

MARCH 24, 2013

sunday

# Style

AUSTRALIA'S BIGGEST GLOSSY

**JOSH THOMAS**  
REVEALS WHAT  
MAKES GEN Y  
SO SMART  
(LIKE, SERIOUSLY)

**"THE SEX WAS  
FANTASTIC"**  
JO WOOD  
ON HER LIFE  
WITH RONNIE

**CANDICE LAKE**  
MODELS HER  
WINTER HIT LIST

**KATE LEDGER**  
OPENS UP ABOUT  
HER NEW PROJECT  
AND MISSING HEATH

## TAKING FLIGHT

MEET BIRDY, THE 16-YEAR-OLD SINGER  
WHO'S SETTING THE WORLD ALIGHT



(cover\_story)

+ TAP FOR CAPTIONS

*A little*  
**Birdy**  
*told me...*

DON'T JUDGE THIS BRITISH  
SONGBIRD BY HER COVERS.  
SHE'S SPREADING HER WINGS  
AND IS READY TO SHOW THE  
WORLD SHE CAN FLY SOLO,  
DISCOVERS VANESSA KEYS

+ TAP HERE TO SEE BEHIND THE SCENES VIDEO

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**I**t's a cold and blustery afternoon when I turn up to a north-east London studio to watch 16-year-old schoolgirl-turned-singer Birdy have her photograph taken. It's the kind of weather that eats umbrellas for breakfast and I expect the goings-on in the studio to mirror the chaos outside, with a hubbub of hairspray, scrupulous stylists and a dash of diva thrown in for good measure.

But calm reigns supreme. There are no sample sizes strewn over chairs, no harried assistants, nary a hint of who – or what – is supposed to be the focus of attention. I'm mentally checking the studio number when a make-up artist glides across the floor and there, in her shadow, wobbles a gazelle-like creature in cream pumps two sizes too big, eyes as round as saucers, long limbs twisted upon themselves. She looks as if her first instinct is to flee but then there's a straightening of spine, an outreached hand, a gentle voice: "Hello, I'm Birdy. How do you do?"

Critics eager to put Birdy in a box have compared her mature, soulful voice to that of Adele and Kate Bush. Her haunting piano ballads have prompted Tori Amos correlations, and the sorrowful knowingness that seeps from her lyrics spurs Regina Spektor references. Listen to her signature single, a cover of Bon Iver's 'Skinny Love' that's racked up more than 42 million YouTube views, and it's easy to see why her voice astounds on levels that are difficult to measure without comparison. She was chosen to sing in front of millions at last year's Paralympics, recorded an original song for *The Hunger Games* soundtrack, has the likes of Mumford & Sons suggesting collaborations and her covers of well-known songs often attract more fans than the original versions. She's even been known to make grown men cry. Is the girl who accomplished all that in less than two

years really the gawkish, gentle, schoolgirl wobbling before me?

Two hours later, a jeans-and-jumper-clad Birdy sits gingerly on an overstuffed sofa in a room adjacent to the studio. Stripped of make-up and her long hair loose, she looks and talks like any other 16-year-old (if any other 16-year-old had hovering publicists and waiting drivers, that is). She tells me the shoot was "fun", and that even though she found one of the dresses "scary", she could recognise how different it would look once the stylist had made the final touches. "I was actually quite scared by all of the clothes, but I knew they'd be different on, so I tried them and they were all really nice," she says, letting out a bleat of nervous laughter. She still remembers her first shoot: "I think it was for *Nylon* magazine, and there were other people, like models, doing shoots as well; I was watching them thinking, Oh my God, I have to do that? They looked so professional, and I was so scared," she admits.

Nerves may run hot and fast in her veins, but there's no denying that underneath her devastatingly shy disposition, Birdy has pluck. At five, she eschewed her mother's piano lessons for her own "tinkering", muddling through chords and singing little ditties at the family piano until words and melody started to meld together. She wrote her first song at the age of eight ("It didn't make sense but I think it was mostly about love," she says) and entered her first talent show, the prestigious Open Mic UK competition, at 11. "Nothing happened," she adds, "but then I went back the next year and I, um, won it."

Birdy wrote the winning song herself, a tender ode to distant love called 'So Be Free'. As a thank-you to the fans who voted, she put a video of her singing on YouTube. "It was only my friends who watched it to begin with," she says, "then when 'Skinny

## SONGBOOK

### *Birdy's inspiration*



#### ELLIE GOULDING

"Ellie has the most amazing, powerhouse voice. And her songs are so catchy. I saw her in LA recently and she had so much energy on stage. I learn a lot from watching people like her."



