

The Sensual World by Elizabeth Aubrey

Just over a decade before the release of *The Sensual World*, Kate Bush famously looked to literature for inspiration on her debut single, a song which topped the UK singles charts for a month and made Bush the first female artist to achieve a UK No 1 with a self-written song. *Wuthering Heights* saw Bush immersed in Emily Brönte's gothic fever dream as she sang of wild moors, grief, lost loves and haunted nights under the guise of the book's doomed protagonist, Catherine 'Cathy' Earnshaw. Over a decade later, there were uncanny parallels as Bush turned to another famous female literary character on *The Sensual World's* title track: Molly Bloom from James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Bush famously tried (and failed) to get permission to use Molly's lengthy stream-of-conscious narrative at the end of *Ulysses* from the Joyce estate. Indeed, she'd already set Molly's soliloquy to music and the song was album-ready. Despite being devastated when permission was refused, Bush was undeterred and re-wrote Molly's speech in her own words. Where Bush's 19-year-old teenage imagination ran riot as Cathy, her 30-year-old take on Bloom was an altogether more measured and nuanced one. Her comments about the record in 1989 were revealing: "Someone said in your teens, you get the physical puberty, and between 28 and 32, mental puberty. It does make you feel differently."

While Molly may well have been more grounded than the ethereal characters of Bush's previous albums, her inclusion was still a radical act. Bloom's narrative in Joyce's earth-shattering work is one of a candid sexual awakening: she is a real woman speaking of the very real desire she feels towards her husband-to-be. In Bush's re-imagining, Bloom's erotic thoughts are no less overt: "Then I'd take the kiss of seedcake back from his mouth," she sings evocatively before the imagery and breathy delivery flirts between the literal and the metaphorical. "Rolled our bodies/Off of Howth Head and into the flesh... he said I was a flower of the mountain... to where the water and the earth caress."

Female characters in songs are historically defined in relation to men: the wives and lovers, the sum of individual parts but rarely a whole person in their own right – let alone one who yearns for sexual desire and satisfaction. Bush took Molly from the pages of a male-authored novel and "into the sensual world", a place where she was allowed to experience desire on the same terms as her husband-to-be. As Bush told *Pulse* in 1989: "A lot of people have said it's sexy... the original piece was sexy, too; it had an incredible sensuality which I'd like to think this track has as well. I suppose it's walking a thin line a bit, but it's about the sensuality of the world and how it is so incredibly pleasurable to our senses if we open up to it."

The song bursts into life with church bells. As well as heralding Molly's status as bride-to-be, they also ring out a new celebratory opening of sorts, both for Molly and for Bush. Whereas Cathy was a product of the fantastical, thrashing across open moors in dreams and nightmares, Molly calmly walks among nature against a backdrop of gentle uilleann pipes and Irish folk on a song inspired by a traditional Macedonian bride's dance.

Earthy, relatable characters saturate the 10 songs on the album, with each feeling like a mini, biographical-vignette as we're offered a snapshot into the lives of another. Short story-like in structure (much like another Joyce work, *Dubliners*), characters often grapple with their identities and place in the world around them as they pass from innocence to experience. To match this shifting of her lyrical focus, the synth-dreamscapes of Bush's earlier work were understandably largely absent, replaced by harps, violins, solitary pianos and the Bulgarian voice choir, Trio Bulgarka, whose vocals haunt throughout.

On the intricate Love And Anger the narrator struggles to speak about traumatic events of the past: "It lay buried here/ It lay deep inside me/It's so deep that I don't think that I can speak about it." The stress is mirrored in the nervousness of the song's instrumentation: there's the delicate valiha of Bush's brother Paddy and the tentative, heartbeat-like percussion of Stuart Elliott, who captures the anxiety of a character coming to terms with a harrowing memory. By the time David Gilmour's sporadic guitar bursts into a fuller life towards the end of the song, a euphoric tone abounds as hope prevails once the character comes to terms with their past. It's a complex song and one that perhaps unsurprisingly took Bush two years to compose.

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The Fog follows a similar stylistic and emotional path, from fear to hope. "It's all about trying to grow up," Bush said of the song to Len Brown for *NME* at the time. "Growing up for most people is just trying to stop escaping, looking at things inside of yourself rather than outside." Taking the idea of a father teaching a child to swim (the voice of Bush's own father can be heard on the song) it's a song about letting go, of facing fears and uncertainty, of sinking or soaring. The gossamer strings of Nigel Kennedy create a melancholic atmosphere in the early stages until their tension builds to a more hopeful crescendo as the child learns to let go. It eventually progresses into a song about relationships, of immersing yourself in another person completely, much as Molly does with Leonard.

Album standout *This Woman's Work* was written to accompany an emotive scene from John Hughes' *She's Having A Baby*. When an expectant mother runs into difficulties in the delivery room, a nervous father confronts adulthood in all its widescreen-terror – he's forced to face the possibility of loss as his mind darts from the moment they met to worst case scenarios. Placing the female front and centre once more, this time we see a woman through the eyes of a man: "I stand outside this woman's work/This woman's work/ Ooh it's hard on the man/Now his part is over," Bush sings on this emotional crush of a song as the man suddenly realises he is devoid of power and influence.

There are still some momentary flights of fancy on the album in between its realism. While these may have felt surreal in 1989, now they are eerily prescient. *Heads We're Dancing* shows a young girl being duped by the words of a powerful, devil-like dictator and *Deeper Understanding* explores the isolation caused by spending too much time in front of a computer, desperate for virtual love and becoming more devoid of reality and truth with each passing day. The songs could easily soundtrack 2020, both lyrically and sonically. Stepping away from the stripped-back instrumentation of the album's more delicate moments here, lush synths swoon and electronic experimentation thrives.

The Sensual World is a brave about-turn of an album, with Bush placing real-life front and centre, choosing joy and deciding just how and what her growing up will look like as she progresses into her next creative era. Just as Molly Bloom had done 60 years earlier, Bush let go and found her own creative freedom. As she said to *NME* back then, "Rather than being in this two-dimensional world, [Molly is] free, let loose to touch things, feel the ground under her feet, the sunsets, just how incredibly sensual a world it is."