



**“Playing rock clubs,
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And the Yamaha S80
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Singer/pianist Charlotte Martin doesn't know when to quit—fortunately for her. After completing college and moving to Los Angeles from her Illinois hometown, the classically trained Martin got a record deal on Bong Load/RCA. She recorded her first disc, One Girl Army, with producer Tom Rothrock (Beck, Foo Fighters). But just as things started to move ahead for Martin, the label decided not to release the record.

STILL, CHARLOTTE WASN'T READY TO GIVE UP. WITH THE INITIAL HELP OF HER RECORDING ENGINEER boyfriend, Ken Andrews, she learned how to become her own producer and began work on a new record. Martin placed a song in the soundtrack of the romantic comedy *Sweet Home Alabama*, and released her major-label debut EP, *In Parentheses*, in August 2003.

“It was definitely a case of ‘if you want something done, you have to do it yourself,’” she says. “I’d done this indie album and it wasn’t coming out at the time, so I had to do something with myself. Ken taught me how to use some of the gear, how to run Pro Tools and so forth. He helped me set up my home studio, with my little Yamaha baby grand in there, and I spent a lot of hours figuring stuff out, how to record and mix.”

As the daughter of a music professor and a voice teacher, Charlotte was reared in a strong classical music environment. “I listened to a lot of Bach and Rachmaninoff growing up,” she says. “Rachmaninoff is so heavily romantic and emotional, and Bach is just this freak genius psycho. I loved Mozart too, but not as much as Bach.” Martin went on to study music in college, where she trained as a coloratura soprano. “I would do the lighter soprano roles,” she recalls with a laugh. “None of the heavy Queen of the Night stuff. I wasn’t Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro*—I was her maid!”

It wasn’t until her senior year in college that Charlotte turned to pop songwriting. Tragically, she wrote her first song for the funeral of her best friend, a suicide victim. After that, Charlotte simply kept writing songs.

According to Martin, her pop side has little to do with her traditional training. Her more contemporary influences include Tori Amos, Kate Bush, and Fiona Apple. “I didn’t get into rock music at all until I was in college,” she says. “There definitely is a contrapuntal influence from Bach in my piano playing, but that also comes from Tori Amos, who is very contrapuntal in her piano work. And on the jazz side I listen to a lot of Laura Nyro—she was an amazing jazz pianist.”

Having more control over the production side of music has changed the way Martin approaches songwriting. “It’s completely different now, being able to envision the final tracks when I’m still writing,” she says. “Right now I’m finishing the last two or three songs on the new record, and there are certain sounds in my head—I know exactly what I want on these tracks.”

Though she uses loops and beats on some songs, Martin has chosen to record almost the entire record live with other musicians, rather than as overdubs cut to a click. “Coming from a classical background, the ritards and rubatos are really important for my music, for the expression,” she explains. “You need that kind of space, a breath before you go into a bridge, for example. And it’s hard to do that if you’re playing to a click.”

Martin prefers to write and record on Yamaha pianos. “I love the sound of them,” she says. “They all have very different personalities. I’m actually opting to record on seven-foot grands instead of nine-footers, because they’re thicker sounding. For the music I’m doing, the midrange needs to cut through a little more than you can with a nine-footer.”

In addition to finishing the new record, Charlotte maintains an active performance schedule, usually singing and playing solo with her Yamaha S80 keyboard. “For the plug-and-play situations I’m in live, playing rock clubs, I have to be able to turn up loud,” she says. “And the S80 is awesome for what it does. I’ve played real pianos in these little clubs, but I’m not in a position where I can go into a theater and have a real piano in there. I need to be able to turn up, and the S80 is great for that. I need it to blow my head off!”

The Unsinkable Charlotte Martin