

Class act

Her music is as breathtakingly beautiful as the images it was written to accompany. Sheena Grant finds out what inspires composer Sarah Class

Musician and composer Sarah Class is a woman in demand. At only 34 years old she is already one of Britain's most sought-after

musical talents, whose hauntingly beautiful and evocative compositions have helped bring to life many of the nation's favourite natural history documentaries over the last decade or so.

She may not yet be a household name but many of the landmark series for which she has provided the music are, including the David Attenborough-fronted Africa, Madagascar and the State of the Planet.

Sarah is about to make her first trip to Suffolk.

On October 25, she will take to the stage as part of the Halesworth Arts Festival with a performance of music and personal reflection. Proceeds from the evening will support the conservation work of the World Land Trust (WLT), which is based in the town, and for whom Sarah is an ambassador. Television presenter and conservationist Bill Oddie, also a WLT supporter, will also join Sarah on stage for this Musical Safari. She may be a big name in the world of music but Sarah remains remarkably grounded and down to earth.

Her conversation is peppered with words such as "vibey" and she comes across as someone who just loves to make and play music, spend time in the natural world that has inspired so much of her work and lose herself through surfing.

She's looking forward to making the journey east from her home in Bristol and speaks passionately about the work of the WLT, an international conservation charity that raises funds to buy and protect critically threatened tropical forests and other vital wildlife habitats.

"It's one of the most singularly powerful and effective charities that I've been fortunate enough to experience," she says. "I got involved because I was looking for a way to help the environment through my music and the WLT seemed to be a quietly powerful and effective charity making huge headway into protecting natural habitats.

"My three biggest loves are people, nature and music - in no particular order - and through music I hope to do something to help the other two. The more you highlight animals and the problems in our world the more beauty you show people, who might go on to feel the importance of protecting these habitats.

"The evening in Halesworth is part of that. It will feature music, film sequence and I will do a kind of question and answer with Bill Oddie, talking about how I approach writing scores for TV and film and how I got into the business."

She credits her "dreamy" childhood on the Isle of Wight, where her biology teacher father ran a nature reserve, with inspiring both her love of the natural world and her music.

"I learned piano when I was very young," she says. "I wrote poetry and composed music early on. After school I went to (Chichester) university, where I did a course in music and art, using my interest in jazz to experiment in different genres."

Success came early. After leaving university she worked on a number of album, television and film projects and in 1999 wrote the score for The Weekend, an independent film starring Gena Rowlands and Brooke Shields.

"George Martin noticed my music around that time," she says with a casualness that makes me wonder if she's talking about someone other than Sir George Martin, legendary

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interview

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Beatles' producer. She isn't.

"Around the same time," she continues. "I went to LA and started writing classical crossover because I loved it and enjoyed experimenting with it."

It wasn't long before Warner Classics asked her to provide all the music for *Aurora-Cantamus*, a bestseller that was nominated for a Classical BRIT Best Album award.

"That was quite scary," she says.

The success of her writing for that album brought her to the attention of Decca and she was asked to write some songs for Hayley Westenra's chart-topping album *Pure* in 2003.

Undoubtedly her prodigious talent has been at the root of her success but Sarah admits to a little bit of luck along the way too.

"Early on in my career I tried to get an agent but hadn't done enough to get taken on at that time," she says. "But it led to me being told about a composer who needed help with *The Weekend*. I was asked if I would be up for it. We ended up writing it together and it was the thing that kick-started me into that world. It might have been incredibly difficult to get in otherwise."

Her other credits include writing the score for the 2008 Paul Newman-narrated film *Meerkats* and a plethora of television soundtracks from *Time Team: Henry VIII's Lost Palaces* to the four-part series *Blitz Street* in 2010.

But the biggest body of her work so far is probably related to nature programming.

"I live in Bristol, quite near the BBC Natural History unit, which helps," she says. "Also, I love writing for wildlife. I love nature. It is my escape."

