

# Sound thinking

Article by **Rob Johnson** Photograph by **Frank Lindner**

Sometimes you can be too polite. Like the time Charlie Chan went on the *Today* show to promote her latest album, *East & West*. They told her to rehearse first – a bit pointless when every song on the album is meant to be improvised. Still, she played the piece once, and the producer said, “That was one minute fifty. Is that how long you’re going to do it next time?” Ever helpful, Chan replied, “Well, how long do you want it to be?” The woman gave her a look that said, this is going to be a bad morning ...

Chan, however, is used to confounding expectations. From Sony, the record label that brought you Billy Joel, Michael Jackson, Michael Bolton and Mariah Carey (all middle-of-the-road, big-selling acts), here is a 28-year-old Malaysian-Chinese-Scottish classically trained multi-instrumentalist and songwriter from Albury-Wodonga. A woman who writes her albums in one take at the piano and records them on to digital audio tape.

“I make the joke about having an accidental career,” she says. “I never really wanted to perform although I am a performer. I love to write music. Even though I play instruments, I don’t consider myself an instrumentalist.”

In conversation she is enthusiastic about her “projects”, be they albums, soundtracks, compositions for the stage or technology. At the moment, she is enamoured of the Internet, spending a lot of her time downloading risotto recipes, e-mailing friends, or working on producing her own home page. This fascination with technology led to Chan’s making *East & West* an enhanced CD. It was launched earlier this year on the World Wide Web.

It was computers that helped her to find a place in the music world. In 1981, she discovered the possibilities of electronic keyboards and tape-to-tape recording, and began composing. While still a child she would try to pick *The Girl from Ipanema* on the ukulele her father had given her, or muck around on her uncle’s pianola. She managed to marry her fondness for technology and her ability with instruments when, as a teenager, Yamaha asked her to demonstrate a range of electronic organs and keyboards. “I thought, ‘Well, I can do this’, and I got really good because I learned how to dazzle, how to show off,” she says. “And I was so small and young, people would say, ‘Oh, she can do that; we can do that as well.’ It was a very good play on Yamaha’s part.”

Classically trained as a double bassist, in her teenage years Chan was involved with the Australian Youth Orchestra and regularly attended the Victorian College of the Arts Youth Music camps. In her mid-teens she moved to Sydney to play with the pop band The Electric Pandas, a valuable experience but one she wouldn’t repeat.

“I wasn’t in control and I think I’m a control freak. I wanted to be in charge of something. I didn’t know what was going on and I don’t like being led around – I like to issue orders.”

