

Stefanie Sun: Singapore's pop sensation

Written by Jaime Koh on 10 February 2014

When Stefanie Sun Yanzi (孙燕姿) burst onto the music scene in 2000, she took the Chinese pop music markets in Singapore and Taiwan by storm. Within a year, she chalked up impressive record sales and swept about a dozen Best Newcomer Awards at various music award shows. Despite periodic absences from the music scene, Sun continues to be one of Singapore's most popular singers.

Early years

Stefanie Sun Yan Zi (孙燕姿) is a Singaporean singer. Born to an engineering lecturer father and teacher mother, Sun has two sisters.¹ She attended St Andrew's Junior College and the Nanyang Technological University, majoring in marketing.^{2 3}

Sun started her musical education young. She started learning the piano when she was five years old.⁴ She also loved to sing. "I was always singing. I remember my primary school classmates used to get very irritated and say, "Can you stop it?" she recalled.⁵

At 19, Sun enrolled in the Lee Wei Song School of Music.⁶ Although Sun was interested in singing, she had not enrolled for the course with the thought of becoming a professional singer.⁷ Nevertheless Sun's vocal quality stood out and attracted the attention of her music teacher Paul Li Wei Song. "Her voice has a very unique quality that's not found in anyone else," he said.⁸ Sun was then selected to go to the Artiste and Repertoire class where the most promising young singers were placed.⁹

Subsequently, Li recorded a demo tape for Sun and sent it to record companies. Warner Music showed interest and quickly signed her up.^{10 11} Although she was signed as a recording artiste, Sun did not release her album immediately. Instead she spent a few months as an intern at the record company. The internship was part of Sun's final year business degree requirement. During her stint, Sun "made coffee, photocopied documents" and "did a lot of admin stuff".¹²

Stellar rise

¹ Yeow, K. C. (2000, September 19). Newcomer Sun takes awards in her stride. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

² Teo, P. L. (2001, November 25). What makes a big Sun and star. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

³ Teo, P. L. (2000, September 8). Singer is celebrity graduand. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

⁴ Yeow, K. C. (2000, September 19). Newcomer Sun takes awards in her stride. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

⁵ Who loves the Sun? (2006, January 11). TODAY. Retrieved from Factiva.

⁶ Music coach's day in the Sun. (2000, September 10). *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

⁷ Yeow, K. C. (2000, September 19). Newcomer Sun takes awards in her stride. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

⁸ Music coach's day in the Sun. (2000, September 10). *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

⁹ Music coach's day in the Sun. (2000, September 10). *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

¹⁰ Music coach's day in the Sun. (2000, September 10). *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

¹¹ Teo, P. L. (2000, September 8). Singer is celebrity graduand. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

¹² Sng, S. (2002, April 22). Is Sun going supernova? *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

When Sun's debut album, *Sun Yanzi* (孙燕姿) was completed and released in June 2000, it flew off the racks, selling more than 400,000 copies in Taiwan within three months. The album also topped the best-selling charts for five consecutive weeks.¹³ The hit title of that album, *Cloudy Sky* (天黑黑) incorporated parts of a Hokkien folk song of the same title. Penned by her music mentor, Paul Li, *Cloudy Sky* became one of Sun's signature tunes and the song propelled her to stardom.

Her subsequent albums, *My Desired Happiness* (我要的幸福) and *Kite*, released in 2001, also did well. They chalked up more than 1.5 million sales in Taiwan.¹⁴ Sun became so popular that she was in high demand for product endorsements. She was labeled the "Queen of Ads" in Taiwan as she endorsed at least 10 products during the height of her popularity.¹⁵

Sun's success was also reflected in the number of awards won. Within a year of her debut, Sun garnered six nominations at the Taiwan Golden Melody Awards, including nominations for Best Female Mandarin Singer and Best New Artiste.¹⁶ In 2001 She snagged the Best New Artiste Award.¹⁷ Her hit song, *Cloudy Day*, won Li the Best Composer Award, while Martin Tang won the Best Arranger award for another of Sun's tracks, *My Desired Happiness*.¹⁸ Just a week before she graduated from university in 2000, Sun won the award for Best Newcomer at the Hong Kong TVB8 Mandarin Music Awards.¹⁹

Sun's stellar rise in popularity had media observers at the time saying that she had overtaken Kit Chan, Tanya Chua and Mavis Hee to become Singapore's most successful singing star.²⁰