#### PAOLO NUTINI

"He's a Scottish folk singer and probably my favourite person to listen to. His voice is amazing and there are so many layers to his songs – they've inspired me a lot. I'd love to collaborate with Paolo."



#### LIANNE LA HAVAS

"She's really soulful and her songs are quite strange. There are lots of little twists and melodies you're not expecting, which I love. We've performed together a few times now, once at a concert and also on a TV show. She's amazing."



#### LYKKE LI

"She's so cool. It took me a while to get into her style and now I'm obsessed. I love what she wears onstage and her music is different. A friend sent me one of her songs and I've since bought her album."

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"IF YOU'RE  
REALLY YOUNG YOU  
STILL UNDERSTAND  
BEING IN LOVE  
AND BEING HURT.  
YOU CAN UNDERSTAND  
JUST BY WATCHING  
AND LISTENING"

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Love' was released, the views just started to build and build, until I couldn't bear to look at it anymore."

Part of her Open Mic prize was the opportunity to record in a London studio. "I heard my aunty listening to Bon Iver, and that song 'Skinny Love' and I loved it, and I'd never, like, properly done a cover before," she says. "I'd always written my own stuff, but being at school at the time I thought an album of covers seemed the best thing to do." On a whim, she sent 'Skinny Love' to BBC Radio 1. It landed in the lap of DJ Fearne Cotton, who chose it as 'record of the week'. Birdy had just turned 15. "My parents recorded the show and I remember listening back to it and hearing all the people phoning in," she recalls. "It was so weird to hear my voice on the radio and even weirder to hear people, like, talking about it."

Born Jasmine van den Bogaerde in Lyminster, a tiny coastal village in southern England, Birdy's nickname stuck early on. "My mum gave it to me because when I wanted food, I'd open my mouth really wide, like a little bird," she says, and obliges me with an impersonation that has us both clutching our sides with laughter. "It's probably the question I get asked most." At home, she insists, nothing has changed. "I'm one of five; I have two older brothers and a younger sister and brother. I have chores to do," she explains with a shrug. What about switching from her 'adult' life to her 'child' life at the end of the day – does she find it hard? "It is quite strange," she says, "because I feel like I'm the same age as my friends but I'm always working and spending time with adults."

Her close friends don't treat her any differently, she says, but a change of school this year (to a college where she studies art and French) has meant "more people stare at me. Not in a bad way," she adds quickly, "just that

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at my old school everyone had been with me from the beginning, and now..." She trails off. How does she cope with the staring? "It makes me feel embarrassed, but I just kind of laugh about it. It's funny when you're with your friends and they know it's happening as well."

Birdy's initial detractors weren't shy about dishing out the criticism. Mainly, they complained that her 'Skinny Love' wasn't as good as Bon Iver's. Her age was also a hot issue. "How does she know what she's even singing about?" goaded one commenter. Does she think that in order to sing about love, she should experience it first? "No," she replies slowly. "People often ask me that, and I think you don't have to be any age – like, if you're young you still understand being in love and being hurt. You can understand just by watching and listening." She's not in a relationship right now, though she confides in fits of laughter that she "sort-of, might" want a boyfriend in the future.

The record that followed 'Skinny Love' was *Birdy*, an album of covers and one original song released in late 2011. She doesn't read music, so every cover was arranged by ear. "I've found if you listen to them too much you just end up copying the original," she says. An album of original songs is scheduled to be released at the end of the year – something she hopes will placate those who think she's only capable of covers. "I've recorded lots of demos and I'm going back to work on them and record some more," she says. "Some are about love, some of them are about... my experiences over the last year and about change."

Her Australian tour – which kicks off April 3 in Brisbane (she'll also squeeze in an appearance at the Logie Awards) – will be her last commitment before she knuckles down to write. "I was in Sydney performing on *The*



*X Factor* last year, which was amazing, but I didn't have time to do much except stroke a koala at Taronga Zoo," she says.

First on the agenda this time? "I really want to go to Summer Bay," she admits sheepishly. "I used to be a really big *Home and Away* fan. I've researched where [Palm Beach] is. Are there cafes there? Maybe I'll go and see if Alf is hanging around."

Every now and then, she says, something will happen that makes her pinch herself, "like today," she adds. "I remember the first time I saw a poster advertising 'Skinny Love'. We were told it was in London under a bridge somewhere... or behind a bridge. My mum and I spent ages

driving around trying to find it," she recalls, laughing. "She made me stand next to it and took a picture. It was embarrassing... but totally amazing."

**S** *Birdy plays Melbourne's Palais Theatre on April 8 and Hamer Hall on April 9, and Sydney Opera House on April 12–14, [ticketmaster.com.au](http://ticketmaster.com.au)*

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