

**I**n these pretentious times, Charlie Chan is a refreshing change. She has no gimmick, no manifesto and no delusions that she's any more than a hard-working musician. She plays piano, double bass, guitar and percussion; she composes and she improvises. The product of all this labour, however, reveals something else: a talent. Charlie Chan's talent is in her ear for the grateful sound, the sound that is easy on the listener, the sound that takes up only as much consciousness as you want it to. The fluency and simplicity of her music could mislead you into thinking her kind of music is easy to make. After all, there's a fine line between intelligent ambient music and ear-wash. But, with her talent for the grateful sound, she stays on the thinking side.

The wide appeal of her music is attested to by the amount of work she gets. Chan is often commissioned to write and perform incidental music, amongst which have been the Sydney Theatre Company's *Gift of the Gorgon* and Channel Seven's *Share The Spirit: Sydney 2000*. She has just completed music for *Venus and Adonis*, a staging of Shakespeare's poem for the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. In concert she has duetted with classical pianist Roger Woodward. Her first CD, *The Adventures of Charlie Chan* (originally released in 1993) has been reissued as part of the flagship batch of Sony's Alternative Contemporary Music Label.

Charlie Chan was born in Albury, NSW to a Malaysian-Chinese father and a Scottish-Australian mother. Like her heritage, her music is rather uncatagorisable. The title of her second CD for Sony, *East & West*, reflects both her heritage (the title track was written in memory of her father) and her defiance of musical boundaries, which she does casually and with no fanfare. 'I just can't help it,' she laughs. 'I'm extremely good at doing only what I want.' She can't help it if what she likes can't be pigeonholed.

What is so appealing about Chan's attitude is her frankness, which includes freely admitting her deficiencies. *East & West* is a CD of solo piano improvisations, a type of venture she has never before embarked upon. She says, 'I'm not a pianist. I play the piano like a guitarist. I play chords, and I play rhythm from my study of African music. I'm not used to playing melody. So some of the articulation is a bit messy, because I'm not very good at articulation. But because I'm not the most proficient of players, I come up with things that a proficient player won't come up with. I never practise at all. I just put on the recording tape and play. Everything you hear on *East & West* are whole takes. There are no edits.'

The result, Chan's self-criticisms notwithstanding, is a pleasant ambient journey. The 13 tracks on *East & West* never rise to a point that is too loud or too fast. There are many noteworthy tracks, among which is *Desert* (currently being transcribed by Roger Woodward). Its softly-rippling, down-flowing runs are, paradoxically, like an aural waterfall. Then there's *Tomorrow Today*, a bubbly track that is Charlie Chan at her most optimistic. Her life makes an appearance in *Saturday Afternoon*. Even though her own program notes only say this track is about Saturday afternoon, it's like gar-

*The uncatagorisable*  
**CHARLIE CHAN** talks  
*with LYLE CHAN*  
*(no relation) about her*  
*latest recording and her*  
*plans for the future.*

dening and snoozing, this is also music for Chan's girlfriend. 'I don't need to say that in the program notes because she knows. Whenever she hears this piece, she knows it's her song.'

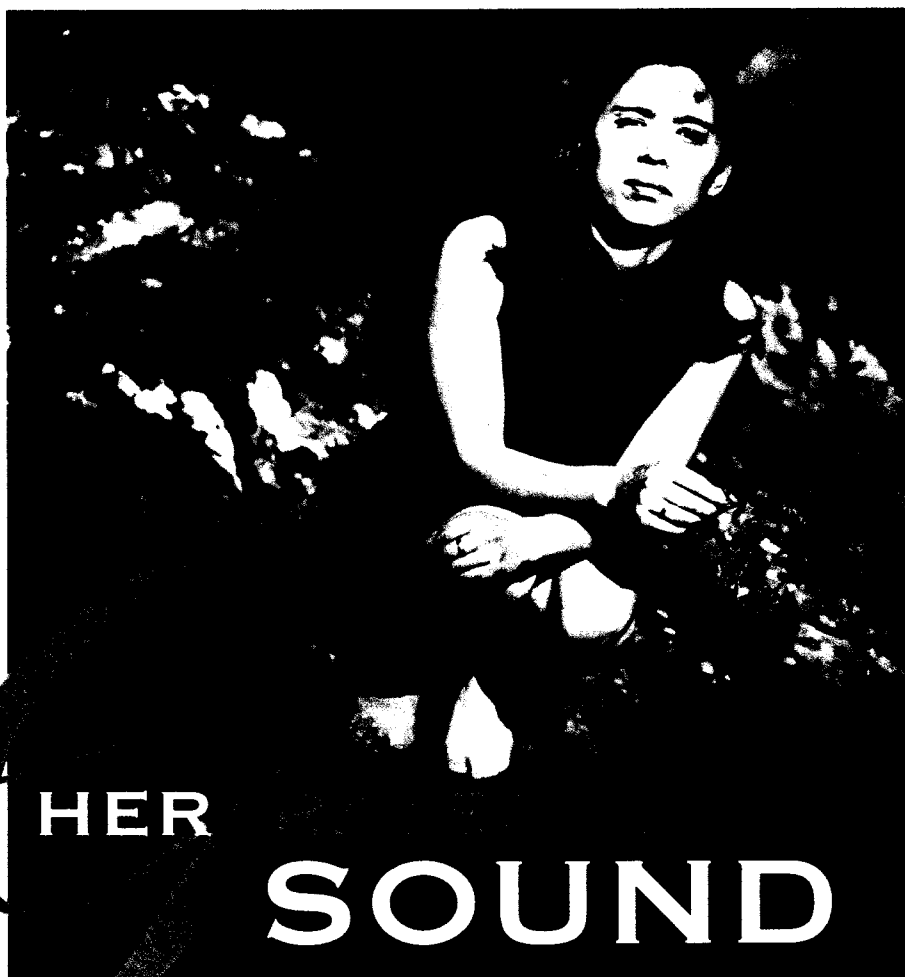
By her own admission, Chan doesn't listen to much music, 'because I don't want to cram my head up.' Which is a daring thing to say, because most budding composers are eager to align themselves with a fashionable source of influence. But from the names that crop up in conversation, you get a sense of what she has paid attention to. 'I remember reading a long time ago John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*, which talks about listening to the "songs" around you, and it made me realise that music comes out of everyday life. If you're not always listening to things

around you, you miss out on all the inherent melodies that are part of everyday life. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do with this information, but that explains where the music comes from. Look at John Cage. His music was improvisation – it was improvisation of sounds as they occurred naturally.'

Speaking again about her performance style, she says 'I think the intensity of the performance should be enough for anyone. That's the old Billy Bragg theory – he gets up and plays his guitar and it goes straight here [points to her heart]. It's the old Elvis theory – he had so much energy and so much soul you can't ignore his intensity. When you hear Tom Jones sing it's almost virtual reality, it's so vivid. That's the biggest asset that I bring to my performance, the energy, the creativity that comes from somewhere.'

Some have said the styles of Keith Jarrett and George Winston feature in her music. At the suggestion that her style is not original, she is startled and says, 'But I'm not interested in being original. I'm not blazing a trail. Or, I'm only blazing a trail in equipoise. There's equipoise between writing for yourself and writing for others. Between being self-indulgent and being what other people like to hear. It's a very fine line and I don't know if I have [reached equipoise], but I'm looking of it.'

What's next for Charlie Chan? 'I'll sing! I want to do something different again. The breadth of my experience is so wide that in order to convey it, I have to keep doing new things.'



Kevin Wilkins/Sony