generosity, she agreed to perform one of the principal roles in our recording of the score. She bestowed on the character all the wit, warmth, resilience and tenderness Declan and I had dared hope for.

One looks for small consolations at times like these. Mine is that the last time I saw her, she was happy with life, happy in matters of the heart (the charming James Knight), happy with her work (including her imminent BBC Radio 2 series on Cuban music) and happy to be spending Christmas in Mexico with James and her two sons.

Thanks, Kirsty, Thank You For The Days.  
Philip Chevron, Nottingham, January 13, 2001

# The Guardian

## High on spiky teeth and Cuba

I met Kirsty, with her long red hair and smashing smile, on November 11 in Havana, making Kirsty MacColl's Cuba, eight music programmes due for transmission on Radio 2. She worked at record pace.

Decisive, with strong opinions, she had been in Cuba several times in the last 10 years. She regaled us with tales of driving, with her sons and a Cuban doctor friend, the length of the island to Santiago in the early 1990s, of giving hitchhikers lifts and avoiding potholes and goats on the road. She was proud that her picture had, just the week before, been on the front page of Granma, Cuba's main newspaper, for handing in a petition in London supporting the island's struggle against the US embargo.

Returning from a heavy day recording in Santa Clara, at the new mausoleum for Che Guevara, then down at the Bay of Pigs, she insisted on us buying a bottle of nine-year-old Havana Club rum, which we consumed, while telling all the jokes we knew: Kirsty had more than anyone - and they were the most wicked. We sang her finest piece, an a cappella music-hall ditty learnt from Ewan when she was young: "It's a great one if the sound goes wrong on stage and you've got to keep the audience pacified, it stops them in their tracks."

She talked gardens; she was passionate about her own, with its two ponds, naming every tree and plant she had. We went to visit Ibrahim Ferrer, of Buena Vista Social Club, then to interview José Luis Cortés, of NG La Banda, Cuba's most controversial street cred group.

Kirsty was half-hearted about Cortés until she met him. By the time we left, they were talking of writing and recording a song together. She left Havana, enthusing over her extra bag, packed with beautiful etchings of armour fish discovered in the market, and "more papier-maché fish, but these ones have got real spiky teeth".

Jan Fairley



# Guardian: Frances Dickinson

**The death of the singer-songwriter Kirsty MacColl in a boating accident in Mexico was a great loss to music. Frances Dickinson remembers a remarkable musician, mother and, above all, a mate**



Under any other circumstances I would have cheered to see Kirsty's photo on the front page of so many newspapers. It was the sort of acclaim that she deserved and never quite achieved - despite her hits. But as her friend I flinch from each new headline as if it were a callused fist. I wasn't Kirsty's best friend, and I definitely was not her only friend. But Kirsty had a talent for friendship that was matched only by her talent for music. My girlfriend Caz Gorham introduced us. It was at a party thrown for another of Kirsty's mates, and Kirsty had agreed to sing. This alone was a measure of her friendship. She had a horror of performing then, that even now - 10 years later - she was only just coming to terms with (perhaps helped by the fact that her partner James, the saxophonist in her band, was with her on the stage). I remember one time asking if she'd be a guest on a TV programme that I was producing. "Do you really want a plank of wood on your show?" she said.

The music industry is famous for its early deaths but Kirsty was its least likely candidate. She survived punk, success, cancelled contracts, the break-up of her marriage, and had probably entered one of the happiest periods of her life, both professionally (her current album was perhaps her best) and personally. Not least of all, the great job she's made of bringing up her two sons, Jamie and Louis, is becoming more and more apparent. Last time I saw her she talked proudly about how Jamie had played guitar on some tracks she'd recorded.

Kirsty's mind was flick-knife sharp, but she was ruled by her passions as much as by her intellect. She had a huge appetite for new things and for underdog causes. Caz worked with Kirsty on a television documentary in which Kirsty spoke out about the way in which we in Britain needlessly pollute and squander our water supplies.

It was typical of Kirsty that this was no pop star rant but something she really knew about and acted on at a personal level. She had a reed-bed system set up in her back garden which recycled the waste water from her home so that it could be used to irrigate the garden and fill an ornamental pond. Last time I saw the pond it was filled with fish the size of squirrels.

On another occasion I remember her opening her front door and pulling me into her music room to listen to a track on an album she'd just bought. "You'll love it," she said, "unless you've turned into a plonker." It was by The Pale Saints, a little-known band from Australia or New Zealand - I can't remember which. But I remember the song. I still love the album.

Kirsty had one of the prettiest faces I've ever seen. Yet like most women I know she seemed to doubt that she was attractive, particularly as she struggled with her weight. When I picture

her I mostly see her laughing. Yet she was no Pollyanna. I saw how the break-up of her marriage plunged her into despair, as did the cancelling of her record deal by Virgin.

And if Kirsty thought you were talking rubbish, she let you know. We argued once about whether I saw homophobia where there was only fatuousness. Yet soon after I heard she'd publicly berated a pop star for anti-gay remarks he'd made.

Kirsty's parties were famous. They were the sort you took champagne to if you could, and you made sure you had no plans for anything the next day. Not surprisingly, many of her friends were musicians and walking from room to room at Kirsty's home could be like rifling the pages of a pop and rock encyclopaedia.

But there were never any pop star tantrums there. As a humanising, democratising force, Kirsty was better than any revolution. She took particular pleasure in introducing you to people that she thought you'd like. And it's a measure of her sense of people that I met two of my closest friends through Kirsty.

On Tuesday night, lying in bed, trying to come to terms with her death, I berated myself for the times I'd meant to call or see her, but - in the way of friendships that you assume will go on for ever - had neglected to do so.

Last week I meant to phone her to tell her that Tower Records in Kensington had put her album on their "recommended" shelf. I even missed her birthday dinner (I had a family crisis). I've still got the books Caz and I had bought as her birthday present - Willa Cather's *Death Comes For The Archbishop* and Ted Hughes's book of poems, *Birthday Letters*. I don't know what to do with them.

This year, as always, Kirsty's Christmas card was one of the first to arrive, written in her swirly handwriting and signed by her, her sons and James. "Have fun girls," she's written. I think it will be a while before I can.

# fROOTS Magazine

## **Billy Bragg pays tribute to his departed friend.**

When the 1995 collection of her best songs was being prepared, Kirsty MacColl contacted various friends within her musical community and asked them to write tributes to her for the sleeve notes. In a way this was more fitting than using press cuttings because she never got the credit she deserved for her talents. A notoriously shy live artist, it was those of us who had seen her perform, albeit in the studio, who were in awe of her abilities as a singer and songwriter. Words of praise duly poured in from the likes of Bono, Morrissey and Shane MacGowan. She thanked us all in the CD booklet for making it possible for her to “revel in the glory” of reading her obituaries “without the inconvenience of actually dying”. In a dark twist reminiscent of one of her own songs, when her real obituaries appeared in the week before Christmas, it was from these sleeve notes that almost all of the quotes were taken.