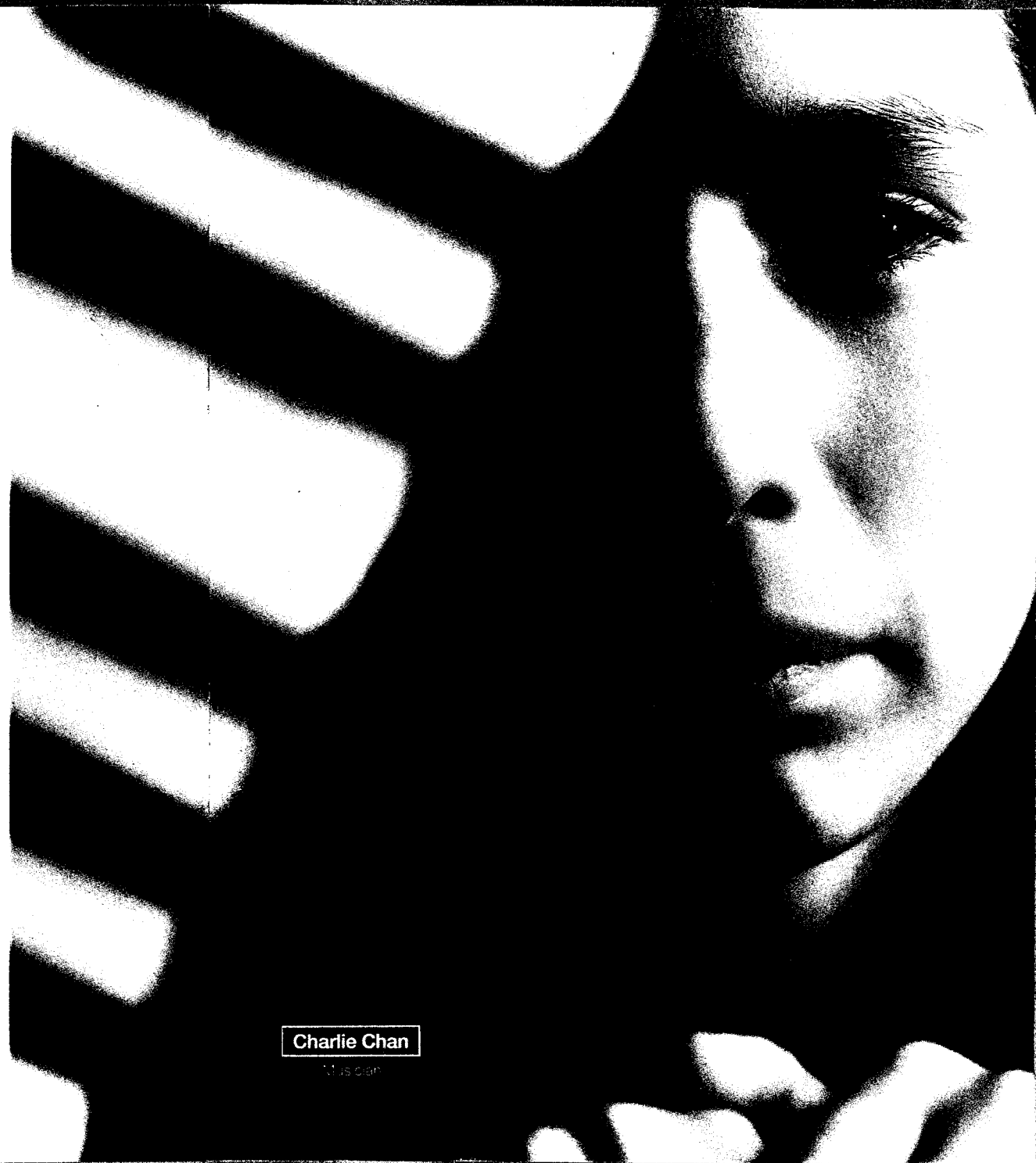
When she was 19 she joined the Sidetrack Theatre company as composer-in-residence, and so began the second phase of her career. As she received more exposure she received more commissions, and began composing work for television and theatre. In an industry that loves to label genres, Chan’s personal projects are often lumped with classical recordings, although it scarcely describes her work.

Her first recording, in 1990, was a track for an ambient music collection. Her first album, *The Adventures of Charlie Chan*, was a studio extravaganza. *East & West* is being called “adult contemporary” because there’s little else out there like it.

Imagine if someone sat down at a piano and just started playing – not mystical, ethereal soundscapes, but bass-driven, rolling songs, then maybe some Eastern music, then some classics. That’s what *East & West* is like: highly accessible and easy to listen to, but not “easy listening”. The albums only came about because Chan was working as a songwriter and “I was making cassettes and sending them out and that was costing me \$6 a time,” she says. “I thought, ‘Well, they’ve got a big plant out there, why can’t we make some CDs?’”

Perhaps the reason Chan’s music sounds like no-one else’s is that she listens to no-one else. “It’s not that I don’t like other people’s music,” she explains. “It’s just that there’s so much sound. And I don’t feel like I need to put music on to hear music.”

She gestures around the park where we’re sitting, which looks over a marina and the harbour, and adds, “My favourite sound is down here in the morning. If it’s really quiet and there’s not much traffic – about 5.30 am – you just get all the sound from the boats when the cables hit the masts. It’s just an awesome sound. That sound, that’s music.” □



Charlie Chan

Musician