

CRISTINA may live in luxury, but she's no pampered butterfly, as Helen FitzGerald finds out

IF YOU called Cristina a Lady to her face she'd probably leer saucily like an up-market Mae West and offer you a refill from the silver service coffee pot conjured from the kitchen by one of her maids.

To say she's disagreeable would be a vicious lie. There is, nevertheless, a feeling that you've been granted an audience, a few fleeting moments of her time, and the moment the apartment door closes behind you she'll resume the busy schedule of her life and dismiss the incident completely from her mind.

Cristina is a woman fulfilled — but then she can afford to be. Fate has been kind and her life reads like an uptown soap-opera.

Daintily beautiful, intelligent, witty and (when the need arises) intimidatingly academic, she's the life partner of entrepreneurial Mothercare heir Michael Zilkha, owner, creator and *persona* of the infamous Ze label. It was a label, despite the lady's protestations, which was initially formed as a vehicle for her first disastrous foray into the format of song.

Spawmed by a Franco-Italian theatrical background, she took History and French Lit. at Harvard after graduating from London's Central School Of Drama. Meeting Zilkha in the newsroom of New York's Village Voice where they both works as theatre critics was, she says, "completely fated".

"He was writing this article on Harold Robbins at the time and I recall he said to me, 'Harold Robbins is the eighth grade Balzac of an eighth grade age'. I think that's what did it for me — I've been in love with Balzac since I was 10 years old and here was a man who loved his work as much as me."

CRISTINA sits in the centre of neo-opulence and beckons the visitor onto her couch. Any air of regality is foiled by the new Zilkha sibling Lucinda, who sicks up some curdled milk on her mother's arm. Cristina giggles and dabs at the mess with a doting glance at her daughter. Far from the caricatured decadence of her past, from the seedy vignettes of her songs, she's very much at home in her environs but suggest, as many do, that she's a dilettante financed by an indulgent husband and the slap-down is immediate.

"Okay, so I fell into music ass-backwards but I'm sick of media insinuations that my records are a project Michael dreamed up to keep the little wifey amused," she snaps.

Her musical debut in 1978 also marked Ze's initiation as a label; the song was "Disco Clone" produced

by John Cale, a god-awful bastardisation of disco and punk. Neither this flop nor the subsequent LP orchestrated with the embryonic Kid Creole augured well for her chances but then Cristina, unlike her spouse, wasn't really in it for the bucks.

Art was an all-embracing term and popular success wasn't that important. Then, again in cohorts with August Darnell, she cooked up the idea of recording Lieber and Stoller's "Is That All There Is?" — with customised lyrical adaptations à la Cristina. Poignant, funny and purposely droll it was released in 1980 and almost immediately withdrawn under threat of litigation from its authors who found her interpretations a little too — flamboyant.

She waves her hand in the air, contemptuous of such a stuffy attitude. "I just loved the absurdist aspect of it," she offers by way of explanation. "My first two records were crap but that one and 'The Christmas Song' I stand by completely."

THIS week the Lady has a new record out, an album "Sleep It Off" produced by Don (Was Not Was)

Fagenson and graced with a formidable pedigree of musicians. The fact that Cristina can't sing but lilt her way in a Mogadon drone only enhances the sickly sweet decadence of her vividly pictorial songs, sick little homilies to the underbelly of urban life. Peopled by fading socialites and no-hopers on self-destruct, these ditties explore masochistic satisfaction with all the amoral colour of B-movie sleaze. Nothing new you might say, but Cristina has enough sass to infuse what could have been clichés with a style of her own. Her self-confessed obsession for Brecht/Weill (she executes a stylish cover of "The Ballad Of Immoral Earnings" duetted with Ben Brierley), Grand Opera, Noel Coward, tacky movies and genuine camp graduates beyond the obvious into uncomfortably dissonant yet fascinating ground.