Kirsty’s musical career began on the same day as mine in June 1978, when Chiswick Records simultaneously released 3 EPs as part of their Suburban Rock’n’Roll series, amongst them my punk band Rift Raft and Croydon’s answer to the Velvet Underground, Drug Addix, featuring Kirsty, disguised as ‘Mandy Doubt’ on backing vocals. Me and my mates returned to obscurity but Kirsty was spotted by Stiff Records who signed her as a solo artist. I bought her first single, They Don’t Know, and admired her ability to sound like The Shangri-Las. As a singer, she was a one woman all-girl vocal group and in a previous era would have made a tidy living writing songs for Phil Spector’s stable of artists.

When I first met her in late 1983, Tracey Ullman was riding high in the charts with her version of They Don’t Know. Those penny pinchers at Stiff had Tracey sing over Kirsty’s original backing track and when Ms. Ullman couldn’t quite reach the high notes, they kept Kirsty’s vocal. It is unmistakably she who sings the high “bay-bee” that begins the third verse.

Kirsty had come to see me because she wanted to record a version of my song A New England which duly appeared in 1984 and marked the arrival of a new pop sensibility in her work. She had recently married whizz kid producer Steve Lillywhite and together they fashioned a huge chart hit out of my spartan original. Kirsty lifted me out of the indie ghetto and into the Top Ten. My debut album Life’s A Riot went gold as a result.

The collaboration also had the effect of gaining me entrance to her community of friends who gathered at her large suburban house to drink, eat and listen to great music. She knew so many people, not just in the music industry. There was always someone there who seemed totally out of place but who was dear friend of the hostess. Once, someone came dashing up to tell me he had just met Bob Hoskins. “Look, look! Here he comes now,” trilled the star struck guest and we all turned around to see that “Bob Hoskins” was in fact Lionel Bart.

One time I arrived just too late to hear her and Brian Kennedy sing folk songs to Joan Littlewood, her father’s first wife. This surprised me because she could be very dismissive of folk music. Being Ewan MacColl’s daughter had not been easy. He was not around much during her formative years and her relationship with his third wife, Peggy Seeger was somewhat frosty. As for her father’s legacy, I don’t recall her ever recording one of his songs.



Only once was I able to coax her into performing one — she made the exception for a good cause. In the mid-nineties we did a benefit for the miners at Tower Colliery in South Wales. She joined me in the encore to sing a moving version of her father's mining song Schoolday's End. Later on the long journey back down the M4 in thick fog, she regaled us with a boozy selection of music hall songs her father had taught her — amongst them her famous rendition of Lydia, The Tattooed Lady.

But that night was an exception. Once, when we sat and pondered whether our recording careers might go in a music business that she once described as “getting less about music every day”, I suggested we make an album of folk songs together. My idea was shot down in flames when, echoing comments her father might have made about pop, she said “I fucking hate folk music.”

She had a better idea anyway. On her 1991 album *Electric Landlady* she had recorded a track in a New York club with a bunch of Cuban musicians. *My Affair* was the first hint of her growing obsession with music from Latin America. A year later she travelled to Cuba for the first time and fell in love with the place and its people. Always willing to back up her politically charged lyrics with action, she became a stalwart supporter of the Cuba Solidarity

Campaign and made numerous trips to the island throughout the nineties. Following her divorce from Steve Lillywhite, Kirsty devoted much of her time to bringing up their two sons Jamie and Louis. During these years, Cuba revitalised her. She learnt Spanish and, travelling to Brazil, became fluent in Portuguese.

Last year, all her influences came together on an album of which she was justly proud. Released to rave reviews, *Tropical Brainstorm* was the record on which Kirsty finally seemed to have found a way to mix her Latin influences with her natural wit which, as she got older was becoming nicely sardonic. She even toured with her band of mostly British musicians, including her partner James on saxophone. In him she had found the love of her life and her love for life again.

And perhaps she was beginning to reconcile herself to her own roots. On 7th of January this year, she was due to unveil a plaque commemorating her father at the Working Class Movement Library in Salford. A mutual friend told me that she intended to take the boys along to introduce them to their grandfather's memory.

Ironically, it may be for her performance on what is probably be the most popular folk song of the past thirty years that Kirsty will be remembered. But that's okay because, although it wasn't her record, she brought something of herself to the Pogues' *Fairytale Of New York*. When Shane MacGowan cries into his beer “I could have been someone!”, Kirsty's quick as a flash response — “Well, so could anyone” — was very much in keeping with her attitude to life. All of us who sat whingeing in her kitchen about fickle husbands, lovers, record companies, reviews etc got the same short shrift. She would laugh, get you another beer and play some fabulous Celina Gonzalez track, inviting you to dance your cares away.

# Obituaries: The Observer

## Kirsty MacColl wrote 'jolly little numbers with snarling attitudes'. We'll all be poorer without them



Her last record was her best. That would have been important to Kirsty MacColl. 'Whenever I go into a studio, I always operate on the principle that I might get hit by a bus tomorrow,' she said earlier this year. 'I'd hate the obituaries to read, "And her last album was her not-very-good album".' No chance of that; *Tropical Brainstorm*, her Latin-drenched finale, was superb. And it wasn't a London bus which cut off Kirsty MacColl's life and career in mid-sentence but a Mexican powerboat, striking her as she swam in a reserved area off the coral island of Cozumel, close to the Yucatan peninsula. She had taken her two teenage sons on holiday there after one of them had lost a close friend; to ease his loss. Instead, she added her own.

The senseless accident that took her life was one reason why the death of Kirsty MacColl is so shocking. Early deaths in pop music usually come surrounded by caveats; drugs, drink, car accidents and plane crashes are almost occupational hazards for lives lived on the road and often at the edge. This was a 41-year-old mother who long ago put her career second to raising her kids, and who sought a life unwarped by a business she often spoke of contemptuously and which, she declared, 'gets slightly less to do with music every year'.

That MacColl should vanish just as Christmas was unfurling added a further poignant note. Rare is the seasonal compilation that doesn't include *Fairytale* of New York, her 1987 hit with The Pogues, on which she and Shane MacGowan play a quarrelling pair of Irish immigrants in the Big Apple, MacGowan soused on nostalgia and false hope, MacColl tanning him with gritty realism. It's a perfect seasonal item, packed with regret, drink and optimism, and now tinged with tragedy.

If *Fairytale* confirmed MacColl's place in the public's heart, she had plenty of other claims on our affections. She may not have had many hits, but her songs, and her inspired cover versions, sank into the national psyche in a way that the chart-busters of more successful acts did not. It was a MacColl song - *They Don't Know*, written when she was 17 - that gave Tracey Ullman a number one on her way to thespian stardom. MacColl's 1987 cover of Billy Bragg's *New England* helped bestow anthemic status on the song, and her 1989 version of *Days* reminded a new generation of the national treasure that is Ray Davies.

