

Singing to my fans tops everything else

It's Friday. And Friday means it's New York. Such is the life of international jet setters like Katherine Jenkins.

The nation's favourite sweetheart, our 21st century Vera Lynn, is on the road to promote the best of British.

David Cameron asked her to fly the flag and she was quick to respond.

"It's chilly out here," she says, from the comfort of her hotel room. "You'd think that being a Welsh girl I'd be used to this."

"The Prime Minister asked me to get involved in a campaign to advertise what an amazing place Britain is, so I give my time and sing." It's part of Jenkins' role as an ambassador, though she longs to be Home Sweet Home.

Home Sweet Home was, of course, the title of Jenkins' 10th studio album. It was released before Christmas, to celebrate her 10th year in the music industry. And it will be followed by a spring tour, which reaches Birmingham's Symphony Hall on March 7 and 8.

Jenkins is cherished as one of Britain's favourite singers.

The Welsh mezzo has achieved meteoric success as the world's most prolific classical crossover artist. Her nine previous studio albums have sold in excess of eight million copies and gone platinum all around the world.

She has received numerous accolades

for her recordings, including two Classical BRITs for the coveted Album of the Year Award. In 2013, Katherine headlined the Queen's Coronation Festival at Buckingham Palace and was awarded an OBE at the 2014 New Year's Honours List for her services to music and charity.

She says: "Performing live for my fans is what I love most about being an artist. I'm so thrilled to be going on tour next year, getting to see you all and performing my new album. I can't wait."

"But I think it's also important to get involved in things like the campaign to promote Britain. My mum brought my sister

and I up to give back and help charity. When you've been lucky enough to have success in your life it's important to turn it round and give something back.

"I'm proud of being British and I talk about where I come from."

Jenkins has previously visited troops, to boost morale. "If you can boost morale in Afghanistan for our amazing military, or just fly the flag for the UK, there's no reason not to do it."

"I didn't expect my OBE. I got it last year and I was 33, I never saw that happening. It was really overwhelming and very humbling to get it. To take my family to Buckingham Palace with me to get the award was overwhelming. Mum and I had a little cry and toasted my late dad when we found out. I couldn't tell anybody for three months."

In addition to a new album and OBE, Jenkins also found love last year as she married American artist and film actor-director Andrew Levitas. They had met in February, engaged two months later and were married in September.

"The wedding made it honestly the best year ever. So much happened from the OBE, to my sister having a child and me becoming an aunty. Andrew and I got engaged and married and then I ended the year by singing to a million people in Berlin on New Year's Eve, so 2014 is my favourite year ever."

Though Jenkins is one of the world's most experienced singers, even she found playing to a million people daunting.

"We went there in the afternoon and at 4pm there were already 100,000 people

watching the rehearsal. By the time of the show, it was a million. From the stage, you can see a few of the faces but after a while it just blurs into a number that you can't understand. You think: 'don't fall, don't be set on fire

by the fireworks, and enjoy it.'"

Jenkins is looking forward to being on tour and the Symphony Hall will be among her favourite venues.

"Touring is my favourite part of the job. Being in the studio and focusing energy on getting something as good as possible is amazing."

"But when you take the music out to an audience and have a full orchestra and see people's reactions to the live versions,



On song - Katherine Jenkins will be at Symphony Hall

there's nothing like it. I'm relaxed on stage and I like the banter.

"It's a very fluid show and I want people to come and not feel as though it's classical and high brow and formal."

By Andy Richardson

Soul man O'Neal back on the up

If the purpose of Celebrity Big Brother is to revive careers, then Alexander O'Neal has reasons to be cheerful.

The soul man who used to make Barry White seem as though he was shy with the ladies is back in the big time.

O'Neal's stint in the CBB House has revived interest in the American-born singer. And he's capitalising on his revival by launching a string of headline dates in the UK, including a show at Birmingham's Town Hall on December 19.

O'Neal will look forward to transporting fans back to the day when he scaled the heights in the UK and Billboard charts. Fans can look forward to hearing renditions of songs like Criticize, If You Were Here Tonight, Fake, The Lovers, (What Can I Say) To Make You Love Me, All True Man and more.

The singer is grateful that CBB helped his star to rise.

"It was a great experience being in the Big Brother house. Obviously I learned about things along the way. My task was to be the best Alexander I could be for my fans and for myself. I achieved that. I did get a chance to look at some of the footage and I was neither pleased nor displeased. They treated us fairly and were responsible and looked after us."