In hot demand

Sun's healthy album sales paved the way for Sun's successful live concerts. In 2000, Sun became the first Singaporean to perform at the Taipei Zhong Zheng Memorial Hall (中正纪念堂). Sun was only the third singer to perform at the memorial to Chiang Kai Shek, after Hong Kong's Jacky Cheung and Taiwan's A-Mei. More than 20,000 braved the rain to attend the concert, a testament to Sun's appeal.²¹

Two years later, Sun hosted her first paying concert in Taiwan. Aptly titled *Start*, the concert then went on a world tour of Malaysia, Hong Kong, China and the United States.²² The Singapore leg of the tour played to a sellout crowd.²³

¹³ Teo, P. L. (2000, September 8). Singer is celebrity graduand. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

¹⁴ Teo, P. L. (2001, November 25). What makes a big Sun and star. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

¹⁵ Teo, P. L. (2001, November 25). What makes a big Sun and star. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

¹⁶ Entertainment – The Buzz. (2001, April 2). *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

¹⁷ Goh, S. N. (2001, May 6). Sun shines at awards. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

¹⁸ Goh, S. N. (2001, May 6). Sun shines at awards. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

¹⁹ Teo, P. L. (2000, September 8). Singer is celebrity graduand. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²⁰ Teo, P. L. (2001, November 25). What makes a big Sun and star. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²¹ Tee, H. C. (2000, December 4). Sun shines despite showers. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²² Sng, S. (2002, March 25). Her world is her oyster. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

In Singapore, Sun was so popular that she bagged the Best Local Artiste, Singapore Hit Awards for four consecutive years from 2001 to 2004.²⁴ Sun was also invited to sing the National Day Parade theme song for two consecutive years: *We will get there* in 2002 and *One United People* in 2003.^{25 26}

Of her appeal, Ken Lim, director of Hype Records, said, “She has a unique singing tone, a million-dollar smile, and a very good and friendly attitude. These elements are the hardest to put together because most singers have only one or the other. But Stefanie has them all”.²⁷

Burnout

Sun’s popularity and success came with a price. The bubbly singer recalled feeling burnt out as early as 2002. “I trained very, very hard for the (2002 concert) show. I was stressed to the point that there was some disruption to my psyche,” she said. “When I finally finished the show, there was all this applause and I started crying, crying, crying. There was so much emotion, relief and happiness. But when I went back to my apartment, I felt very, very alone and I thought: Now what? Wah, at that time, I felt very, very lost. There were a lot of questions in my mind: Why am I doing this?”²⁸

Shortly after that experience, Sun announced in 2003 that she was taking a one-year break.²⁹ In an interview, Sun said, “The first seven albums were very hectic. I was pretty much like a factory”.³⁰ During her break from recording albums, Sun established *Make Music*, a talent management agency and production house.³¹

Comeback

In 2004 Sun staged her comeback with another self-titled album – *Stefanie*. The album included three songs she wrote – two tracks (I Heard 听见 and Seed 种) and lyrics for the title track (*Stefanie*).³² Her brief sabbatical did not dim her popularity. Sun’s comeback album sold 2.2 million copies in Asia following its release.³³

Since her break, Sun said “it’s been a lot easier to breathe, a lot easier to rethink –

²³ Stefanie Sun hot at home. (2002, April 28). *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²⁴ She sang the same song but it’s Sun on top. (2004, September 12). *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²⁵ NDP 2002 theme song urges Singaporeans to overcome adversity. (2002, April 30). Channel NewsAsia. Retrieved from Factiva.

²⁶ Stefanie Sun will sing and perform NDP 2003’s theme song ‘One United People’. (2003, June 11). Channel NewsAsia. Retrieved from Factiva.

²⁷ Teo, P. L. (2001, November 25). What makes a big Sun and star. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²⁸ Who loves the Sun? (2006, January 11). TODAY. Retrieved from Factiva.

²⁹ Fans packed Stefanie Sun’s mini-concert before her 1-year break. (2003, September 8). Channel NewsAsia. Retrieved from Factiva.

³⁰ Sunny side up; Rich, successful, charitable, caring, humble and happy all the time? How does Stefanie Sun do it? (2007, November 23). TODAY. Retrieved from Factiva.

³¹ Lee, S. (2004, December 18). Sun’s ready to shine. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

³² *Stefanie*. Warner Music, 2004.