Davies was one of her influences and idols, along with Morrissey; writers of catchy, literate songs in the English kitchen-sink tradition. Her own brand of acerbic wit and social commentary was apparent from the start, when she dropped out of school in Croydon to sign up with Stiff Records, one of the bastions of the punk uprising. She had first picked up a guitar at 13 after hearing Neil Young's *Harvest* album. As a redheaded 17-year-old with an attitude to match her flame-coloured hair, she fitted into the feisty atmosphere of the times,

though she had to wait until 1981 for a bona fide hit, with *There's A Guy Works Down The Chip Shop Swears He's Elvis*.

Surprisingly, given her self-confidence and forthrightness, Kirsty was dogged by stage fright, which she ascribed to 'a bad experience on my first tour. I just thought, why subject yourself to such humiliation?' She tried hypnotism, among other things, though the remedy proved to be a bout of touring with the Pogues.

Her 1989 album, *Kite*, confirmed her as a songwriter of real class, albeit one who didn't fit into the stereotypes of rock chick or what Kirsty witheringly termed 'the Laura Ashley school of singer-songwriters'. *Electric Landlady*, two years later, followed *Kite*'s pattern of critical adulation and disappointing sales. She accurately summed up her songs as 'happy and melodic but with bitter, twisted lyrics - jolly little numbers with snarling attitudes'.

Despite the protracted absences, she stayed active. She lent back-up harmonies to The Smiths, Happy Mondays and Simple Minds among others. A natural singer, she had the gift of perfect pitch, and though she declared 'there are worse things in life than being out of tune', she never was. She sang a beautiful version of *Miss Otis Regrets* for Aids charity *Red Hot & Blue* album, and with Evan Dando a winning cover of Lou Reed's *Perfect Day*.

Back at the start of the 1990s, she also had her own regular spot on an early French and Saunders series. 'I look incredibly pissed off and unhappy on those programmes,' she said later. 'In fact, I was just terrified.' If she had cared to compete a little harder, been able to play the celebrity TV slots with the necessary fake gusto, Kirsty MacColl might have become more of a household name. She, however, clung to her belief that what ultimately mattered was her work. 'I've never been fashionable, which is a definite advantage when it comes to longevity. I've always just concentrated on the quality of the songs,' she told this writer back in 1994, in an interview to promote her *Titanic Days* album.

It was an instructive encounter, conducted at the offices of her latest record company; since she invariably undersold their expectations, she was always hopping labels. MacColl was just what I expected: bright, funny and caustic, with a laugh like a tray of breaking crockery. When I proved less knowledgeable about her new album than she liked, she was quick to put a bluebottle in my ear about it. She was also very charming. We ended up discussing garden water features, on which subject she proved formidably informed, talking about the virtues of reed beds with an enthusiasm most stars reserve for their record collection.

Kirsty also put me straight about my assumption that her musical gifts were some kind of ancestral heritage passed on from her father, Ewan MacColl, the pre-eminent British folk singer of the 1950s and composer of *Dirty Old Town* and *The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face* - songs that have become minor institutions in themselves. Not a bit of it, said Kirsty. Everything she knew about folk music she had learnt from The Pogues. Her father had been an almost remote figure whom she saw only at weekends. He had left her mother, the choreographer Jean Newlove, shortly after Kirsty was born, and taken up with his fellow folk singer Peggy Seeger. In any case, Ewan, a politically active Scottish Communist, regarded the pop music Kirsty loved (the Beach Boys, for example) with the contempt of the folk puritan. (It was he, for example, who led the attack on Bob Dylan for his lack of folk purity.)

Kirsty's attitude to her famous father was ambiguous. At times she seemed almost dismissive of him, at others proud, citing his songwriting as an inspiration. 'I didn't realise it for years, but I was brought up to agitate,' she said recently.

One of the songs on *Titanic Days*, *Bad*, alluded to her familial baggage. 'I've been the token woman all my life/ The token daughter and the token wife,' it started, referring not just to her father but to her husband, the record producer Steve Lillywhite, with whom she had just broken up. 'The implication is sometimes that I only went into music because certain men guided me that way,' she complained, 'whereas I'd been making records for five years before I even met Steve.' Kirsty was fiercely righteous about the deal the music business hands to women, especially the idea that having a couple of children meant she had given up the creative ghost: 'I'm constantly asked, "How do you combine a career and a family?" They never ask my husband or Sting that question. It's plain old sexism, really.'

The demands of motherhood must, nonetheless, have played their part in the six-year break between *Titanic Days* - which she referred to as her 'sad divorce album' - and this year's magnificent *Tropical Brainstorm*. For two years she didn't write any songs at all. 'I used to worry about writer's block, but I think this time it was God's way of saying: "You've got nothing to write about, so shut up." In any case, I didn't want to make another melancholy record. That would have been grim. Instead I started to do some of the things I'd wanted to do since forever.'

One of those things was travelling to Cuba, which she did first in 1992, and thereafter on a regular basis. MacColl, who had a Latin track on *Electric Landlady* and had sung on David Byrne's *Rei Momo* album, had liked Latin music for a long time. Her fascination stretched back to her childhood, when her father gave her an album of Mexican mariachi music.

The young Kirsty was fascinated by the gaudy cover, the band's exotic clothes and instruments, the carnival atmosphere of the music. 'I think that's where I got it into my head that anybody who spoke Spanish was having a better time than me.'

Once she'd visited Cuba, the Latin bug bit hard. When her *Best Of* compilation appeared in 1995, there was Kirsty on the cover dressed in Castro cap, lighting a fat cigar with a US dollar bill. She became a regular at Cuban Solidarity Campaign shows, and took Spanish classes. Here she met a Brazilian who became her lodger at her Ealing home, paying his rent with Portuguese lessons. Her love of Cuban music extended to Brazil, which she also visited.

Her travels, many of them alone, fed into *Tropical Brainstorm*, a record which fused her songwriting with her passion for Latin music. In a more just world, she would have been back in the UK charts this summer with one of the record's highlights, *In These Shoes*, a salsa tale of lust and non-sensible footwear that was picked by Adidas for an ad campaign. The single became a hit in Europe, but not at home. Kirsty, who complained that 'Radio 1 won't play my singles now I'm over 30', had made a documentary series on Cuban music for Radio 2, which was due to kick off last week, but which has now been deferred.

'I didn't want to recreate an authentic sound,' she said of *Tropical Brainstorm*, 'first of all cos I'm not Celia Cruz, and a lot of people like my music mostly because of the lyrics. I didn't want to try and fail at being the Buena Vista Social Club. I wanted to succeed at being Kirsty MacColl.'

Kirsty MacColl, singer and songwriter, born 10 October 1959, died 18 December 2000.

Neil Spencer  
Sunday December 24, 2000

# Obituaries: Evening Standard

## The genuine tragedy of Kirsty MacColl

In my favourite song of hers, *On The Beach*, Kirsty MacColl sang wistfully of a friend she'd run into from time to time, and with whom she used to share a taste for wine, who had escaped the drizzly melancholy of Britain by emigrating to Sydney. "And he says it's brilliant there! there's something in the air," runs the chorus, "And sunshine everywhere! he's on the beach."

