

Asian Star Comes Home For U.S. Debut

Calif. Native Coco Lee Seeks To Build On International Success With Sony Set

BY STEVE MCCLURE
and CHUCK TAYLOR

HONG KONG—Showcasing your music while suffering from a severe case of the flu might not be the first choice for most artists.

But Coco Lee lived up to the title of her latest album, "Just No Other Way," here on Nov. 2, when the Chinese-American singer acquitted herself well before an international media crowd, as well as senior Sony Music executives. The Chinese herbal remedy that she sipped repeatedly during the gig must have helped.

Lee's U.S.-produced album will be launched in January in America. The Hong Kong showcase marked the start of six weeks' regional promotion work, the first step of what Sony Music is hoping could be the first global success story from the Asian region.

Significantly, Lee is now signed to 550 Music/Epic in the U.S. for English-language recordings, which means she will benefit from the A&R expertise and marketing muscle that took Celine Dion out of the French-speaking orbit and onto the worldwide map.

"Just No Other Way" was produced by Michael Caplan and recorded in New York and Los Angeles. To boot, the artist now has U.S. career guidance in the hands of Los Angeles-based Morey Management.

Born in Hong Kong and raised in San Francisco, Lee is already a regional star in Asia. The 23-year-old redhead now hopes to achieve international success with her R&B-flavored vocal style—which is distinctive enough to merit the recent interest of EMI Recorded Music president Ken Berry, according to industry sources.

There was reportedly a bidding war between Sony and EMI, which had hoped to snare Lee for its start-up of Virgin Records Taiwan after her original two-year pact with Sony Music in the territory expired late last year. (Matthew Allison, president of EMI Music Asia, previously ran Sony's company in Taiwan.)

With that skirmish now history, Sony shipped "Just No Other Way" Oct. 30 in Asia. Its intense promotion campaign began with the Nov. 2 showcase at Hong Kong's swanky Regent Hotel, where among those present were Sony Music International president Bob Bowlin and Sony Music Europe chairman Paul Russell.

That show date began a full tour of the Asia region, which Lee will follow with a U.S. visit by year's end to prepare for the album's release there.

She sees her American debut as



LEE

a homecoming. "I was raised in the U.S. I'm an Asian-American, and the only type of music I ever listened to was singers like Whitney Houston and Mariah [Carey]

'What I look for in any artist is, does she have "it," and she's got plenty of "it.' She just exudes charm when she walks in the room'

— MICHAEL CAPLAN —

... I never listened to Chinese music. I'm basically coming back home to try to let the hometown know, 'Hey, Coco Lee can sing!'

Sony Music Asia president Richard Denekamp is confident. "She is a very talented young lady, determined to make it big time all over the world. If we can pull this off, it will open the door for some of the other Asian talents," he says.

The key to making it in America, he points out, is the act's commitment to that territory. Few Asian acts, locked into their product-hungry, fast-paced domestic markets, have been willing to do that. It requires "someone [being] willing to move to the U.S., to go and live there," he says.

Steve Barnett, executive VP of worldwide marketing for the Epic Records Group, says Lee is in pole position to exploit future trends. "The next great influence in pop music may come from Asia, and she can be at the front of that wave."

Like many of the believers, Caplan, senior VP of A&R at Epic Records Group, saw Lee at a Sony conference in Boca Raton,

Fla., in 1998, and subsequently witnessed a stadium gig in Taiwan in front of 30,000. "With this album," he says, "we took what Coco has done and upped the production standard."

Taking Lee out of the fast-paced Asian environment and having her work in New York and Los Angeles allowed her to make a different kind of album, according to Caplan. "[For the Chinese music markets in Asia] artists put out three or four albums a year, so they record them in about two weeks," he notes.

Unlike her previous album, "Just No Other Way" does not include any material written by Lee. She visits such styles as dance on "Do You Want My Love," the first single; ballads on "Can't Get Over," on which she shares the mike with Kelly Price; and the '70s-flavored "Crazy Ridiculous."

JUST FOR FUN

Lee's first big break came during a vacation in Hong Kong after high school graduation. She placed second in a talent contest singing Whitney Houston's "Run To You." "The next day, a local record company called and wanted to sign me," Lee remembers, "because they felt that my voice was so different compared to those of all the other Asian artists."

Epic's Barnett says her vocal style is a huge plus compared with other Asian singers. "Unlike many artists who established themselves overseas, she grew up in the U.S. with the sounds of R&B and kinds of music that are more familiar to our audience," he says.

In 1996, Lee was signed to Sony Music Taiwan by A&R chief Yao Chien, who is now at Virgin. The territory remains her single largest market to date, while total regional sales are in the region of 5 million album units, according to the label. She remains under contract to Sony in Taiwan for Chinese repertoire.

