

Malia

Everything started some twenty-five years ago in Malawi, a tiny East African country bounded by Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia. This small republic was then recently independent - and still had the puritanical leanings of British cultural domination - when Malia was born, one of six children. Her mother being African and her father being English, family history set a particular tone straight away - life was to be a rich mix of black and white. An ordinary childhood, a strict upbringing, yet a happy, uneventful life within the family cell. Little penetrated from outside, and there was little contact with the outside world as it was. Only local radio with its two paltry stations - one in the local language and one in English - was there to pour forth traditional African music. For English pop music, the Beatles in particular, there was her father's record collection; no jazz at all, apart from one Louis Armstrong record. In short, this was no environment conducive to making music, and there was no early vocation for singing, just the fun of cycling through the surrounding countryside and climbing trees. A classic, idyllic childhood. However, the one memory which does stand out - common to most little girls - is an innate sense of dance and a taste for entertainment.

Everything was to change in the late 1980s, when for political reasons the family had to go into exile in London. The 14-year-old Malia discovered a new world full of noise, excitement and plenty - but also of grey indifference. At a time of usual adolescent hang-ups, the young Malia took refuge in music. At this time London was dancing to the synthetic harmonies of New Wave, but Malia went against the tide, discovering jazz, Sarah Vaughan and Billie Holliday in particular. This was a revelation to her, and there was no turning back. She immediately realised that something fundamental to her was being played out in these black voices which sang so happily about the pain of being alive. Or vice versa. She was then sure she would become a singer, one day or another.

As time went by, she gradually took charge of her life. She finished school, had a string of waitressing jobs, began singing backup in minor pop endeavours, learning the tricks of the trade. Little by little her life took shape. She set out on her own, finding a pianist to write songs and accompany her, hired musicians, sang in bars, spent her days on the phone trying to find gigs, organising everything with passion, hard work and personal investment. At that time she was mostly singing ballads, still refining her technique, still seeking her particular style, but she already had her own voice and her own personality, as yet unpolished but undeniably attractive.

That was the state of affairs when, a scant two years ago, in a smart New York restaurant, she happened to hear a zippy pop melody with overtones of jazz harmonies being sung in French. She whispered to her sister: "That's exactly what I want to do. I've got to work with the guy who produced that." The idea took root, and she rose to the challenge. Malia found out the song's credits. The singer was Liane Foly and the producer André Manoukian. She didn't know it yet, but her life had just changed. She contacted Virgin, who finally gave her Manoukian's number, and she contacted him straight away. He still remembers that first, out-of-the-ordinary phone call: "I'd realised very early on, when I left the Berklee School in Boston, that what I liked working with best was female vocals. Working with Liane in the late 80s, I was able to experiment with this special relationship with voice in a sophisticated jazz-type register. I thought then I'd seen it all. But when I heard the timbre of this girl's voice on the phone, I noticed something special. I asked her to send me a demo so I could see what she was made of. Right after that I got a cassette with 40s standards sung only with a guitar accompaniment. From the first bars on, shivers went down my spine. You don't hear a voice like that every day. I knew I was on to something."

They hit it off immediately. Manoukian realised he'd miraculously been handed a Stradivarius, and Malia knew she'd found her Pygmalion, the one who would show her the way.

The result was her first album "Yellow Daffodils", a masterly collection thrusting her straight to the fore among young jazz singers. A selection of bare-faced songs, deceptively simple, timeless and ultra-melodic, playing on jazz roots, blending in the spirit of the 40s standards - Cole Porter especially - enveloped in clever, sophisticated arrangements, highly contemporary in tone, swinging from resolute soul to discreet electronic rhythms, so elegant in the way they strip everything down to the essentials without ever becoming austere. But above all, there is the Voice. An extraordinary voice, understated and restrained, yet masterfully daring in the way it penetrates to the innermost depths of each phrase, to the very heart of emotion, with no extravagance, no pathos, just the striving to reveal the dark side of things, in the manner of Billie Holliday or Shirley Horn. A unique approach, which André Manoukian sums up in these terms: "Malia is a composer's dream. She can sing anything, jazz, soul, gospel, whatever. There's something fragile in her voice, something universal, a certain reticence and innocence. She goes far beyond just technique. She has a direct, no-frills approach to the melody, following it to the letter, and this lets her transcend it while keeping to the purity of line. She sings the score while keeping the whole thing self-contained, that's her secret. She's a crazy mixture of timeless classicism and up-to-the-minute modernity." There's no better way to describe the inimitable charm of this exceptional voice. Listen to the singer of the future.