In the time-honoured studiously callous way of journalists, you would have expected to hear someone say, within 30 seconds of the news of her death becoming public, that she'd have been all right if only she'd stayed on the beach. In fact, I haven't heard one facetious remark about Kirsty MacColl. Quite the reverse, I cannot remember a celebrity death that provoked such genuine if understated sadness, partly perhaps because, for all her talent and success, she didn't have any aura of celebrity, as the subject matter of her recordings (from drunken bums serenading each other in New York at Christmas to chip-shop fantasists) tended to imply.

Nothing so little became her, indeed, as the manner of her death. From the plane crash that accounted for Buddy Holly along with the Big Bopper and Ritchie Valens to the death by ligature of Michael Hutchence, via innumerable overdoses, fires and shootings, stars of rock and pop have found such spectacular and glamorous modes of dying that even Marc Bolan's car crash seemed a bit of a swiz, what with the vehicle being a Mini and not an E-type Jag. But there was so little that was melodramatic or glam about this daughter of a Scottish folk singer that the idea that she was doing the scuba-diving off the Mexican coast while Madonna was on her way up to the Highlands has the appearance of some farcical travel agency cock-up.

What was so engaging about Kirsty MacColl was a genuine lack of self-regard that extended to the stage fright that limited what might have been an even more glorious career. Still, it was quite glorious enough, and the loss of both her and Ian Dury - two Left-wing ironists (and you can imagine what a crowded field that is in pop) who inspired more affection than any other British performers you can think of - in the same year seems as tragically wasteful as the incongruous manner of her death.

Matthew Norman



Tributes were pouring in last night for singer-songwriter Kirsty MacColl after she was killed in a boating accident in Mexico. U2 frontman Bono led the tributes to MacColl, who died in front of her children after being struck by a speedboat on Monday during a holiday on the Yucatan peninsula. The 41 year-old star was swimming with her two sons at Cozumel on the Caribbean coast when she was hit by a boat that appeared to have intruded into any area reserved for swimmers.

Her manager, Kevin Nixon, who work with her for four years, said: "we are absolutely distraught. I was personally immensely proud to be her manager after being a fan for so many years."

Bono, who once described her as "The Noelle Coward of her generation", said: "I remember Kirsty as just a really brainy, funny girl whose songwriting came from all different traditions. I just remember her humour really. She was really funny. Her death just makes you feel very sick thinking about her kids and that is really all I can say."

Johnnie Walker, a Radio 2 DJ and friend, said: "she was one of the true, real characters of popular music and although there has been pressure on women in music to conform in the music business, she was always herself and said "I Am What I Am". We'll miss her sense of humour and a beautifully crafted songs."

Jools Holland, the television presenter who recently hosted a performance by MacColl on his Later series on BBC2 said: "I'm shocked by the sad news of her death. My thoughts go out to her family."

MacColl was a wordsmith whose wit pervaded the many musical styles she toyed with, but many of her biggest hits were written by other people. They included her covers of A New England by Billy Bragg and Days by Ray Davies of the Kinks. Her biggest hit was the Pope's track Fairy-tale of New York, a boozy love song of which she duetting with Shane MacGowan. It is regarded as one of the greatest Christmas songs ever recorded.

Her first solo single, They don't know, was not a hit for her when released in 1979 when she was just 19, but made the charts when covered by Tracey Ullman some years later. The singer - daughter of folk singer Ewan McColl - had her first chart success, There's a guy walks down the chip shop swears he's Elvis, in 1981.

Over the years she worked with numerous contemporary acts, including the Wonder Stuff on their hit Welcome to the cheap seats, and the Happy Mondays on Hallelujah. However, in recent years have work had tended towards world music with a strong Latin flavour. She worked on an eight-part series for Radio 2, Kirsty MacColl's Cuba, which she recorded in Havana. She interviewed musicians from the Buena vista social club and Ry Cooder for the shows.

A Radio 2 spokeswoman said: "We have decided to delay the broadcast of Kirsty MacColl's Cuba as a mark of respect until we have had the opportunity to consult the family as to their wishes. We are devastated at her loss, which is a tragedy for her family and has robbed the world of a major musical talent. She will be much missed."



Commenting on her extensive travels in Cuba and Brazil, drawing inspiration from the local music, MacColl said recently: "it was like a sudden liberation of my brain. I'd spent so long been unhappy in a very British way, and suddenly there was all this new stuff."

She added: "whenever I going to the studio I always operate on the principle that I might have hit by a bus to moral and I would hear the obituaries to have read it 'her last album was her not very good album'."

In 1995 she released her greatest hits album, on which she poked fun at death by asking her appears to write the sleeve notes in the form of a eulogy.

Keith Sinclair

## **Kirsty MacColl had left-wing agenda and clever line in changing the politics of chart music**

It is now almost exactly 13 years since Kirsty McColl attained the highest chart placing of her 25 year long career with Fairy-tale of New York, a single which, in sad retrospect, seems to summarise her whole approach to music-making. Because her duet with Anglo Celt soulmates the Pogues on Fairytale of New York was rare among Christmas singles in having a left-wing political agenda and a vigorous urge to subvert conventional notions of pop music. Its message, however, was delivered with surprising subtlety.



Fairytale of New York was a rootsy piece of plainsong which are articulated an atmospheric protest on behalf of the millions of disenfranchised Irish emigrants who pitched up in America last century. Despite not actually having been written by MacColl, it boasts lines that nevertheless evoke her own perennially playful way with a memorably inventive song lyric.

For whereas your run-of-the-mill yuletide hit generally reaches number 2 in the British singles chart thanks to anodyne references to Little drummer Boys, rockin' snowmen, and/or mistletoe and Wine, Fairytale of New York tunefully cocked a snook at festive cosiness and complacency with pithy sentences including "Merry Christmas, my arse."

At their best, MacColl's own lyrics were similarly witty, fresh, direct, and colloquial. In addition, you rightly find yourself humming along to the melody propelling MacColl's words- and only later would you clock that their meaning was often in earnest and melancholy counterpart to the upbeat nature of the tune. This can be seen in these couplets from Bad: "I've been the token woman all my life/the token daughter and a token wife/Now I've collected tokens one by one/Till I've saved enough to buy a gun."

Her self-determined slant on the world was something she owed to her left wing upbringing. Her father, Ewan McColl, with a noted left-wing playwright, folk singer, and song writer throughout five decades. Her Scottish roots derived from her father's Scottish parents, grandparents Jimmy Miller [William - FW] and Betsy Hendry. The former had been a militant trade unionist who had left his native Stirlingshire for the iron foundries of Salford, near Manchester.

Formed in suburban London, MacColl's own first instantly catchy hit came in 1981. Typically, it sported an unlikely but unforgettable refrain for its title, There's a guy walks down the chip shop swears he's Elvis. However, it was the next line that was the killer: "but he's a liar and an not sure about you." it was soon followed by the equally memorable Don't come the cowboy it with me, sonny Jim.

