

Charlie Chan *composer*

Photography **Michele Aboud**

Not everyone is into spirituality, and I don't care," says composer Charlie Chan. "But it's the 90s. You're mixing spirituality with ambition — spirituality, New Age and money. What could be better?" She is only half-joking. The daughter of a lapsed Buddhist, a one-time altar girl and a devotee of the meditation-based Siddha yoga, Chan is a one-woman music corporation, complete with a publicist, a recording contract (with Sony Publishing), a battery of mixing consoles, musical instruments and an overworked paging service.



"People say I am very businesslike," she says, "because I have business cards and 'with comps' slips and I do cash-flow projections and boring things like that. But I think it's compulsive-obsessive behaviour, anyway, to be noticed and to keep doing your art, and I think there's a point, too, where pig-headedness has to meet with economics."

Psyches and balance sheets aside, it is Chan's prodigious skill as a composer, performer and engineer

that has earned her the reputation and industry attention she is currently enjoying. At 28, she has written soundtracks for TV documentaries and for films — most recently for *The Long Ride*, which forms one part of the SBS short film series *Under the Skin*. One of her latest works is being performed with the Sydney Theatre Company's production of Peter Shaffer's play *The Gift of the Gorgon*.

"Her work can be incredibly diverse," says the production's director, Wayne Harrison. "There seems to be a melancholic tone to it, a very clear emotional content. She's certainly not afraid to express her opinions. I found Charlie delightfully engaging and, of course, there's a touch of the eccentric to her."

Indeed, *HQ's* visit finds Chan, in cut-off shorts and with wet hair, recovering from a paranormal experience the night before. "Sorry if I'm floating around a bit," she says, sipping mango tea in her Sydney dockside home cum recording studio. "I'm a bit of a balloon today ... I'm trying to pull myself back into my soul." A soundtrack of chants plays soothingly on a cassette player in the centre of a room that's scattered with musical equipment and photos of Gurumayi. "I'm a Catholic girl, you know," she says. "At school I thought, 'I'll be a nun and I'll devote my life to God,' because I was always in love with God. And I was so in love with my life and everything about it."

Precociously talented, Chan (she was actually named Mary Ann, after an inscription on a piece of her mother's crockery collection, and dubbed Charlie at school in Melbourne) received her first instrument, a ukelele, at three. It was promptly broken and replaced with a guitar. She moved on to the piano and by 15 was composing for small ensembles and touring with the Australian Youth Orchestra. At 19, she

was appointed composer-in-residence with the Sidetrack Theatre Company; at 21 she was conducting the orchestra on the *Fairstar*, and within a couple of years she had moved to Sydney to work with Robyn Archer.

As well as guitar and keyboards, Chan plays percussion, double bass (she completed seven grades in two years), and, as one of the first women in Australia to accept the "computer as a musical tool", is known for her skills with high-tech machinery.

"Although music on a lot of levels is a very creative thing, it's very much a technical skill," she says. "There are absolute nuts and bolts ... that's why there are a lot of guys who do this job, because it's actually a number-crunching job — watching a screen, conducting six people playing six different instruments."

Her debut CD, *The Adventures of Charlie Chan*, explores performance and know-how to great effect: the compositions and arrangements fuse musical styles from jazz to opera to ambient, using electronic keyboards, didgeridoos, African and Indian percussion, antique clocks, piano, a 20-person humming choir and dolphins. Says Chan, who is working on her second album: "My whole philosophy has always been: if you give people everything, they can choose what they want to listen to."

Karen Pakula ■

Hear Charlie Chan

Phone *HQ's* Music Line on

0055 655 43

to hear edited versions of two of Chan's tracks, "Mermaids" and "Infinity", from her album *The Adventures of Charlie Chan* (Sony Masterworks/SMK47650).

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