

YUNGCHEN LHAMO: ONE DROP OF KINDNESS

PRESS RELEASE BY JANE CORNWELL

Imagine a life based on unconditional love. A life filled with compassion, lived in service of others. A life of prayers and offerings and song.

Now imagine a voice so unique and beautiful, so utterly compelling, that it brings birds to roost in trees and makes wild animals stop in their tracks and listen. A voice as pure as a singing bowl. A voice with a range that astonishes and a force, a vibration, that uplifts and restores.

Then welcome - welcome back - the wonder that is Yungchen Lhamo.

"I sing to help transform people's minds and make them better human beings," says the globally renowned Tibetan singer. "We are living in difficult times. But together, bit by bit, we can change the world."

Lhamo's seventh album *One Drop of Kindness* is a glorious reminder, a golden encouragement, for us to do precisely that. Co-produced with John Alevizakis at Little Buddha Studio on the forested slopes of California's Sierra Nevada, the recording is a fresh take on an ancient practice, a work whose seven songs - or better still, seven offerings - are flavoured by musicians on everything from piano, flute, drums and electric guitar to didgeridoo, Indian violin, the Turkish cümbüs-oud and the Armenian duduk-oboe.

This is music as it was first intended - as a tool to heal, build communities, provide a universal language. To open hearts, share influences, bring cultures together.

"Musically I wanted to do something different, more instinctive and rhythmic," says the New York-based Lhamo, who has toured to over 80 countries since releasing her award-winning debut *Tibetan Prayer* in 1995 and the seminal *Tibet Tibet* on Real World Records the following year.

"John has enough instruments in his studio for a small orchestra. We chose some and started creating."

The main instrument on *One Drop of Kindness* is - what else? - that voice.

Warm, bright, rich with emotion. Hypnotising with its melisma. Raining blessings with its vibrato. Flowing seamlessly from low guttural throat singing into long-sustained high notes with an otherworldly beauty and the sort of perfectly smooth soundwaves that have studio engineers shaking their heads in disbelief. A voice that offers potential for spiritual awakening.

"The older I become the better I understand how to transmit sound healing to people no matter their religion, beliefs or non-beliefs," says Lhamo, whose name, given to her by a lama on her birth in Lhasa, Tibet, means 'Goddess of Melody'. Who in 1989 left Tibet, walking the life-threatening month-long journey over the Himalayas to Dharamsala, India, to pursue her spiritual practice. In 1993 she moved to Australia, then to New York City in 2000. She is currently based in Kingston in Upstate New York, a city with historic churches and a thriving art community not far from the Catskill Mountains.

Feted as the first Tibetan singer to sign to a major label, Lhamo has collaborated with the starry likes of Bono, Billy Corgan and Annie Lennox, and graced the stages of such illustrious venues as Carnegie Hall, Royal Albert Hall and the Sydney Opera House, standing still in the spotlight to sing *a capella*, her voice spine-tingling, her costume the colour of pearls.

All of which, she says, is secondary to her purpose - to foster compassion for all beings. To encourage acts of kindness. Having established the One Drop of Kindness Foundation in 2004 with the aim of helping those in need within Tibet (the charity has since supported projects in the USA, Nepal, and India), in 2013 Lhamo decided to stop performing internationally and devote herself to working with the homeless and mentally ill at designated facilities in Kingston.

"So many people in the West are living in fear. They feel isolated and unloved. I tell them they are beautiful, that all human life is beautiful," she continues. "When the people I work with are sick or dying, I stay with them. I wash them. Cook for them. Sing for them. These are my offerings."

Just as the pandemic arrived, Lhamo had finished recording her sixth album, the meditative *Awakening*, which was released last year and emphasised the importance of bringing compassion-based spirituality into our self-focused narratives.

One Drop of Kindness was probably meant to be. In California as part of a fundraising tour for the One Drop of Kindness Foundation, Lhamo happened upon - or was energetically directed to - Alevizakis and his serendipitously-titled Little Buddha Studio. "When I opened the door and saw the unusual instruments and felt the good energy from JonJon [Alevizakis] I knew I would make an album there," she says.

Alevizakis's passion for the transformative potential of trance music, for dance and music as medicine, dovetailed with Lhamo's sung prayers. Over the course of two days, with Lhamo on vocals, mantras and full-beam energy ("I have all the words in my head") and Alevizakis variously on keyboards, banjo, oud, cümbüs and guitars, they jammed, crafted from scratch. Musicians dropped by, or were added later.

Seven offerings. Titled in English, sung in Tibetan. Sent out - with loving kindness - to the world.

Opener 'Sound Healing' weaves the haunting drone of the didgeridoo, that earth frequency instrument of First Nations Australia, into a mantra designed to mend and restore, as Lhamo's vocals - always majestic, sometimes celestially multi-tracked - set about paving the path to enlightenment. A testament to female healing energy, 'Awakening Through Sounds' brings delicate piano chords and heart-tugging duduk passages to a mantra designed to still the restless monkey mind, to bring balance, relief and presence.

Slow-building, deftly paced, the dramatic 'Overcoming Obstacles' is a string-driven tribute to Guru Rinpoche, who brought spiritual teachings from India to Tibet in the 8th century. The song's title - and its feelings of freedom and possibility - might well be applied to Lhamo herself. "It is true that I overcame many obstacles," she says. "I am a woman. I spoke no English. I sang only in Tibetan. I did not have a band. I travelled alone. But I had a voice, and I have carried it with me."

Augmented by bells, shakers and found sounds from village life, 'Perfect Compassion' honours Om Mani Padme Hum, the well-known Mani mantra of compassion whose six syllables each have a colour, a visual form and, when chanted, a vibrational power proven to transform negatives into positives.

"I have this Mani mantra in my prayer wheel, always going around," says Lhamo, most of whose albums feature an image of the Mani mantra, and whose lips are continually moving in prayer.

'Being Courageous' merges Lhamo's gorgeous harmonics with North African and Middle Eastern trance grooves in ways life affirming and rhythmically exciting. The cinematic 'Dedication To My Teacher' is a tender yet vivid paean to those determined to live their lives truthfully, without ego. Lent further magic by didgeridoo, duduk and loping, twanging desert blues guitar, 'Dream Song' reminds us of our potential to do good in every waking moment - and the life-improving lessons that arrive in our sleep.

One Drop of Kindness. An album of love, compassion, offerings and song. A reminder that together we can make a difference.

"Kindness is recognised as a virtue in many cultures and religions," says Yungchen Lhamo. "Just one act of kindness, no matter how large or small, can change a life, and remind us that we are connected. That we are all breathing in and out. That we all share the same earth and sky."

She pauses and smiles. "It is really very simple," she says.

Jane Cornwell