Kirsty carefully fitted chart hits around her marriage to producer Steve Lillywhite and the couple's two children. This year she made a long overdue return to solo recording with the Latin-derived album Tropical Brainstorm, which formed the basis for her final concert performance in Glasgow in spring, a show in Scottish Television's Cowcaddens studio which was recorded for the Boxed Set series.

There will be widespread agreement with words voiced yesterday by Boxed Set's producer, Ken Neil: "Kirsty MacColl's death now is especially sad in the light of the musical rejuvenation she'd so evidently found in Cuba and Brazil. She came to us in a spirit of great enthusiasm and vitality, with a whole new avenue to explore. Her latest adventure had barely begun."

David Belcher

# The Herald



A sadder Christmas without the singer who was always a quality act. With a dreadful coincidence I was talking to a restaurateur friend of mine yesterday lunchtime who wanted to borrow a CD of mind of Christmas songs and I told him of a recent production that had everything needed for Christmas songs from White Christmas to-and the best ever- Fairy-tale of New York by the Pogues and Kirsty MacColl. Then I went on to wax poetic about Kirsty MacColl. Two hours later the BBC telephoned me to tell me that Kirsty had died in an accident in the Gulf of Mexico.

The first time I met Kirsty she was about five and the most angelic little blond-haired child you ever saw. It was in the mid-Sixties I think, and she was there with her father, Ewan McColl, who didn't like me or my friends much because we had gone electric at Kiel folk Festival. Ewan was a Beeb producer and very much a purist: his daughter was to draw up

an eclectic girl who grew from pop and folk and anything else she met musically.

I met her much later at music festivals and in pubs in Scotland and Ireland. By then she'd written and had a hit with one of the wittiest pop songs ever written, There's a guy walks down the chip shop swears he's Elvis. It was much featured on television.

She emerged at much the same time as anodyne Sheena Easton but, because she was much prettier than the Bellshill girl, she was always a little plump and frankly didn't care about the showbiz side of pop. She was always a quality act. I recollect when she did the cover of the Kinks Days. It is the first and only time I have heard a cover better than the original. Kirsty was a splendid vocalist, a quality she may have got from her dad, also a well voiced singer, though it has to be said that it never got the impression that Kirsty got on terribly well with her parent.

The last time I met Kirsty was in Glasgow, in the Clutha Vaults Bar after a concert. She was enthusiastic, as well she might be, about her new album, which appeared last March. But the leiges got her to sing that Christmas Song, the one she had recorded along with co-writer Shane McGowan of the Pogues. Christy Moore covered it on his last album.

Kirsty was a strawberry blonde girl, bright and cheerful. Clever. And with a voice that sounded all of that. I'll bet her yuletide song is going to be played a lot over what is now sadder Christmas.

Jack McLean

# Obituaries: Q

**incoming...**

**Kirsty MacColl**  
1959-2000

**MacColl was one of Britain's cleverest songwriters.**

**Obituaries**

**Nick Massi**  
1938-2000

**James Carr**  
1933-2000

**Rob Buck**  
1938-2000

**Bryan Gregory**  
1938-2000

**Pops Staples**  
1924-2000

**Luis Floriana Bonfa**  
1928-2000

**Eddy Shaver**  
1938-2000

Even in a career filled with ironies and twists of fate, it seems singularly perverse that Kirsty MacColl, one of Britain's cleverest songwriters, should find chart success only through the works of others - Billy Bragg (who reworked her A New England in 1985) [it was Bragg's song! - FW], The Pogues (Fairytale Of New York, a Christmas Number 2 in 1987) and, in 1989, her own cover of The Kinks' Days.

Kirsty MacColl was born 10 October 1959, the daughter of communist folkie Ewan MacColl (author of First Time Ever I Saw Your Face). Signed to Stiff at just 16, she was unlucky not to have a hit with her first single, the girl group tinged They Don't Know About Us (later a Number 2 for Tracey Ullman in 1983). Unfortunately for anyone hoping to mould this bright, funny girl into a marketable pop product or a demure female singer-songwriter, MacColl was her father's daughter: too

sharp and too full of life. The possessor of a famously acid tongue, her songs were peppered both with scathing references to the injustices of society (New World (sic), Walking Down Madison) and to anyone who didn't care, particularly those of the male sex.

She finally secured her first hit in 1981 with the sardonic There's A Guy Works Down The Chip Shop Swears He's Elvis. But it was to be MacColl's sole self-penned Top 20 hit in what ultimately proved a stop-start career. She suffered badly from stage fright and deemed being a mother to her two boys by producer Steve Lillywhite more important than personal fame. She was also a sought after backing singer, working with Simple Minds, U2, The Rolling Stones, Talking Heads, The Smiths and Van Morrison.

MacColl picked up her solo career at the end of the '80s, finding album success with 1989's Kite and 1991's acclaimed Electric Landlady (which featured Children Of The Revolution, a collaboration with ex-Smith Johnny Marr), but took another break after 1993's Titanic Days.

Her death in Mexico last December -she was hit by a speedboat which had strayed into an area for swimmers - was all the more tragic since it followed a brand new album in which all her gifts flowered dramatically. Poignant and sophisticated, Tropical Brainstorm marked the culmination of MacColl's long-held interest in Latin American music (a six-part TV series she made on this topic was due to be screened the week of her death but has been put on

hold). Since her passing a memorial fund has been set up to provide musical equipment for children in Cuba, a country she visited many times in the last decade.

Kirsty MacColl's funeral was held in private. A public memorial service took place at St Martin's-In-The-Field, London, on 20 January.

Ian Cranna

# The Croydon Advertiser

## Singer Kirsty killed while swimming in Mexico

By James Wickham (Chief Reporter, Croydon South)



Croydon-born singer and songwriter Kirsty MacColl has died in a freak boating accident while on holiday. Miss MacColl, whose hits include the Christmas classic Fairytale of New York, is believed to have died after being struck by a speedboat while diving off the coast of Mexico with her two teenaged sons on Monday.

Following visits to Cuba in the 1990s her song writing became increasingly influenced by Latin American music and her last album Tropical Brainstorm was received warmly by critics. Her death comes at a time when according to people close to her, she was enjoying her life and work more than ever before. The 41-year-old singer, who grew up in Selsdon, had just recorded a documentary series about Cuban music, which was due to start on Radio 2 on Wednesday. BBC bosses have postponed the show as a mark of respect.

Miss MacColl's death has stunned the pop world with tributes being paid by some of the biggest names in the business. She was not only highly respected for her voice and song writing talent but also regarded as one of the most likeable people in the industry. A greatest hits compilation released in 1995 featured glowing tributes from her contemporaries. Despite her success, Miss MacColl was remembered by friends and colleagues as someone who never adopted a rock and roll lifestyle or conformed to stereotypes. Wimbledon-based songwriter Tom Robinson said: "Kirsty was a human being first and a pop star second. She had enough talent to have hit after hit, but she chose to put her family first. She deserves respect for that."

