

Sarah Jane Morris

On singing John Martyn

You may remember Sarah Jane Morris as the smiley, big-hatted, red-haired girl on *Top of the Pops*, duetting the 1986 hit *Don't Leave Me This Way* with Jimmy Sommerville, a female baritone to his male falsetto.

“It was bang in the middle of all the chaos of Thatcher’s Britain, the repression of gay people, the AIDS epidemic, and Jimmy was the first man to actually sing about being gay,” she says. “It was radical stuff, and it was number one for, I think, six weeks.”

Her career might have turned out very differently if her subsequent solo single – a cover of the Billy Paul hit *Me and Mrs Jones* – hadn’t been banned by the BBC on its release in 1988. “It’s incredible, really, to remember how repressive those times were: they were afraid that I was a lesbian coming out of the closet.” (For the record, she wasn’t.)

In mainland Europe they had no such reservations, and it was a big hit. “While I was touring Italy with Simply Red – they did it as a double bill, even though I was technically supporting – it went to number one there, which was great.” She’s been revered in that country ever since. “They love singer-songwriters. And they are very loyal and open. They accept whatever I try.”

But it’s in England that she’s touring her latest show, a homage to the late, great singer-songwriter John Martyn. On January 11th, directly after a three-night stint at Ronnie Scott’s, she finishes the tour in the Con Club. “I’ve been encoring with the John Martyn song *I Don’t Want to Know about Evil* for 22 years, now,” she says. “He has such a rich, rich voice. It’s milk and honey. He sings in the same



register as me. I don’t have to change key at all.” She’s quick to point out that she’s not a tribute act. “These are very much my own versions of his songs,” she says, admitting this was a risky project, as his fans are so passionate about his work. “We’ve had a lot of his fan club members coming to the shows so far,” she says. “I’m really happy that they’ve seemed very positive.” There is an album of her covers, and a theatre project based around the songs, in the pipeline. She only met John Martyn once, when they were recording at the same studio. “He probably wouldn’t have remembered, he was quite drunk,” she says, quick to point out there’s no way she’d be judgmental about his notorious hedonism. When I ask her if she has any hedonistic tendencies, her response is quickfire. “I was married to a Pogue,” she replies, “so I’ve been surrounded by that sort of behaviour. But, luckily, I can become a wild woman on a glass of water. I don’t need drugs or drink to help my creativity. I lose myself in every song, I take myself to the cliff edge every time, digging my toenails in to hang on.”

Alex Leith

Con Club, 11th Jan, 7.30pm, £20.

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