



LUNCH WITH



CERYS MATTHEWS

Kaye Martindale talks to the BBC 6 Music DJ about being a teenage rock star, throwing an axe, and keeping chillies in her bag at all times

IMAGES: GEOFF BROKATE

Every Sunday morning my family follows a tradition of eating breakfast while listening to Cerys Mathews on the BBC radio station, 6 Music. So going to meet her at Zing, an Indian restaurant in London's sophisticated and multicultural Hammersmith, felt like meeting up with an old friend. After all, I've technically been meeting her every weekend for the past two years, well her voice at least. A voice that carries a distinct Welsh accent with a soft, intimate tone, over the past six years

she has seduced half a million listeners with that lit. Cerys is a siren of the airwaves.

I arrive at the restaurant early. It has a pared down elegance, with tasteful art and Indian antique pieces positioned sparingly. The staff were busy preparing for the lunchtime rush. I meet Rahul, the owner, and he tells me how Steve Abbott – Cerys' husband and manager – was one of his first customers. He was there the night Zing opened and has been coming ever since.





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CERYS RELEASES A LAUGH THAT FILLS THE ROOM AT THE THOUGHT OF A YOUNG BLIND TEENAGE BOY DRIVING HIS BAND MEMBERS AROUND NEW ORLEANS

As I was talking to Rahul I noticed out of the corner of my eye a striking woman pass by wearing a fedora hat and a black cape – it had to be Cerys. As she strode into the restaurant it was clear her style echoed her all-encompassing musical influences.

"I always travel with fresh chillies in my bag," reveals Cerys, conspiratorially, as we sit down. "I have done for 20 years. Curry is on top of the British food charts as the most popular food in the country and this place is very special because it has taken the tired British curry and dragged it into the 21st century." As I listen to her voice I'm transported to my Sunday breakfast time, it's an enjoyable experience to have the voice animated by it's owner in real time.

I sense some natural nerves between two strangers as Cerys fiddles with the rings on her fingers. I'm surprised as she's a veteran of receiving and giving interviews. She began her career as the lead singer of '90s band Catatonia, reaching international fame with hit singles *Road Rage* and *Mulder and Scully*. The band were together for 10 years and released four albums before splitting up in 2001.

Voted Sexiest Woman In Rock, she was known as a wild frontwoman who stage-dived her way to the top. "I think the wild rocker thing is probably because I like to stir things up. Interviews can get quite boring if you're a youngster and I liked to play with that."

Cerys insists I try the Indian wine, which, she assures me, has a beautiful smokey flavour. It also eases any awkwardness and it all starts to feel like I'm meeting with an old friend.



Cerys leans forward with a complicit grin as she warns me about reports from her past "You have to be careful when you read interviews, especially when you read headlines, because papers sell better if you only represent a person in a two dimensional form."

Careful to represent as many dimensions as she can through her radio programme, Cerys holds true to her own musical philosophy. "I've never thought of music as anything but sound and so if a sound interests me or makes me feel good, it doesn't matter where it's from, what era or who it's by. So the idea of having stations that only play one kind of music, especially now with the internet, seems kind of dated to me."

It was the repetition of being in a band that eventually wore Cerys down. "If you're lucky enough to get that level of success then you're part of a business in a way," she says. "You have an itinerary and you have certain restrictions within it and you have certain restrictions within a band as well, because you've got five people, five musical tastes, five opinions and five musicians' egos. So after a good, long 10 years, it was definitely time to move on."

She hit the road and decided to move to the US where after only two weeks in New York she met Bucky Baxter, who was the pedal steel guitar player for Bob Dylan. He offered her a half-built studio in the hills of Tennessee. She jumped at the chance and began exploring the Deep South, the homeland of her musical heroes.

Our food arrives and I realise I'd forgotten all about lunch. Cerys had ordered the jumbo prawns marinated in pomegranate seeds, with a huge side of chopped green chillies, while I had opted for the mellower artichoke and paneer cheese in a vegetable gravy.

Passionate about music as a vital art form, it appears that Cerys' early musical career has swayed her against the music industry's method of taking artists and turning them into brands. "You can



The UK is Emirates most frequented A380 destination, with nine daily A380 flights. There are five daily services to London-Heathrow, and twice-daily A380 services to London-Gatwick and Manchester.





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think of music in two ways: you can look at it as a business or you can look at it as art that you're drawn to do. I'm definitely of the art brigade. If you think about it, music has been made by humans for centuries and it was only when it was able to be recorded that people began to realise it could be a business."

In an attempt to bring people back in touch with their musical heritage, Cerys has added to her roles of musician, presenter, celebrity and mother-of-three that of festival director. This is the second year of The Good Life Experience festival held in September in the UK. It's a family-oriented festival that offers a varied and unique selection of events. A quick look at the activities and you will find axe-throwing, sausage-making and stargazing.

"The whole point of the festival is to try and give these kids and parents, myself included, a bit of a break from their online lives and get to do things like sharpening axes, cooking on an open fire and dancing Cuban-style. I think it's the trying that is important rather than the succeeding in this case." She smirks at the thought of herself attempting to dance Cuban-style.

"I think that at the minute we are beginning to understand that there's such a huge gulf between older traditions and modern life, so it's quite nice to dip back into the landscape for a while. I think that's the point. To feel dirt in your hands," Cerys says as she offers me a prawn, which I decline thinking fearfully of the generous helping of extra chillies she'd added from her bag.

Cerys has an ability to find and interview remarkable people. "I like people who have been around the block, you know, people who may not be household names but have actually been mega-talented and put out some songs that have

touched millions of people around the world." I ask about her favourite interview and she lights up with joy of the memory. "Allen Toussaint! I absolutely adore Allen. He's not a household name to most people but when you look at what he's done and his dignity in the interview, I just adore him. He's a New Orleans producer, arranger and songwriter who's worked with some of the greats.

"When I have a guest on the show, I usually pick music that I think they'll like or will trigger memories for them. And so I played one from New Orleans by Snooks Eaglin 'cause that's his hometown. And I played it and Allen Toussaint turned around, and this is my favourite ever moment in an interview, he turns around and says: 'I was in a band with him when I was 15,' and I said, 'No way!' He said: 'Yeah, he used to drive us around.'

"When did he go blind then?" I asked, and he said 'Oh, he's always been blind.'" And with that, Cerys releases a laugh that fills the room at the thought of a young, blind teenage boy driving his band members around New Orleans.

Our conversation begins to weave through subjects as I learn that the first Welsh poem was a war cry and that a Roma family helped keep the Welsh tradition of triple harp alive. We talk about the fact that Cerys will be singing at a gig that night and I discover that her family is on a mobile gadget diet.

Tales and stories not only define Cerys' radio programme, they are who she is. Every aspect of her life is delivered with a yarn about its origins or some funny coincidence about how it came to be. Her career has been marked by distinct phases. "Most of us go through that stage where you're finding yourself as a teenager and through your early 20s being so reckless with the gift of life. Then when you start a family, you look back and think, 'Oh my goodness!' Then you get to the middle of your life and you're looking at what time you've got left and suddenly there's an intense pressure to make sense of this life you've been given and try and do something that matters."

With our meal finished, Rahul brings out a takeaway order for Cerys' husband. We say our goodbyes and she leaves in as she arrived, wearing her fedora and cape, before striding out on to the street, no doubt in search of another story.

THE BILL

1 x Tandoori artichoke and paneer with a warm, spicy, roasted vegetable gravy (£12.50), 1 x jumbo prawns in pomegranate seeds and dill (£14.50), 1 x Shiraz, Sula Vineyard, Nashik from India (£19.50)

Total: £46.50

