

Corrinne May: Singapore's Joni Mitchell

Written by Jaime Koh, 11 March 2014

Considered one of Singapore's foremost English musical exports, singer-songwriter Corrinne May has wowed audiences in the United States, Singapore and the region with her singing and compositions. She has released five albums to date and is based in Los Angeles.

Named after her mother's favourite song, *Corrinna, Corrinna*, singer-songwriter Corrinne May was born in 1974.¹ Although her full name was Corrinne Foo May Ying, she shortened her stage name to Corrinne May. "It just felt a little bit smoother as a name and it felt like it rolled off the tongue," May said.²

May's musical training began with the classical piano when she was five years old. Subsequently, May studied at Raffles Girls' School and Raffles Junior College where she was part of the college choir. She also sang in an a cappella group called Punch. At university, she was involved in the Catholic music ministry.³

In 1995, May graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from the National University of Singapore in English Literature. Shortly after, she left Singapore to pursue songwriting and film-scoring at the Berklee College of Music, in Boston in the United States.^{4 5}

Making it in the US

After graduating from Berklee in 1998, May chose to stay on in the United States to try to become a professional musician. "I wanted to come back and work behind the scenes in music production. But, exposed to the possibility of making music my living, I thought I'd give it a shot," she said.⁶

May chose to make her base in Los Angeles, at the heart of the popular music industry. Trying to establish herself in a new country was not an easy task. "But, one needs to be away from the familiar in order to be challenged to grow in ways that one would not have been able to otherwise," May said of her decision.⁷ "I had to build up a fanbase and find my audience in a city that I was still getting familiar with. So I went to every open mic that I could, checked out all the venues that were appropriate for singer-songwriters, met new musicians at these venues and said yes to every social event I was invited to," she said. "It was all pretty exciting and a little bit tiring, but worth it."⁸

To supplement her income, May sang at coffeehouses, taught at kids' music schools and played at church masses.^{9 10 11}

¹ Corrinne May website, retrieved from <http://www.corrinnemay.com/biography>

² Thomas, S. (2005, January 7). What May be. *The Straits Times*.

³ Lee, S. (2002, June 14). Album of Caroles. *The Straits Times*.

⁴ Tan, J. (2000, October 16). May's tune tops music contest. *The Straits Times*.

⁵ Corrinne May website, retrieved from <http://www.corrinnemay.com/biography>

⁶ Lee, S. (2002, June 14). Album of Caroles. *The Straits Times*.

⁷ This is home, truly. (2007, December 19). *TODAY*.

⁸ Eddino Abdul Hadi. (2013, August 22). Foreign attraction. *The Straits Times*.

⁹ Tan, J. (2000, October 16). May's tune tops music contest. *The Straits Times*.

¹⁰ Tan, J. (2000, October 16). May's tune tops music contest. *The Straits Times*.

Breakthrough

May's breakthrough came in 2000 when she won the Carole Bayer Sager and Carole King Songwriting Challenge in August that year.¹² Sager said May's winning tune, *If you didn't love me*, "brought a whole other dimension to the lyrics that I hadn't known was there until I heard her melody...It invoked a deep emotional response in me."

The competition was organised by the music portal, Tonos.com founded by renowned songwriters and music producers, Carole Bayer Sager, David Foster and Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds.¹³ Contestants had to submit a tune to accompany a set of lyrics written by Carole King and Carole Bayer, with the winning entry used to record the song.

With the win, things began to look up for May. Her debut album, *Corrinne May*, was released in 2001.¹⁴ Subsequently she also won the 2001 Kerrville Folk Festival New Folk Award and the 2001-2002 Ascapi Plus Popular Music Award.¹⁵ One of May's songs, *Cast your spell*, was included in the long-running ABC soap drama, *One life to live*.¹⁶

Style and inspiration

May has been described as having "velveteen voice and laidback talent", her "ethereal" sound has earned her critical comparisons to singer Sarah McLachlan and singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell.^{17 18} May's earlier albums tended to feature folk songs accompanied by the piano while she experimented with different sounds in her later albums.