"I grew up on a nature reserve on the Isle of Wight. It was beautiful. As far back as I can remember I had this beautiful place to grow up in. My father was a biology teacher and always showed my sister and I plants and wildlife. I was a nerdy kid. I would classify these plants. I was really into *Watership Down*. It was a childhood full of nature, art, poetry and music."

"I used to want to be a concert pianist, then a jazz pianist but then I realised you needed to practise for eight hours a day for that to happen. That didn't seem right to me. It was a dream I hadn't thought through."

So instead she combines her film and TV soundtrack composition with being a singer-songwriter, performing her folky-Americano sounding pieces. She's currently working on her own album.

"I'd really love to develop that side of things," she says. "It's a whole new area of creativity."

She's also developing a series of concerts incorporating her renowned Africa soundtrack, which so captivated Sir David Attenborough (also a World Land Trust patron) that he is said to have exclaimed: "What wonderful music!" when he first heard it.

"I certainly draw on my love of nature when writing," she says. "When I go out into nature it clears my head and freshens me up. I also have a love of surfing. It's like meditation to me, concentrating so hard on something else that it makes the creative energy flow. Very often, when I go out to the sea or the woods I take the guitar and a little recording device with me. Nothing gets wasted."

"It's all to do with my rich background in nature growing up. I was a child wandering the beach, looking for shells and being on the shoreline. I would walk back across the fields from my piano lessons. It was dreamy existence and it is always there in the background."

When she writes for film and television she works in a variety of ways, sometimes having seen the footage the music will relate to, sometimes not.

"I will sit down with the director,"

she says. "Very often they might have some library tracks in the film already or they might tell you the sort of thing they are after. If there is a piece of music in there that I feel is inspirational or the director loves I will make sure elements of that piece are kept in. It can be a big job incorporating an hour or more of music, opening and closing credits as well."

In the "old days" a composer might have sat down at the piano and played the director what he or she had written but not anymore, says Sarah.

"I personally write every single part using libraries and electro acoustic samples. It's a digitally-created piece. I have to make sure that it sounds so good that the director wants to invest in recording it with an orchestra."

"With Africa we worked at Abbey Road and other studios and recorded with a 50 or 60-piece orchestra."

"When I write the music it is fully composed. I write for every part of the orchestra and arrange it as I'm going. I am looking at writing three minutes of composed music a day. Sometimes I can be even more productive - perhaps six to ten minutes a day."

"I write very quickly. It seems to come from somewhere ethereal. When I am writing I hear the melody, bass and harmonies at the same time. It comes out in one big out-pouring."

"Sometimes it seems as if it comes from somewhere like a heavenly source. When I go back later and listen to what I have written I often think: 'Where did that come from?' I feel quite guided musically. I get into the flow and hear where it is going to go next."

In the future she would love to work on some big films - not necessarily animal-related - to show her song and orchestral writing off to a wider audience.