"I think my biggest thing was convincing my housemates that we didn't really live there, that it wasn't real, that it was just a TV show. People have to be careful about just how far to go. With some of the housemates, I'd look at them and think: 'where does the child end and where does the adult begin?'"

O'Neal fell out with Perez Hilton, the house's resident pantomime villain. "Everything I did, people could perceive it as a volatile situation. But I could never let it get that way. I care too much about my fans and my fans wanted me to do well and to do good job. My thought was to represent them."

He also suffered racial slurs at the hands of former Corrie man, Ken Morley. "I'm a black man from the deepest part of the Southern USA. I grew up in the sixties with a lot of racism and we've come a long way through non violence."

"Every time you are aggressive when someone says something you don't like, that doesn't mean it's the answer to the question. Ken was old, I wanted to teach him to do better, not to intimidate him. He's going to be himself, the best way to deal with that is to help him to relate to something, by non-aggressive."

O'Neal fell in love with music at the age of nine. "The neighbourhood kids were more aware of my gift when I was."

"They coerced me into singing for one of my friend's mothers. They said they'd give me a dime if I sang - I immediately broke into the song. And that was my paid gig. I guess the best time was the first time I heard myself on the radio. I stopped in my tracks. The song came on and I just thought I had arrived."

"I have so many memories of my career. I'm really looking forward to coming back and performing my fans in the UK by kicking off the tour in December."

O'Neal has seen it all during his career. "The first thing is you keep your values and your morals in perspective. My values and morals were formed long before the record deals."

By Andy Richardson

Plant in forest

Black Country rock legend Robert Plant will take his Sensational Space Shifters to Cannock Chase for a summer woodland concerts.

The Led Zeppelin frontman and solo star will feature in two special dates as part of Forest Live, the summer concert series promoted by the Forestry Commission.

After nearly 50-years in music, Plant, continues to surprise and challenge his audience with music that is smart, exciting, and completely of the moment. Returning to his native England after an extended sojourn in America, last year saw the release of his 10th 'solo' album, 'lullaby and... The Ceaseless Roar', his latest project recorded with The Sensational Space Shifters.

The album received worldwide acclaim for its contemporary song-writing and brilliant musicianship.

Following a recent sell-out tour of indoor venues, fans can look forward to an exceptional live show which will include tracks from the 2014 album as well as new interpretations of Led Zeppelin classics and other solo material.

Plant will play Cannock Chase Forest, near Rugeley, on July 11.

Tickets cost £48.50 (plus £4.85 booking fee) and are available from 03000 680400 or online at forestry.gov.uk/music

Six at Slam

You Me At Six will headline Wolverhampton's Slam Dunk Festival in June.

The event is back with a bang for the May Bank holiday weekend and will take place at three sites in Leeds, Hatfield and Wolverhampton.

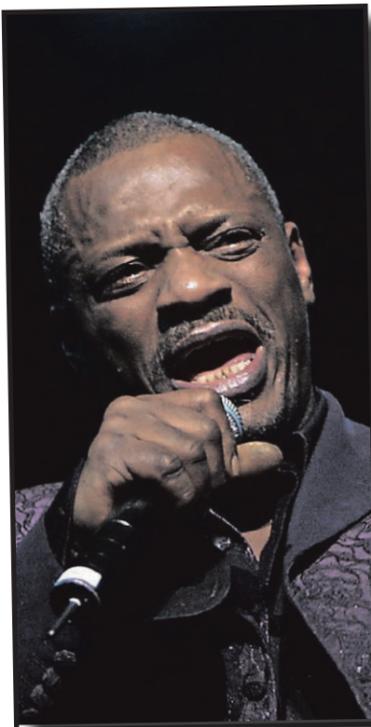
You Me At Six frontman Josh Franceschi said: "We are really excited to be headlining Slam Dunk Festival again. We had a lot of fun last time we played there, and can't wait to close the festival each night."

Former Slam Dunk Festival headliners Taking Back Sunday will return to play as special guests with a 2015 UK festival exclusive.

Singer Adam Lazzara said: "Excited to head back to Slam Dunk Festival again in 2015. Man those folks really tell you how it is, so if you can get those shows/crowds up to a certain volume you know you're doing okay. To be able to get back over for it makes us really happy, we love it there."

The event will also feature Lower Than Atlantis and singer Mike Duce said: "Obviously really excited to play! Slam Dunk was one of the first festivals we ever got to play, it's nice to be asked back later on in our career. We went last year as punters and had such a laugh! Roll on the summer!"

Also joining the line-up will be international pop punk kings The Wonder years, Neck Deep, Bayside, Knuckle Puck, Fireworks, and Reel Big Fish among others.



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