



JUDITH OWEN


PIANO CRAZY

“After music, humor is the greatest way to express yourself.”

“I am obsessed with the piano,” confesses singer-songwriter Judith Owen. “I can’t put it any other way. I own five pianos. If I walk into someone’s house and there’s a piano, I immediately have to excuse myself and go over to see it, like it’s a dog. I literally get goose-pimples when I’m around a piano.”

The Welsh-born Owen may be single-minded when it comes to her instrument, but not in when it comes to her music. Her five albums veer effortlessly from jazz to rock to pop, all delivered with sly intelligence and dramatic verve.

Besides pursuing her solo career, Owen has been performing alongside singer-guitarist Richard Thompson in a production uniquely suited to her uncommon stylistic range. “It’s called 1,000 Years of Popular Music,” she says. “It goes from Gregorian chant to Britney Spears in two-and-a-half hours. We touch on opera, folk music, music hall, jazz, and rock and roll, all the way to the present day. I’m the pianist and female singer—the ‘diva,’ basically. It’s thrilling, because I’m such a huge fan of Richard.”



Owen credits her father with inspiring her passion for so many styles. “He was an opera singer and also a great pianist. He sang in the choir at Covent Garden Opera House for 37 years, and I went every weekend from the time I was five. Hearing the orchestra made me cry, beam, and then cry some more. Then I’d go home and imitate those chords on the piano.

But Judith and her family were hardly classical snobs. “My father was a blues, gospel, and jazz fanatic,” she recalls. “He was crazy for jazz piano and the great jazz singers.”

The other big influence, says Judith, was simply being Welsh. “It’s a hideously broad generalization to say that all Welsh people can sing. But we really do have a love of music and a desire to sing. My grandparents were miners and steelworkers, but they named my father Handel Ludwig Owen, because Welsh people name their children after people from the Bible or musicians. That’s how important music is in Wales. The other part of being Welsh is our sheer love of melancholy.”

Melancholy? Judith’s albums are often flat-out funny, thanks to oddball cover versions of such unlikely material as Deep Purple’s “Smoke on the Water” and Spinal Tap’s “Christmas with the Devil.” And she’s married to one of the wittiest men on earth, Spinal Tap bassist and Simpsons vocal stylist Harry Shearer.

“I know many funny people,” says Judith, “and I stand by the notion that the unhappiest people are often the funniest ones. Melancholy people have a great need to laugh and see the strange, humorous side of all things.”

Judith plays a Yamaha C7 grand piano at home and in the studio. “I just happen to be a C7 girl” she says. “It’s the piano that sounds exquisite for the type of player I am. When I record with my C7, I’m happy as a pig in mud.”

But onstage, Owen opts for a digital piano. “I prefer an electronic keyboard at my shows because I have to face the audience,” she explains. “A lot of my expression comes from my face, and it’s too hard to establish intimacy with the audience when you’re behind a behemoth of a piano, facing sideways. So I needed a keyboard with a great piano sound. I didn’t care about the other instruments, or anything else that would make me into a crazed nerd. I just wanted the sound.”

The answer? A Yamaha S90. “Like a lot of obsessive, hardcore pianists, I find it painful how bad most keyboards sound. That’s why I was so relieved when I found the S90. It feels good. I’m confident with it. I enjoy playing it. The S90 isn’t a real piano, but it’s very, very close.”

Owen says her upcoming sixth album, *Here*, will be a change of pace from last year’s jazz-influenced *Lost and Found*: “I’m returning to that classic pop place, which I truly love.”

Expect more amusing cover tunes. “I recorded ‘Black Hole Sun’ and ‘Eye of the Tiger.’ What attracted me to those songs is that fact that they’re great songs. But I also like to cover songs like that because the more testosterone and male thrust they have, the more I want to turn them into something sexy and female.”

Here gave Judith’s Yamaha pianos a workout. “It’s a very piano-centric record,” she notes. “I mean, lots and lots and lots of piano. I use the piano for overdubs, as if it were a full orchestra. As a kid, I loved the piano’s orchestral quality. I still love that about the piano. I love it. I love it, I love it, I love it!”