For instance, for her album *Beautiful Seed*, May incorporated a string ensemble to create a warmer sound.¹⁹ *Safe in a Crazy World* featured a happier, pop feel reflecting "that romantic period in my life, when I'd just gotten married".²⁰ In her 2012 album *Crooked Lines*, May played the guitar which featured heavily in the album.²¹

May's inspiration comes from everyday life. She said her songs are based on stories she hear around her – from friends, the news and even from prayers. "In short, I can be inspired by almost anything," she said.²² May keeps a journal in which she jots down ideas for songs.²³ "I work with whatever I accumulate in my journal writing," said May.²⁴

¹¹ Cheah, U. H. (2002, April 12). Music to the ears. *The Business Times*.

¹² Tan, J. (2000, October 16). May's tune tops music contest. *The Straits Times*.

¹³ Songwriting chat logs, Corrinne May. Retrieved from <http://www.musesmuse.com/chatguest17.html>

¹⁴ Cheah, U. H. (2002, April 12). Music to the ears. *The Business Times*.

¹⁵ Cheah, U. H. (2002, April 12). Music to the ears. *The Business Times*.

¹⁶ Tan, J. (2000, October 16). May's tune tops music contest. *The Straits Times*.

¹⁷ Yeow, K. C. (2002, May 3). Sound bites. *The Straits Times*.

¹⁸ Indie Ingenue Corrinne May Finds Spirit and Safety in a Crazy World. (2005, June 4). Business Wire.

¹⁹ Lim, C. (2007, August 3). Corrinne May launches new album with concert. *The Business Times*.

²⁰ Lim, C. (2007, August 3). Corrinne May launches new album with concert. *The Business Times*.

²¹ Chen, S. (2012, April 6). Going the Mummy track. *The Straits Times*.

²² Corrinne May. (2007, March 16). *The New Paper*.

²³ Corrinne May. (2007, March 16). *The New Paper*.

²⁴ Chen, S. (2012, April 6). Going the Mummy track. *The Straits Times*.

May's 2010 composition, *Song for Singapore*, the National Day theme song for that year, for instance, was inspired by her feelings for Singapore. Having lived in the United States since 1996, May said she does miss her country. On the song writing process, May said, "I took out a journal and started writing my thoughts about Singapore, and what came out were feelings of gratitude for all the ways I've been nurtured." She added, "When I think of Singapore, I think of family, the food, the relationships that brought me this far. So I thought, let's write this down, and it just flowed from there."²⁵

Motherhood and her daughter Claire were major influences for her latest album, *Crooked Line*, released in 2012.^{26 27}

Though based in Los Angeles, May returns to perform in Singapore periodically. She is also an instructor for the Berklee Online course, Songwriting: Melody.²⁸

Quote

*"Often, I find that all that is needed to finish writing a song is to be patient. Some songs just take a while to finish. Some songs are worth finishing and some songs are best left to wilt. Time is a great teacher."*²⁹

Albums

- 2001 Corrinne May
- 2005 Safe in a Crazy World (Renamed *Fly Away* for Singapore release)
- 2006 The Gift
- 2007 Beautiful Seed
- 2012 Crooked Lines

Concerts

- 2007 Singapore
- Japan
- Los Angeles

Awards

- 2001 New Folk Award, Kerrville Folk Festival
- 2003 Best Contemporary Album, Just Plain Folks Music Awards
- 2007 Young Composer of the Year, COMPASS
- Wings of Excellence, COMPASS
- Outstanding Young Alumni Award, NUS

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Berklee Online. Retrieved from <http://online.berklee.edu/courses/songwriting-melody#!faculty>

Cheah, U. H. (2002, April 12). Music to the ears. *The Business Times*.

²⁵ Star struck. (2010, August 10). *The Straits Times*.

²⁶ Rasul, J. J. (2012, April 10). Influenced by motherhood. *The New Paper*.

²⁷ Crooked Lines. Retrieved from <http://www.corinnemay.com/albums>.

²⁸ Berklee Online. Retrieved from <http://online.berklee.edu/courses/songwriting-melody#!faculty>

²⁹ Corrinne May. (2007, March 16). *The New Paper*.

Chen, S. (2012, April 6). Going the Mummy track. *The Straits Times*.

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