In the U.S., 550 Music/Epic's marketing initiatives for Lee included placing "Before I Fall In Love" on the soundtrack for "Runaway Bride." The first single from "Just No Other Way" will be serviced to radio with mixes in the first week of January.

Having the right record completes the package for the international market, says Epic's Caplan. "What I look for in any artist is, does she have 'it,' and she's got plenty of 'it.' She just exudes charm when she walks in the room. The world is ready," he says.

newsline...

SONY MUSIC GERMANY is launching a new full-service label, Berlin Records, and has named veteran German singer/songwriter Udo Lindenberg as its first signing. Lindenberg, a former Polydor Germany artist who was critical of the former East German regime, performed Nov. 9 in front of Berlin's Brandenburg Gate on the 10th anniversary of the breaching of the Berlin Wall. Berlin Records' official debut will be on Jan. 1, 2000, and Sony says it will be a fourth label in Germany, alongside Columbia, Epic, and Sony Media Marketing. Its managing director will be Uwe Lerch, currently director of concept marketing for Sony Music Media. DOMINIC PRIDE

GERMAN PUBLISHER Axel Springer Verlag has bought a portfolio of 13 German teenage and pop music magazines from Swiss publisher Juerg Marquard. On Jan. 1, Springer will take over a clutch of titles, including Maedchen, Miss Beauty, Popcorn, Musikexpress/Sounds, and Hammer, which are thought to generate total annual revenues of about \$45 million. Music industry insiders believe that circulation numbers for the teenage and music magazines have been declining over the past few years. In 1998, Pop Rocky was taken off the market. The deal was negotiated for Springer by publishing operations manager Claus-Dieter Grabner, who has been in charge of pop title Bravo for many years and knows the music industry well. The titles' editorial offices will remain in Munich. WOLFGANG SPAHR

STOCKHOLM-BASED Basic Music Management (BMM), owned and operated by Lasse Karlsson, who manages Ace Of Base, Emilia, and Meja, has set up a Norwegian affiliate, based in Oslo. The company is headed by Trond Fjellman, formerly with Sirkus Management in Oslo, and Eivind Brydø, head of the International Managers' Forum in Norway and manager at Artistpartner in Oslo. BMM will initially concentrate on developing new local acts. However, Brydø has brought with him such acts as EMI-signed Infinity and Bertine Zetlitz (the latter represented by Nettwerk/EMI in the U.S./Canada) and Warner Music's Noora from Artistpartner.

KAI R. LOFTHUS

BRAZIL-BASED PRODUCER SUBA died Nov. 2 in São Paulo, Brazil, from a heart attack suffered after he inhaled smoke from a fire at his studio. Suba, who was born in Novi Sad in the former Yugoslavia, relocated to Brazil in the 1980s and became well-known locally. He produced a number of acts for Brazil-based Crammed Discs. MARC MAES

VIRGIN RECORDS DENMARK has signed an agreement to distribute Copenhagen-based indie label ManRec, founded a year ago by musician/producer Thomas Blachman. Until now, ManRec product was only available through the label's own store in Copenhagen. The label launches albums in batches and has 18 albums in its catalog. The latest, "Shiny Shoes And A Stiffy," a collection of 17 songs by various acts produced by Blachman, was released at the beginning of November.

CHARLES FERRO



JUDGE JULES

U.K. DJ JUDGE JULES has pacted with Peoplesound.com, a U.K.-based site exposing unsigned acts. In a two-year deal that the site says is worth \$1 million, Jules, who also broadcasts for national BBC Radio 1, will review new dance acts, create his own chart, and provide content from the club world.

DOMINIC PRIDE

THE BEATLES are the top band of the last thousand years, followed by Queen and the Rolling Stones, according to a poll of 600,000 music fans by retailer HMV and U.K. TV broadcaster Channel Four. The poll was titled "Music Of The Millennium." John Lennon was voted best songwriter and most influential musician, and Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" was voted the best song. Madonna was voted best female artist of all time, ahead of Aretha Franklin and Celine Dion, while Mozart was selected as best classical composer. Louis Armstrong beat Miles Davis as best jazz artist, while Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" outdid Holst's "The Planets" as best classical record. The Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" was favorite album, with Michael Jackson's "Thriller" at No. 2 and the Beatles' "Revolver" at No. 3. Channel Four will air a three-hour TV special on Nov. 13 in the U.K. featuring some of the music voted on in the poll.

PAUL SEXTON

LONDON RADIO GIANT Capital FM obtained a world exclusive broadcast Oct. 29 with George Michael's version of "Roxanne," the leadoff track from the British singer's upcoming Virgin album, "Songs From The Last Century." It came about through the longtime affiliation between Michael and Capital—and in particular, his friendship with next-door neighbor Richard Park, the broadcast group's PD. Previous Capital exclusives with Michael included the first play of "Jesus To A Child," during the 1995 round of the station's annual Help A London Child fund-raising campaign. "Roxanne" is not yet scheduled for release as a single.

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