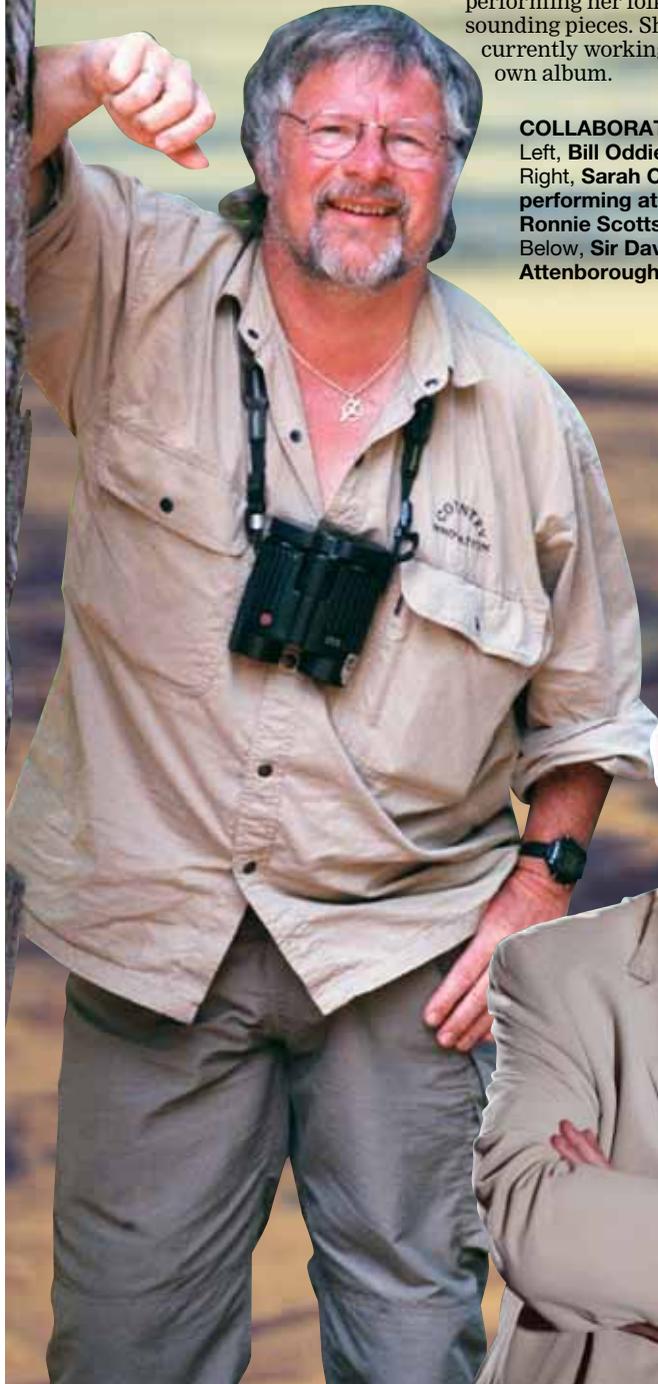
But whatever she ends up doing her commitment to the World Land Trust is ongoing.

She first got involved with the charity when she put together her debut, self-released EP *A New Dawn* in 2009.

"I wanted to find a charity to work with that I felt did great things and donate some of the album proceeds to," she says. "Initially I was looking at some of the bigger charities but I am very vibey and when I first heard about the World Land Trust and the fact that they had saved more than 500,000 acres of land over the years I got in touch with them. I do anything I can to help. They are such a brilliant and powerful organisation and just quietly get on with their incredible work. I can't rate the trust highly enough."

■ A Musical Safari with Sarah Class and Bill Oddie takes place at 7.30pm on October 25 at The Cut, Halesworth. For tickets visit www.halesworthartsfestival.org.uk/ or telephone 01986 874264.

COLLABORATION:
Left, Bill Oddie.
Right, Sarah Class
performing at
Ronnie Scotts.
Below, Sir David
Attenborough



high notes



MUSICAL TALENT: Composer Sarah Class will be talking and performing in Halesworth as part of the town's arts festival. Above, a BBC Africa recording session. Sarah composed the music for the Sir David Attenborough-fronted natural history programme



INTERNATIONAL FAME: Sarah Class singing at the International Festival of Istanbul Songs

WORLD Land Trust is an international conservation charity that raises funds for the purchase and protection of critically threatened tropical forests and other vital wildlife habitats. Its headquarters are in Halesworth.

The trust's patrons are Sir David Attenborough, former international cricketer David Gower and Springwatch presenter Chris Packham.

Sarah Class has written musical scores for a number of David Attenborough documentaries including *State of the Planet*, *The Blue Planet - Deep Trouble* and *Madagascar*, which was nominated for an Emmy award.

Sarah's music for the 2008 wildlife fiction film *The Meerkats* won Best Score

at the 2009 Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival. The soundtrack featured vocals from Sarah and an African choir with full orchestra.

Her first solo EP *A New Dawn* in 2009, marked Sarah's transition to popular music. Written and produced by Sarah, it blends pop, folk, acoustic and world music. Sarah donates £1 from each sale of *A New Dawn* to WLT.

■ For more information about the World Land Trust visit www.worldlandtrust.org. For more information about Sarah Class visit www.sarahclass.com



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