³³ 孙燕姿一改往日造型 清新典雅造型登封面 (2008, August 12). 四川在线. Retrieved from <http://ent.scol.cn/zs/20080812/2008812101120.htm>

what you stand for, what you like. That's the most simple and important thing for an artiste".³⁴

With *Stefanie*, Sun broke away from the catchy pop tunes and soft ballads that marked her early albums. She ventured into a variety of musical styles, including folk, lounge, rock and world music.³⁵ For her subsequent albums, Sun continued to experiment with musical styles. "There's no textbook that says after you sing this type of song, you should sing that. There are no instructions from anyone. I have to explore it and keep looking for room to grow," she said.³⁶

In 2011, Sun took another two-year break. This time it was to marry her boyfriend Nadim van der Ros and have their baby.³⁷ She returned to the music scene in September 2013 and signed on with Universal Music. The first two shows of her 2014 world tour concert to be held in Taipei on 14 and 15 February were sold out within an hour of going on sale.³⁸

To date, Sun had won more than 130 major musical awards and sold more than 30 million albums.^{39 40} She also said she will continue to sing as it is a calling.⁴¹ For Sun, the formula for success is meeting the right people and sheer hard work.⁴²

Quote

*"Fame is seriously nothing but trouble. I'm always prepared to fail. One day, whatever you do, people will not like it. Even if I decide not to continue, I have achieved what I want. I'm sure I will be remembered."*⁴³

Selected awards

- 2000 Most Promising Artiste award, Singapore Hit Awards
Best Newcomer, TVB8 Mandarin Music Awards (Hong Kong)
- 2001 Best New Artiste, Shenzhen Awards (China)
Best New Artiste, Golden Melody Awards (Taiwan)
Best Local Artiste, Singapore Hit Awards
- 2002 Young Woman Achiever, Her World Magazine (Singapore)
Best Local Artiste, Singapore Hit Awards
- 2003 Most Popular Female Artiste, Channel V Chinese Music Awards (China)
Best Local Artiste, Singapore Hit Awards
- 2004 Best Local Artiste, Singapore Hit Awards

³⁴ Sunny side up (2007, November 23). TODAY. Retrieved from Factiva.

³⁵ *Stefanie*. Warner Music, 2004.

³⁶ Who loves the Sun? (2006, January 11). TODAY. Retrieved from Factiva.

³⁷ Hong, J. Y. (2013, September 5). Mummy dearest. TODAY. Retrieved from Factiva.

³⁸ "亞洲重量級天后"孫燕姿《克卜勒》天體之美上身 全亞洲151家電台強力放送 1/15聯合首播《克卜勒》. Stefanie Sun non-official Facebook fan page. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/notes/環球華語粉絲書/亞洲重量級天后孫燕姿克卜勒天體之美上身-全亞洲151家電台強力放送-115聯合首播克卜勒/754404154571258>

³⁹ 孫燕姿一改往日造型 清新典雅造型登封面 (2008, August 12). 四川在线. Retrieved from <http://ent.scol.cn/zs/20080812/2008812101120.htm>

⁴⁰ Hong, J. Y. (2013, September 5). Mummy dearest. TODAY. Retrieved from Factiva.

⁴¹ Hong, J. Y. (2013, September 5). Mummy dearest. TODAY. Retrieved from Factiva.

⁴² Sunny side up (2007, November 23). TODAY. Retrieved from Factiva.

⁴³ Sng, S. (2002, April 22). Is Sun going supernova? *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

- 2006 Most Popular Female Artiste, 6th Global Chinese Music Awards
- 2007 Most Popular Female Artiste, 7th Global Chinese Music Awards
Singapore Region's Outstanding Singer, 7th Global Chinese Music Awards
- 2008 Favourite Artist of Singapore, MTV Asia Awards
- 2011 Most Popular Female Artiste, Singapore Hit Awards
Asia Media Award, Singapore Hit Awards
Best Album Producer, Singapore Hit Awards

Albums

- 2000 Sun Yanzi (孙燕姿) (Warner Music Taiwan)
My desired happiness 我要的幸福 (Warner Music Taiwan)
- 2001 Kite 风筝 (Warner Music Taiwan)
- 2002 Start
Leave (Warner Music Taiwan)
- 2003 To be continued 未完成 (Warner Music Taiwan)
The Moment (Warner Music Taiwan)
- 2004 Stefanie ((Warner Music Taiwan)
- 2005 A Perfect Day 完美的一天 (Warner Music Taiwan)
- 2006 My Story, Your Song (Compilation) (Warner Music Taiwan)
- 2007 Against the Light 逆光 (EMI Taiwan)
- 2011 It's time (Wonderful Music)
- 2014 Kepler 克卜勒 (single) Universal Music Taiwan

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Sunny side up (2007, November 23). TODAY. Retrieved from Factiva.

Tee, H. C. (2000, December 4). Sun shines despite showers. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

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