The death of Kirsty MacColl on Monday brought tributes from some of the biggest names in music. But people who remember her as a bubbly Selsdon schoolgirl have also been reminiscing.

The daughter of the late folk singer/songwriter Ewan MacColl was born in Mayday Hospital, Thornton Heath, on October 10, 1959. Miss MacColl's parents separated when she was very young and she grew up with her mother, the choreographer Jean Newlove, in Beech Way, Selsdon. She went to Monks Hill comprehensive, now Selsdon High School, and spent a brief period at art college. Her first taste of the pop world came when, as Mandy Doubt, she sang with punk inspired Drug Addix. The band was invited to record for the fashionable Stiff label, but it was the teenaged Miss MacColl who was asked back and offered a contract. She married pop producer Steve Lillywhite in Warlingham in 1984 and had two children Jamie and Louis, before the couple separated in 1994.

Chris Couchman, a former tutor at her school, Monks Hill in Selsdon, taught Miss MacColl how to play the guitar and was recently cited by the singer as one of her early influences. Now deputy head at Edenham High in Shirley, Mr. Couchman recalled: "She was a lovely person and it was clear that she would be successful. She was involved in all kinds of

drama and had an incredible sparkle. I took it as a great compliment that she remembered me. I was really delighted with her success and I am clearly very, very sad at the news."

Eleanor Redshaw, Miss MacColl's former head-of-year at Monks Hill, said: "I was completely gobsmacked when I heard the news. It was such a shock. We had hoped to see her career go onwards and upwards." Mrs. Redshaw, who lives in South Croydon and now teaches in Banstead, added: "She was a lovely, vivacious girl and we were all very fond of her."

Brenda Kidd, from Coulsdon, also taught Miss MacColl at Monks Hill. She said: "She was bubbly and quite cheeky. I remember her sneaking off PE one afternoon to go and see the rock band Emerson, Lake, and Palmer. "I said to her 'how will that help with your future career?' I had to eat my words later."

Mrs. Kidd who still teaches at the school - now called Selsdon High, added: "I was in tears when I heard about her death on the radio. It was hard to believe. I heard her interviewed on the radio only a few weeks ago and she seemed so happy, full of cheek and mischief."



# Obituaries : Mail On Sunday

## Why we'll miss the wit and wisdom of Kirsty

Singer Kirsty MacColl, who died in a diving accident this week, reviewed music and books for The Mail on Sunday. Here, Tim de Lisle pays tribute to a unique talent...

The cover of Kirsty MacColl's last album, released in May, shows a tropical sea -sunny, calm and inviting. On Monday, while swimming in a tropical sea off the coast of Mexico, Kirsty was hit by a speedboat and killed. She was 41 and in her prime.

There is a terrible poetic injustice about her death. She had survived a lot - punk rock, child stardom, heavy drinking, marriage, divorce, single motherhood, stage fright, writer's block and being repeatedly dumped by the music business, of which she memorably remarked. 'It gets slightly less to do with music every year.'

In a vicious twist of fate, she died while on a Christmas holiday with her two teenage sons in a part of the world that she had explored like a teenager herself. That last album, *Tropical Brainstorm*, was the result of years of immersion in Latin America. MacColl took the trouble to learn Spanish and Portuguese, and she had just been back to Cuba to make a series about its musicians for Radio 2, which has now been held over as a mark of respect. Yet Latin rhythms were only one facet of her music. Her relatively slender body of work embraced many different styles, from pure pop to moody blues, but you always knew when a song was by her, because it was lucid and funny without being a novelty record. Nobody else would have written a song called *There's A Guy Works Down The Chip Shop Swears He's Elvis*, or rounded it off with the line, 'But he's a liar and I'm not sure about you.' No one else would have tackled the subject of stalking by telling a story set to music in which the victim was a fan of hers, and the stalker was MacColl herself.

As a singer, she was accomplished enough to work as a backing vocalist for everyone from Talking Heads to Robert Plant, and to be asked to duet on one of the best Christmas singles ever, the Pogues' *Fairytale Of New York*. But it was as a songwriter that she really stood out - and as a personality.

She was the opposite of a prima donna, as The Mail on Sunday discovered when we asked her to be a guest critic on this page. Her journalism displayed the same gift as her lyrics - uncommon sense backed with dark humour. She wrote of *The Best Of Black Sabbath*: 'You can't really use this record to frighten small children any more as they can retaliate with much scarier music by Westlife and Steps.'

Being funny is not too hard if that's all you are trying to do. Being funny while being wise and touching is a trick very few songwriters even attempt. In the whole of rock music, just three people have done it consistently: Randy Newman, Leonard Cohen in later life, and Kirsty MacColl, the only Briton in the club and the only woman. That's how good she was.

Tim de Lisle



# Obituaries: The Guardian

## Gifted but restless singer ill at ease with an industry she despised



Last March, Kirsty MacColl released *Tropical Brainstorm*, a witty, wise and acerbic work widely hailed as the best album of her career. At the time, she said that "whenever I go into a studio, I operate on the principle that I might get hit by a bus tomorrow. And I'd hate the obituaries to have to read: 'And her last album was her not-very-good album.'" She avoided that fate, but her death, at the age of 41, must prompt speculation about the albums she might have made. *Tropical Brainstorm* bore all the hallmarks of her recent infatuation with South America - even though it was recorded in drizzly old Britain with non-Latin musicians - but throughout her career she proved herself adept at writing or performing in diverse idioms.

MacColl's first Top 20 hit from 1981, *There's A Guy Works Down The Chip Shop Swears He's Elvis*, was a novelty effort, which suggested she might be a kind of female Chas & Dave. But her collaboration with the Pogues, on the whisky-sodden 1987 Christmas hit, *Fairytale Of New York*, revealed new musical and dramatic gifts, while later releases found her tripping nonchalantly through country & western, rock and electronic dance music.

Even though she never entirely overcame the stage fright which probably kept her from achieving the success that should have been her due, MacColl was steeped in music and the performing arts. Her father was the folk musician Ewan MacColl, and her mother was the dancer and choreographer Jean Newlove, although, by the time Kirsty was born, her father had married Peggy Seeger. She grew up in Croydon, south London, with her mother, her older brother Hamish and three younger half-siblings. Ewan used to visit them on Sundays.

Her first adventures in the music business found her tiptoeing round the edges of punk rock. In 1978, she sang with a band called the Drug Addix; she dubbed herself Mandy Doubt. The group made an EP called *The Drug Addix Make A Record*, which came to the attention of Stiff Records. However, Stiff were only interested in Kirsty, and invited her to record a debut solo single, *They Don't Know*; it was released in June 1979, after she had dropped out of art college. The disc flopped, but the song became a substantial hit for Tracey Ullman four years later.

