

Pop is inherently disposable and of the moment, yet its most popular and emblematic princess has dominated the culture for 35 years. Michael Holden considers the paradoxical qualities that have made Kylie such an enduring icon



We think we'd like to time travel, but I wonder if anyone could cope. Particularly with the past – especially our own. I am thinking about when I first saw Kylie Minogue in the 1980s, but the idea of the 1980s keeps pushing into the picture. Famous then versus famous now seems an impossible equation, let alone famous throughout. Perhaps it's easier if you weren't there. I was, and so a certain feeling attaches to everything from then. Can I separate Kylie from the context in which I became conscious of her? Should one try? To be journalistic in the old-fashioned, pre-culture-war sense meant to avoid taking a position,

me it was about back ache. When the ceremony screened in the UK on 8th November 1988, I was in pain. Days earlier I had tried to copy or, more likely, parody the way someone who could actually dance was dancing in a club. Walking home from the night bus I noticed my back hurt. By the morning I could hardly stand. I bought some Nurofen which, like Kylie, was still relatively new then, and fled to my parents to lie down in what I presumed would be a more attentive environment. But I had miscalculated. My parents were away, so when Charlene/Kylie was married I looked on alone from the sofa in considerable discomfort. Twenty million other

white, Australian performer turns out for the Queen, as Kylie did for the monarch's birthday in 2018, quite what these cultures are saying to one another on these occasions, is thesis worthy. Nick Cave, who once embodied and invoked the shadow to considerable effect and with whom Kylie as the lighter counterpoint had previously collaborated, has found himself recast through tragedy and revelation as a kind of sagacious national confidante. It is he who enters Westminster Abbey alongside the former archbishop of Canterbury for the coronation, while Kylie's whereabouts on that day remain a private matter. This is not the outcome anyone would have bet on from the sofa back in 1988 if asked which of these two might wind up closer to the throne.

Had my mother been at home, none of this would have been allowed. Watching television then was somewhat akin to the internet now – which is to say a permitted but reviled and suspicious medium which one generation felt might well be the undoing of another and perhaps even everything. Australian television... that was another matter. There was a layer of distance, perhaps some ridicule and scope for irony in the consumption of this distant product which allowed it to present as somehow lighter than the real thing. Storylines in British soaps made tabloid headlines. Homosexuality, hard drugs and hard times moved between BBC1's *Eastenders* and Channel 4's *Brookside* in a kind of narrative arms race. Australian soaps were for the daytime (*Prisoner Cell Block H* notwithstanding) and were sculpted accordingly. In this lost, pre-internet paradigm, *Neighbours* was screened twice a day in case

you missed it. After the one o'clock news and just before the six. Under the auspices of this strange and very British form of snobbery, something real happened. The show, which was a parochial hit in Australia, became a phenomenon in the UK. Some obscure cultural code had been satisfied, or maybe broken. We were in love. The question now was what or who with? The answer would become Kylie, but not just yet. She, or rather what we took her to be, had sufficient resonance that what she did – acting, singing – was for a time less important than the fact that she was doing it. Her character in *Neighbours* had been a mechanic and the speed and utility with which she worked or was applied to the various gears of fame seemed germane to that, if not especially personal or particular. PWL, her UK record label, was known as the Hit Factory and functioned accordingly. For the next two years she released singles almost as often as I swallowed ibuprofen and to greater effect. I limped around London, by the end of the 1980s she was already a global superstar. Walls fell, empires receded and Kylie grew in commercial prowess, if not yet into herself. In pursuit of the latter she signed to Deconstruction records in 1993. The label had a hard-to-get T-shirt at the time which read, simply, 'Bomb the Past.' Nothing so violent was necessary in Kylie's case, because there was nothing rigid enough yet to be destroyed. Perhaps this is the essence of real pop music. Something fluid, less statement-driven than other genres, enables a kind of 'gone before you know it but always back soon' paradox. Pop is almost unnatural in this regard in that it offers things life cannot: change without

Neighbours, a parochial hit in Australia, became a phenomenon in the UK. We were in love. The question now was what or who with? The answer would become Kylie

but what has not already been said journalistically in the 35 years since she arose – politely – into awareness? At the time there was no hint of the duration of her stay (permanent) or the breadth of her domain (total). But here we are now, us and Kylie, 80 million records later. Is surprise still possible in such a long relationship? We'd better hope so. Maybe to bring vitality to longevity we have to drop our guard and show something of ourselves. This is considerably easier if you are not famous, so I'll go first. The wedding of Charlene Robinson, Kylie Minogue's character in the Australian soap opera *Neighbours*, was packaged for heartache, but for

Britons did the same, although many of them will have enjoyed it more than me. Back then, watching certain things and thus people on television was simply what one did regardless of what was going on in your life and who you were. Although we were all different, there were a few times a week when we were – almost – all the same. Out of this quasi-religious cultural mass came Kylie Culture. Britain's cultural relationship with Australia is a peculiar thing. The shadow aspects of colonialism, the parts of the collective psyche exiled to the far side of the world, can only be permitted to return in processed form. Quite what it means when a

KYLIE

loss, time without bereavement. For all that, the move to Deconstruction yields the first Kylie statement single that seems like her, or her as we have come to perceive her: 1994's 'Confide in Me'. Here then was something one could build upon.