"I like everything to fight everything else," she laughs, "I think that's quite sexy and stimulating. For example a lyric like 'Don't Mutilate My Mink' would have sounded like a Bette Midler song if I'd given it a real cute melody. The fact that it's punky and

harsh makes it more up market, more dour. The abrasion of it creates more impact — enhances the absurd. It really pisses me off that men can sing about their cocks in every song yet when I mention pussy it's like I've done the unmentionable," she shrugs, a passing reference to some reviews which suggested that Madame Zilkha is no more than a third rate Grace Jones, a spoilt rich kid venting her childish humour at our expense.

One American paper called her a "tongue in cheek cross between Lotte Lenya and Lydia Lunch with a dash of wasted chanteuse à la Marianne Faithfull or Nico", concluding that she was a "pouting, treacherous gold-digger — shouldn't this white trash go back where she belongs?" But Cristina's songlets perceive more than the debris of consumerism. There's a lot of self-humour and deprecation involved. It's a very female album and she underscores her point with heavy traces of sarcasm.

"I try to steer away from stereotypes," she announces, reaching urgently for another Marlboro after depositing her offspring into the arms of a hovering nanny. "I see women as being both vulnerable and masochistic — all the things we've been since history began. I'm sick of women's 'role' in things being carved by ignorance."

"Okay, so now magazines are telling us that we can have a career and a man and a baby — like, Nirvana! But what happens to the bulk of women who maybe work at the underwear counter of some department store and go home to a bedst every night. And who put up with their boyfriend beating up on them once in a while because that's the only way they know?" She pauses for effect, staring through the window at the bustling examples below. Quite a little drama queen our Cristina but she poses with such natural flair that you have to laugh with her.

"I had such a fight with Michael and Don to do my cover of 'The Ballad Of Immoral Earnings'," she sighs, "they said it would sound like nostalgic crap but I wanted to do it straight so some 14-year-old who's never heard of Brecht and Weill could appreciate it. All they ever get to hear is people like Bowie who do piss-elegant cabaret/theatre covers as a form of intellectual name-dropping. There were some lumberjacks in Detroit (where the LP

was recorded) who said that was their favourite track. That proved my point."

With the aid of the Was Not Was duo along with the musical skills of James Chance, Andy Hernandez, Barry Reynolds and Ben Brierley the album was very much a corporate Ze affair... but crafted strictly to Cristina's instructions. Her husband is credited as "executive producer" but really he was "just there to keep an eye on me!"

From the twisted punkette of "Don't Mutilate My Mink" to the jaded drawl of "The Lie Of Love" and the spicy marimba on "Ticket To The Tropics", the tracks are unified by her deadpan vocal and their play on seamy situations.

THE Lady stands accused of being a debutante whose worldliness is as fake as the diary of an imaginative schoolgirl. Does she sing from experience? Is Cristina's fatalism drawn from life or could it be culled from trash novels, junk culture blues and an appetite for the rampant hedonism in the works of her heroes Balzac and Zola?

"Oh, I've lived it — most of it," she states with matter of fact panache. "I'm not writing from some ivory tower, I know what I'm talking about. I might not be participating in the sordid side of life any more, but I've done that too." Teasing, she refuses to elaborate, but you don't feel she's kidding.

Our hostess is fairly resigned to being stuck in a musical ghetto of one. She's not commercial but that's no crisis in her life.

"Michael keeps asking me why I can't write songs like Madonna. I tell him because I have brains. Why does Cyndi Lauper dress her mother like a scarecrow and shove her into videos?"

And she wins this hack's affections by referring to Michael Jackson as "a homogenised little creep — I mean all that 'Thriller' stuff. Didn't Fifties kitsch go out about 10 years ago?"

Schizophrenically divided into loving wife, mother and world-weary siren, Cristina can switch roles in seconds. At pains to point out that in the end nothing really matters, she's still a multi-faceted vehicle of her own design! Scared little rich kid or op-art bard, it doesn't really matter. Her records are a lot more valid than the victims of her art.



Pic: Paul Rider

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