Despite the success of *A Guy Works*, MacColl still could not establish herself, not least because of her fear of live performance. On a tour of Ireland, she once rushed through her material at such a pace that she ran out of songs and had to sing them all again. Nonetheless, she was back at Stiff Records in 1985, and returned to the UK charts with a version of Billy Bragg's song, *A New England*. "She has possession of one of the most distinctive voices in pop," he said.

By now MacColl was married to the record producer Steve Lillywhite, who was quick to make full use of her talents, which included perfect pitch and a knack for recording harmony

vocals on the first take. She appeared regularly as a backing singer on production efforts by Lillywhite and others, and featured on discs by Simple Minds, Happy Mondays, The Smiths, Talking Heads and Robert Plant.

It was her solo album, *Kite* (1989), that finally saw MacColl realising some of her potential. The songs were, by turns, funny, tender and furiously political, one of her recurring themes being the treatment of women in the music business. "The music industry packages women," she said. "You're either a dolly-bird bimbo or a soapbox sociologist."

Subsequent releases included *Electric Landlady*, *Titanic Days* and the compilation *Galore*, but despite the manifest quality of her songwriting - and showers of critical plaudits - sales were disappointing, and MacColl grew accustomed to the chore of shopping for new record labels. She remained visible via regular television appearances with French and Saunders, while her music has been used in several movies and in the TV comedy, *Moving Story*.

She was never able to reconcile herself fully to working in a music industry she often despised - "It gets slightly less to do with music every year," she complained. This, perhaps, contributed to the breakup of her marriage in the mid-90s. "She's brilliant," Lillywhite once said, "and sometimes she's not very happy."



MacColl's discovery of the delights of South America and the Caribbean had even prompted her to consider giving up music for travelling. "It was like a sudden liberation of my brain," she recalled. "I had spent so long being unhappy in a very British way, and suddenly there was all this new stuff."

She leaves two sons, Jamie and Louis.

Kirsty MacColl, singer, born October 10 1959; died December 18 2000

# Obituaries: The Independent

**The singer-songwriter Kirsty MacColl had impeccable credentials, a healthy disrespect for music biz conventions and a wonderful voice.**



As the daughter of the legendary Irish folk singer Ewan MacColl, it was only to be expected that she would develop a style based on passion and conviction. Certainly it was her vocal character that endeared her to a wider public with such performances as the raucous Fairy-tale of New York, her biggest hit, sung with Shane MacGowan and the Pogues in December 1987.



But it was her skills as an imaginative and evocative song writer that won her most respect and admiration. Sometimes her propensity for covering other artists' songs suggested she lacked confidence in her own material. MacColl was capable of shifting moods and directions as she absorbed new musical influences.

Kirsty MacColl was born in Croydon, Surrey, in 1959. Her mother was a choreographer and her half-brothers were Neil (of the Bible) and Callum (of MacColl and Seeger).

Early on her musical career she sang in the punk band at the Drug Addix under the name of Mandy Doubt. She was signed with Stiff records in 1979 at the age of 19 and released her debut single, They don't know, which just missed being a hit. Several years later, the actress and comedienne Tracey Ullman took a cover version of the song to number two in the UK charts.

MacColl's first chart hit was the witty There's a guy walks down a the chip shop swears he's Elvis, which peaked at number 14 in July 1981. The following year, she successfully covered Billy Bragg's "A New England", a Top 10 hit in February 1985.

As her songwriting career developed, Kirsty MacColl was greatly admired by the pop literati, including David Byrne from Talking Heads, who enthused over her voice and once said, "She has the wit of Ray Davies and harmonic invention of the Beach Boys." Morrissey also lauded her songs, while Bono called her "the Noelle Coward of her generation". Although consistent chart success seemed to elude her, MacColl commented: "I've never been fashionable, but I've never been unfashionable either. My work is quite well known," she admitted, "but people don't necessarily know it's me. And I haven't been particularly prolific."

She delighted in paying tribute to the works of others, recording versions of the Kinks Days and Lou Reed's Perfect Day (with the Lemon heads Evan Dando). She also provided backing vocals for Talking Heads on their LP Naked, for the Smiths on Ask and Morrissey's Interesting drug. She wrote songs with Johnny Marr, notably Can't stop killing you and Walking down Madison. Some claimed that, with all these collaborations and cover versions, MacColl "sold herself short", but self-penned works such as Free world and the gloomy Titanic Days received critical approval.



In 1984 she had married the producer Steve Lillywhite, and subsequently gave birth to two children. Although she had to quit touring she still found herself in demand as a backing singer. She guested on records with Simple Minds, the Smiths, the Rolling Stones, Talking Heads, Robert Plant, Van Morrison and Morrissey.

In 1989, she has turned with a new solo album, Kite, which included Free world and her version of the Kinks Days, which brought her back to the UK top 20. The Smiths guitarist Johnny Marr guested on several of the album's tracks and appeared on the follow-up released in 1991. Electric landlady, a pun on the Jimi Hendrix Experience's Electric lady land, was another strong album that revealed MacColl's diversity. The dance influenced Walking down Madison gave her another top 40 UK hit. The retrospective album Galore celebrated for album she had released over 15 years.

Kirsty MacColl eventually split from her husband and spent seven years travelling in Cuba and Brazil, drawing inspiration from Latin music. The first of an eight-part series on Cuban music from Havana, Kirsty MacColl's Cuba, was due to be broadcast on BBC Radio 2 today, featuring key figures from Cuban music such as Ry Cooder and two musicians from the Buena vista social club.

She began to think more seriously about her future and the LP, Tropical Brainstorm (1999) reflected her new way of living. At one point she said she even considered giving up music altogether. However there was no doubt MacColl had much more to give and her musical legacy is one of refreshing inconsistency, rebellion and bursts of brilliance in an often predictable pop world.

Chris Welch



# Obituaries: The Times



## Kirsty MacColl

Kirsty MacColl was a reluctant pop star. She made only five albums in a career of more than two decades. She worked in a variety of styles and her most recent records were heavily influenced by her love of Cuban music, but in everything she did she brought a much needed dash of wit and urbanity to the art of popular song - leading U2's Bono to call her "the Noel Coward of her generation".

Though she was the daughter of the stern traditional folk-singer Ewan MacColl, she did not grow up with her father, who left her mother Jean soon after she was born. For years she denied that his strong musical personality had had any influence on her, but recently she paid him an indirect tribute: "I think I did learn something from him, which was that you can have a successful career as a songwriter regardless of pop fashion. If you've got good songs, it doesn't matter if you've got a crap haircut."

Dropping out of school, she signed to Stiff Records as a 17-year-old in 1978, when the label was in the vanguard of the punk and New Wave explosion. She nearly had a hit single the following year with the first self-written release *They Don't Know*, but somehow missed out. It was later taken into the charts by Tracey Ullman's inferior version.

She had to wait until 1981 for her first hit single with the memorably witty *There's a Guy Works Down the Chip Shop Swears He's Elvis*, a song that established her droll style. "Vitriol

and misery have always been far easier to express in song," she said some years later. "People seem to think that humour implies you're not serious about the music, but I don't buy that."