This she did. 2000's 'Spinning Around' into 2001's 'Can't Get You Out of My Head' is one of the great one-two punches of pop cultural history. There is no looking back from this, never again can there be a question of stature. In monster-movie terms, this is when Kylie becomes Mecha-Kylie, a thing of industrial certainty, but one tempered by real frailty. She is seriously ill, candid about this and survives. What else matters? From here on in, the point is that she is around. She is one of us now, and also her. But for all this, something seems hidden still – or (and this is no bad thing for anyone bearing the weight of so much projection) how much of what we see is actually there?

By 2019 I had learned it wasn't the Eighties club scene that had laid me low, but an ancestral curse which had been coming all the time and which showed its hand upon the dancefloor back in the early days of *Neighbours* but which was now, with age, receding. Kylie though was moving ever forward. She plays Glastonbury, having cancelled when unwell, and this show becomes a kind of coronation. If there is a position she has consolidated it, but the question – at least for me – remained: what is that position?

It is an achievement in itself if, after four decades in the spotlight, you can keep anyone guessing about anything. Madonna, with whom Kylie is frequently compared and against

whom she, Kylie, has always been forthright and content to assume the junior position, seems to have a near-pathological drive to expose. 'I don't quite know how this happened,' said Kylie once of being so famous. It is not something one can picture Madonna saying or allowing herself to feel.

Asked once how she sidestepped the pitfalls of many a child star (she was first on screen aged 10) Kylie credited her family: 'I know unequivocally that they are there.' Madonna, famously, formed herself in part from the trauma of losing a parent. These are simplistic comparisons and analyses, but they may still be instructive. Consider the recent speculations about Madonna's appearance. Again, the cultural forces in play here are thesis material, but there is something highly and profoundly personal about what we are looking for when we look in the mirror. In psychoanalytic theory the mirror role is an exchange in which the infant seeks affirmation in the reaction of a loving other, and one which we reenact to some extent with our reflection and hence our image, all our lives. Madonna, one feels, is still hungry somehow, for something, and since she might be insatiable then it follows societally (or, if you prefer, misogynistically) that she must be reviled. Kylie Minogue, by way of contrast, seems alright, and so perhaps we are better able to leave her be. And yet – who is she? The question persists because there remains that sense of something discreet about her. Something subtle and perhaps safe from the weight of public will. We should all be so lucky.

In August 2019 I believe I caught sight of it and, significantly, it was when Kylie was talking about someone else. Richard Lowenstein's

documentary *Mystify* is a remarkable study of the director's friend, Michael Hutchence. The whole piece, while public, somehow abides within a sense of confidentiality, and this especially evident in a 14-minute sequence in which Kylie talks about her relationship with Michael over an extended montage of home movies and memorabilia supplied by herself. Kylie's archive and recollections are offered here in memory of Michael, but in so doing and in how she does so, she does, I think, offer something indisputably real. The effect is quietly magical in part because this reserved aspect seems not just human but also, and in all kinds of ways, good. 'Kylie

Of course, it does not last. When they break up she reflects that 'I realised then this was beyond me. This was a bigger story.' This is simply not the kind of thing that very famous people tend to say. What the sequence denotes might be attached to her endurance and popularity – her survival.

Fame tends to reward damage only to claim its fee by causing more of it. This is presumptuous of course, but Kylie seems to have avoided this transaction, somehow safely situated at the intersection of the phenomenal and the real – not a paradox that many can straddle. Thus she becomes precious without the need

2000's 'Spinning Around' into 2001's 'Can't Get You Out of My Head' is one of the great one-two punches of pop cultural history

is not the person people think she is,' says Hutchence at one point, and this portion of the documentary seems to be proving the point. 'Being in so much limelight,' says Kylie in the film, 'it doesn't let you naturally evolve.' Yet what is shown here is, or appears to be, so natural that it becomes truly (and I note that my teenage self would neither have desired, detected nor appreciated any of this in her character's wedding) romantic. Not in the idealised sense, but in the sense that there is something possible between people which can render our experience of being people tangibly sublime, no matter who we are or where we come from.

to be ideal, extraordinary without contriving to be weird. Despite titling an album to the contrary, she is an eminently possible princess. If famous now and famous then is an impossible equation, then Kylie might be the algebra that solves it. Consider, in the Instagram era, keeping something private for 30 years until the right filmmaker comes along. This becomes part of the power of *Mystify*, and perhaps part of what the faithful offer Kylie and what she offers in return. We feel our heart would be in safe hands. Devotion made easy. If we can't bear it? If we are not ready? Well, that's our problem. She has been here for us all along.