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Lorde: A Kiwi music mystery

Tom Cardy · 12:24, May 10 2013

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MUSIC SENSATION: 16-year-old Ella Yelich-O'Connor, aka Lorde.

She seemed to come out of nowhere. In just two months Lorde has become the Kiwi pop star everyone's talking about.

The only one yet to talk much is the teenager herself, 16-year-old Ella Yelich-O'Connor. With the popularity of television talent shows The X-Factor and New Zealand's Got Talent, predecessor New Zealand Idol, it's rare for a pop singer to be embraced so quickly without television exposure

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slow build up via record company promotions and early singles before the dizzying heights of Someone That I Used to Know with Australian Gotye.

Yelich-O'Connor is another story. Eight weeks ago, with minimal promotion, the Auckland teenager's single Royals went into the New Zealand charts at No 1. Her The Love Club EP of five tracks went into the album charts at No 2. This week Royals is at No 4, having gone platinum with sales of more than 15,000 copies.

The Love Club EP is at No 8 and was downloaded 60,000 times for free before going on sale on iTunes.

Most people were caught off guard by Yelich-O'Connor's sudden chart-topping appearance. It was the rarest of things - a Kiwi music mystery. Few outside the music industry had heard of her. Fewer still had seen her perform. When 140 tickets went on sale last month for tonight's Wellington show, they sold out in minutes. Or, to be exact, "73 seconds," says Sally Thomson, manager of venue Mighty Mighty.

Tickets for two shows at the 320 capacity Galatos in Auckland yesterday also sold out in minutes.

Mighty Mighty hosts international and Kiwi acts, big names and small. But Thomson says the response to Yelich-O'Connor has been phenomenal. This week the venue has continued to field calls, emails and social media messages from people hoping to get a ticket or special entry, despite being sold out.

"We have been inundated with requests, with [people saying] 'please squeeze me in'. There's been a crazy demand for tickets.

"She seems to have struck a chord with everybody at the moment. It's incredible considering it [will be] her second live show. We've sold nothing that quickly."

What has been refreshing about Yelich-O'Connor is that, with little in the way of promotion or hype, the response has centred on the music itself. Lorde's style is a successful marriage of upbeat radio-friendly pop with an indie touch, reminiscent of popular female artists overseas including Britain's Florence + The Machine, American Lana Del Rey and Canadian Grimes.

It's a sound that's equally popular with mainstream radio listeners, as it is with hipsters. Lorde also has a versatile and strong singing voice which seems to effortlessly fit different styles.

Signed to recording giant Universal, the label's promotions director Justin Warren says Yelich-O'Connor was busy during the April school holidays working on her debut album, which is likely to be released later this year. School holidays have been productive for her in the past. It's when she recorded Royals and other songs on her EP.

She will give interviews around the time of the album's release, says Warren. In the meantime Yelich-O'Connor, befitting many performers, speaks mostly through Twitter and Facebook.

What we do know is that she's been working for the past three years towards releasing music. Universal spotted her when she was 12, performing at an Auckland intermediate.

She signed a recording contract when she was 13 and was working with song writers at 14. An important factor has been co-writer Joel Little, who first hit the spotlight in Kiwi pop punk band Goodnight Nurse but in recent years has been more busy behind the scenes, including acts Kids of 88 and Dane Rumble. Yelich-O'Connor would spend up to 50-60 hours a week writing and recording in Little's Auckland studio.

Her management includes Tim Youngson, who started out as the guitarist of Grammy-nominated Kiwi punk-pop band Stereogram.

Yelich-O'Connor has also made an impact overseas. It has included praise from Grimes' Claire Boucher, influential celebrity blogger Perez Hilton and, last week, popular American website BuzzFeed. It hailed her as a future star. "Every song on her The Love Club EP is worth listening to repeatedly," wrote BuzzFeed's Rachel Sanders.

Yelich-O'Connor is also to perform two shows in Australia this month. They've also sold out.

From Mighty Mighty's perspective, Thomson is also rapt to see a new Kiwi act be so quickly embraced. "The type of music she makes just resonates with people at the moment. I don't know, if she appeared two years ago, whether the reaction would have been the same.

"We're just really happy for her. It's going to be an amazing show."

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