In 1984 she married the producer Steve Lilywhite, with whom she was to have two children. One of the first records he produced for her was a version of Billy Bragg's A New England, a Top 20 hit in early 1985. There was demand for her as a backing singer, too, on records by the Rolling Stones, Simple Minds, Robert Plant, the Smiths, Talking Heads, Van Morrison and Morrissey. But it was a collaboration with Shane MacGowan and his band the Pogues, that produced her biggest hit, Fairytale of New York, which reached No 2 at Christmas 1987.

She admitted to suffering from writer's block for long periods, but professed herself untroubled by them and advised others that "if you've got nothing to say, it's better just to shut up". She also suffered acutely from stage fright, and for most of the 1980s she refused to perform.

Yet her stop-start career gathered new impetus with two well-received albums in quick succession around the turn of the decade, when she also returned to the stage to sing. Her 1989 album Kite included the hit singles Free World and Days (a version of the old Kinks song). Two years later Electric Landlady found her co-writing with Johnny Marr of the Smiths and Mark E. Nevin of Fairground Attraction.

The album also included My Affair, a song recorded in New York with top Cuban session musicians. She described the experience as "the most fun I'd ever had in a recording studio", and it established her future musical direction. She made her first visit to Cuba in 1992 and began taking lessons in Spanish. At her language classes she met a teacher who also gave her Portuguese lessons in return for lodgings in her spacious Ealing home.

When she and Lilywhite separated she first made what she called her "sad divorce album", Titanic Days (1994), after which she made increasingly regular trips to Cuba, continuing her love affair with Latin music. "I was completely consumed by it because it was so outside my own upbringing and different to everything else you hear," she later said.

When Virgin Records released her greatest hits album Galore in 1995, it featured a picture of her in a Castro-style military cap lighting a huge Cuban cigar with an American dollar bill. Her name became a fixture at Cuban Solidarity Campaign benefits, and she returned from her regular visits to Havana with suitcases full of records. Her interest in Latin rhythms also soon extended to Brazil, which she visited.

These trips eventually led to her last album Tropical Brainstorm, released earlier this year. She toyed with the idea of working with Latin musicians and attempting to produce an authentic Cuban album in the vein of the Grammy-winning Buena Vista Social Club, but instead opted to fuse the salsa rhythms she had heard on her travels with her own typically quirky and very British style of songwriting. "It's an Anglo-Latin hybrid pop record that



reflects some of the things I love about Cuban and Brazilian music," she said on its release in April.

In recent months she had been working on a six-part series on Cuban music which she was due to present for BBC Radio 2. When the programmes were finished at the beginning of December she took her children to Mexico for a two-week scuba-diving holiday. It was there that she was killed in an accident.

Kirsty MacColl, singer and songwriter, was born on October 10, 1959. She died in a boating accident in Mexico on December 18 aged 41.



# Obituaries: Uncut



Uncut was as shocked as everybody else in the rock world at the death of Kirsty MacColl in a boating accident in Mexico on December 19. The daughter of folk legend Ewan MacColl, Kirsty began her recording career with the self-penned *They Don't Know* on Stiff in 1979 (later a hit for Tracy Ullman in 1983). The semi-novelty *There's A Guy Works Down The Chip Shop* (Swears He's Elvis) provided her first taste of chart success in 1981, but it was her inspired reworking of Billy Bragg's *A New England* four years later that marked the beginnings of her association with some of the finest songwriters of her generation.

The warm, distinctive voice exposing her musical Irish ancestry [Anglo Scottish surely? FW] made her a popular guest vocalist with Talking Heads, Simple Minds and Happy Mondays, to name but a few. Her backing vocals on The Smiths' *Ask* in 1986, produced by husband Steve Lillywhite, would also lead to a close working relationship with both Morrissey and particularly Johnny Marr, the latter playing on 1989's critically acclaimed *Kite* LP and co-writing numerous minor hit singles - *Free World*, *Walking Down Madison* - thereafter. Yet in spite of her own witty, emotive songwriting some of her biggest hits came with covers, including her interpretation of Ray Davies' *Days* in 1989, and she will always be remembered for her role as the intoxicated foil to Shane MacGowan on The Pogues' classic 1987 Christmas hit *Fairytale Of New York*.

The warm critical reception granted last year's Latin-influenced *Tropical Brainstorm*, a four-star album in *Uncut* and for many her best yet, makes her passing all the more tragic. The tributes from those she worked with spoke volumes. "One of the great one-offs," according to MacGowan. "Writes like a playwright, sings like an angel," in the words of Bragg, and to Morrissey quite simply "a supreme original".

She is survived by two children.



# Statement, 19 December 2000

## Kirsty MacColl Death

A statement has been issued on behalf of KIRSTY MacCOLL's management company, which says that the speedboat which struck her was allegedly travelling illegally in an area reserved for swimmers.

The statement in full reads:

"Singer Kirsty MacColl died tragically yesterday afternoon in a boating accident in Cozumel, Mexico, where she was holidaying with her two sons.

Kirsty, who was aged 41, was taking a holiday after a busy and successful year.

"The accident happened when Kirsty, a keen diver, was hit by a speedboat travelling illegally in an area reserved for swimmers. Her two children were with her in the water at the time, but both of them are alright.

Kirsty's former husband Steve Lillywhite is flying to Mexico to be with the children.

"Kirsty has a long and illustrious career in music ranging from hits of her own like 'There's A Guy Works Down The Chip Shop Swears His Elvis' to work with everyone from Johnny Marr to Big Country to Simple Minds and most famously Shane MacGowan and The Pogues on the poignant 'Fairytale of New York' - coincidentally in the charts again, this time courtesy of Ronan Keating. She comes from a musical dynasty and her father Ewan MacColl was one of the stalwarts of the British folk scene throughout the sixties.

"Kirsty MacColl was a bright, fun loving person as well as a talented singer and writer who was loved by anybody and everybody she came into contact with. Manager Kevin Nixon, who has worked with Kirsty for four years, said: "We are absolutely distraught. I was personally immensely proud to be her manager after being a fan for so many years before that".



## Press Coverage

### 19 December 2000

BBC TV News ran a fairly long piece on Kirsty in its 6 o'clock edition, and somewhat shorter in the evening bulletins. She was the main story on the 6 o'clock.







# The Daily Telegraph



## Shy star who put her family before fame

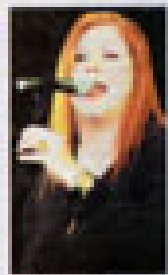


**Brittany found to leave world of pop after stage dies in hunting accident, reports brother Lucille**

She is a quiet, unassuming woman with long, wavy red hair, and she is looking down. She is wearing a black leather jacket and a black beret. She is looking down and to the left, with a serious expression. The background is a soft, out-of-focus pink and purple gradient.



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Photo: [unreadable]

Photo: [unreadable]

# The Daily Mail, The Daily Record, The Sun

