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## Stacey Kent, Jim Tomlinson, and Kazuo Ishiguro “Wish They Could Go Travelling Again”

by ALLEN MORRISON



The singer Stacey Kent and her husband/musical director Jim Tomlinson have been riding out the pandemic in style from their mountain retreat in Colorado, elevation 7,000 feet, complete with home studio and picture windows looking out on the hills and valley below. They're counting their blessings.

“There’s immense suffering out there,” Kent told me recently over Zoom, with Tomlinson at her side. “We know we’re extraordinarily lucky that we’re not part of that. Of course, we miss being connected to our musicians. But I’m here with my best friend, and we’ve been very productive. We have a neighbor who teaches Tai-Chi, so we started doing that with him. Via Zoom.”

The New Jersey-born Kent has been building a fervent international following since her debut album in 1997. Her quiet voice remains remarkably pure, a presence at once intense and intimate, modeled after her hero João Gilberto. Her unimpeachable repertoire draws extensively on the American and Brazilian Songbooks. It doesn’t hurt that she sings in multiple languages, including English, French and Portuguese. Her 14 albums include duets with Brazilian bossa nova greats Marcos Valle and Roberto Menescal, and an album entirely in French.



Jim Tomlinson and Stacey Kent at Fnac Montparnasse in 2007. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

Kent honors the composers’ intent and keeps the focus on the lyrics. Other jazz singers experiment with the time, alter the melody freely, or scat, but Kent wants none of this. And when her fans hear her sing, neither do they. Such variations or creative license are superfluous to her art. Her tone is so sublime, her phrasing so right, her interpretation so

dramatic — well, as David Letterman used to say after a great musical act, “That’s all you need.”

Kent has technique to burn, but she doesn’t show it off — she’s going for the song’s deeper essence, musical and lyrical. “There are so many ways to skin this cat,” Kent told me. “If someone wants to go running away with a song and take it completely away from where it was — you know, like the Betty Carter route — that’s also a phenomenal thing to do, and it came very naturally to her. But I am a *word* person, very much based in the lyric. I love words; so does my husband. We play with words all the time. We’re crossword people. Words are precious things to us.”

Although some of her repertoire is more than 80 years old, she says, “I don’t feel old-fashioned. I’m not singing those songs because I belong in the 1930s, ’40s or ’50s. I’m singing them because those writers wrote universal stories about the human heart and the human condition.”

On her 2007 album *Breakfast on the Morning Tram*, Kent broadened her repertoire by means of a collaboration with the British novelist Kazuo Ishiguro, author of *The Remains of the Day*, and *Never Let Me Go*. In 2017, Ishiguro — “Ish” as Kent and Tomlinson refer to him — was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Ishiguro writes the lyrics, Tomlinson the music, always with Kent’s voice in mind.



Ishiguro's wistful and evocative lyrics on songs like "The Changing Lights," "The Ice Hotel," and "Bullet Train," are akin to short stories, revealing characters, their memories, and their dreams in a few deft strokes.

Kent met "Ish" nearly 20 years ago when she and Tomlinson were living in England. "I had been a huge fan of his work," Kent told me. "Some novelists... describe the world in a way that just makes you go, 'Yeah, that's how I see it.' I felt close to him; we had a shared vision of the world, but I didn't know anything about him.

"There's this BBC Radio show called 'Desert Island Discs.' They invite celebrities to talk about their work and their lives, then they play a game: If you were stuck on a desert island and only had seven discs, what would they be? So, Ishiguro's on, talking about his work, he picks his discs, and we're one of them! He chose my version of 'They Can't Take That Away From Me.'

"I wrote to the BBC, because I was bowled over. I told them I wanted to get in touch with him to say thanks. A correspondence started. When we met, we completely related to each other. There was a reason he was drawn to our music and we were drawn to his writings." The idea of collaborating on songs together developed organically and gradually out of their friendship.

The two artists just "get" each other, Kent said.

Ishiguro, via email, explained the connection this way: "The simple reason is that I was a huge fan, and the idea of turning down such an opportunity just wasn't an option. She is one of the really great singers of our era... When Stacey sings, the song always becomes one about *people*. The singer/narrator, the person she addresses, their relationship. That's what you focus on as you listen."

In his liner notes to a Kent album in 2002, Ishiguro, who, as a young man tried his hand at being a singer-songwriter himself, wrote: "Stacey has complete mastery of her tools, but hardly allows us to be aware of them. In song after song, we find a route to the emotional heart of the music without having first to admire her technique." Today he adds, "Artists in any field to whom the above applies are very rare and, for me, to be treasured.

"Stacey conveys magically the sense of a person talking to herself. The faltering hesitations. The exuberant rushes of thought. There's a happy meeting point here with my own fascination with first-person narration on the page: the swaying between denial and self-confrontation, between hope, despondency, and stoic resignation. The subtlety of her interpretations sometimes creates almost unfathomable depths and nuances, even when the line, melodically and lyrically, appears relatively simple."



Kazuo Ishiguro (Photo ©Andrew Testa for the New York Times/Penguin Random House)

Kent and Tomlinson have been recording and releasing singles during the lockdown, some of them with lyrics by Ishiguro. The series started in February with a timely remake of a 2007 Tomlinson/Ishiguro song “I Wish I Could Go Travelling Again” that seemed to strike a chord with homebound fans. It has also included covers of A.C. Jobim’s “Bonita,” Stevie Nicks’ “Landslide,” and Paul Simon’s “American Tune.”

“We’ve been recording them with (pianist) Art Hirahara,” Kent’s long-time American accompanist, she said, with Tomlinson producing. They had planned to release a quintet album before the lockdown changed everyone’s plans. “We had a whole tour booked,” she said. “We shelved it. (Instead), we thought, let’s put out a song every few weeks. Our fans love it — it makes people feel less isolated. It anchors us all.” They now plan to release the collected vocal/piano duets as an album in the fall.

Kent and Hirahara found new ways to work remotely during lockdown. “Sometimes Art will put down the music and I’ll sing to it,” Kent said. “Sometimes I’ll sing *a cappella*, then Art will record his part. We’re calling it *Songs From Other Places*. The theme is that longing to travel, but it’s not specifically about the pandemic.”



Kent has dates booked all over the world beginning in the fall, “but we have no way of knowing if we’ll be able to travel,” she said. The first of them is a quintet gig in September at Sala São Paulo in Brazil, a gorgeous, cavernous concert hall that they have played three times before. From there, they have other possible dates in South America, then a long list of European countries, then Asia. But at present, there’s no way of knowing whether these countries will let the musicians in without a mandatory quarantine.

“The thing about touring,” Tomlinson added, “is that it doesn’t particularly matter if one country or one date works; they *all* have to work, or the whole thing falls apart. Whatever happens, happens.”

“We’re just rolling with it,” Kent said.

“I suppose that’s one of the nice things about things being beyond your control,” Tomlinson said with a rueful laugh. “There’s really nothing to stress about.”

Meanwhile, the couple continues to write and record, Kent delivering every song with her quiet intensity and distinctive sensibility, sometimes wryly humorous, sometimes full of what Brazilians call *saudade*. She believes in her repertoire, whether the song is an American Songbook classic or a new creation.

“People say to me, how do you sing a song like that when it’s been done 360 other times? And my answer is always this: I feel very confident about my own voice and my

own place; we all have our own vision of the world. Anybody who sings a song is going to put their own stamp on it. You don't have to try so hard."

Tomlinson sums up the essential Stacey Kent approach: "The way to make a song your own is to be yourself."

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