

Jacintha Abisheganaden: Entertainer & jazz singer

by **Stephanie Ho**, written on 10 December 2013

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Jacintha Abisheganaden is an accomplished Singapore actress, entertainer and jazz singer. The daughter of guitarist and Cultural Medallion recipient Alex Abisheganaden, Jacintha's early training in music stood her in good stead for a career in entertainment. During her illustrious career, she performed in numerous stage plays and musicals, represented Singapore in international singing competitions, had her own television and radio shows as well as recorded music. Since the late 1990s, Jacintha focused on jazz music and gained international recognition for her unique interpretations of jazz standards.

Early life and education

Jacintha was born on 3 October 1957 to a musical family. Her father, Alex Abisheganaden, was a well-known musician who specialised in the guitar. Her mother, Aileen Wong, played the piano and sang. When Jacintha and her brother, Peter, were young, they were constantly exposed to music. Her father used to play records while they ate, and brought them to watch concerts and musicals. Jacintha also took formal lessons in classical piano and singing. Peter learnt the violin.¹

In the 1970s, Jacintha joined the Singapore Youth Choir and became friends with her future collaborator and husband, Dick Lee. In his memoir, *Dick Lee: The adventures of the Mad Chinaman*, Lee recalled that he met Jacintha when he was 16. He wrote that the two “hit it off from the start” and eventually started making music together. Lee wrote that Jacintha’s voice and his music was “a perfect fit”.²

By this time, Jacintha had begun branching out from classical music. In 1976, she participated in a singing contest, the RTS Talentime, with two friends – Lim Siau Chong and his sister, Cheng Hui. They formed a group known as “Vintage”. In the finals, the group was awarded full marks by the judges and won the top prize in the competition.³

Despite the win, Jacintha did not immediately turn to music as a profession. Instead she studied English at the University of Singapore and graduated with an Honours degree. After graduation she worked for several years as a journalist for the *New Nation* and later, the *Straits Times*.⁴

Singer and recording artist

The pull of music remained strong. Having established a reputation as a formidable singer, Jacintha was called upon to represent Singapore as a soloist in international competitions such as the Watatboushi Song Festival (Japan, 1981) and the First International Song Festival (Los Angeles, 1982).⁵

¹ Abisheganaden, A. *Oral History Interview transcript*. Accession no. 1461, Reel 11. Singapore: Oral History Centre.

² Lee, D. (2011). *Dick Lee: The adventures of the Mad Chinaman*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, p. 98.

³ The Vintage gets full marks from all judges. (1976, October 29). *Straits Times*, p. 19.

⁴ Teo P. L. (2005, September 12). Ja rules. *Straits Times*.

⁵ Lee, D. (1992?) *Welcome to Nagraland*. Grenadier Press, p. 11.

In 1983, Jacintha made her recording debut with “Silence” – an album of techno-pop songs – released by WEA. Her producer was Dick Lee who also wrote 9 out of the 10 tracks on the album.⁶ In a newspaper interview, Jacintha admitted that the album was a risk, but one that was worth taking. She said, “I discovered a totally new voice and it suits the album”.⁷ Dick Lee recalled that the album was well received. He wrote, “Silence became a local hit. It received plenty of airplay and was well supported by the college crowd.”⁸

The album was not the only change in Jacintha’s life. That year, she married American lawyer, David Scheffer and relocated to the USA to be with him.⁹ Unfortunately, the marriage ended three years later and Jacintha returned to Singapore.¹⁰

The Latin-American inspired “Tropicana” was Jacintha’s second album released in 1987.¹¹ That year, Jacintha represented Singapore at the ASEAN pop song festival in Kuala Lumpur and won the award for Best Performer.¹²¹³

Her third album, “Drama Mama” was released in 1991 in Japan. By this time, Jacintha had left WEA and signed on with Wave, a Japanese Music store that was moving into recording artists.¹⁴

Actor and entertainer

Alongside her music, Jacintha had an active career on the Singapore stage, acting in many amateur drama productions with groups like Sceneshifters and the Experimental Theatre Club.¹⁵ In 1981 she won the award for best female performer (English section) in the national drama festival for her role in *Nurse Angamuthu’s Romance*.¹⁶

In 1985 Jacintha was a founding member of Singapore’s first professional English-language theatre company, TheatreWorks.¹⁷ Subsequently, she went on to perform in many groundbreaking local plays and musicals such as *Beauty World* (1988), *Fried Rice Paradise* (1991) and Dick Lee’s pop operetta ‘Nagrland’ (1992).¹⁸¹⁹²⁰ She married her long-time collaborator Dick Lee in 1992 but they divorced in 1997.²¹

⁶ Lim, S. (1983, September 20). Jacintha’s ‘Silence’ is surely golden. *Singapore Monitor*, p. 20.

⁷ D’Rose, P. (1983, September 29). Jacintha on new ground. *Singapore Monitor*, p. 17.

⁸ Lee, D. (2011). *Dick Lee: The adventures of the Mad Chinaman*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, p. 182.

⁹ D’Rose, P. (1983, September 29). Jacintha on new ground. *Singapore Monitor*, p. 17.

¹⁰ Lim, G. (2008, December 2). Jacintha & hubby split up. *The New Paper*.

¹¹ Ho, C. (1987, May 1). Ja can cha-cha but music’s off. *Straits Times*, p. 5.

¹² Jacintha wins Asean pop song contest. (1987, April 19). *Straits Times*, p. 1.

¹³ Lee, D. (1992?) *Welcome to Nagrland*. Grenadier Press, p. 11.

¹⁴ Maizurah vs Jacintha. (1991, July 19). *Straits Times*.

¹⁵ Koh, B. P. (2013). *From identity to mondialisation: Theatreworks 25*. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, p. 24.

¹⁶ Best female performer award for Jacintha. (1981, October 17). *Straits Times*, p. 38.

¹⁷ Koh, B. P. (2013). *From identity to mondialisation: Theatreworks 25*. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, p. 6.

¹⁸ Yeo, R. (1988, July 3). Something to celebrate – a landmark musical. *Straits Times*, p. 10.

¹⁹ Goh, J. (1991, March 4). Second musical set to hit the stage next month. *Straits Times*.

²⁰ Two couples at work. (1992, August 7). *Straits Times*.

²¹ Entertainers Dick Lee and Jacintha divorce. (1997, January 16). *Straits Times*.

In 1993, Jacintha won the part of Grizabella the Glamour cat in the Southeast Asian tour of Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical, "Cats".²² Her casting was regarded as a coup of sorts as few Singaporean performers had been able to break into international theatre productions. Jacintha's performance in "Cats", however, drew mixed reviews. Straits Times reviewer Hannah Pandian said that Jacintha's voice and stage presence were inconsistent.²³ Several members of the public replied in defence of Jacintha. Chee Soo Lian who had watched Jacintha in "Cats" wrote that she was "spellbound in my seat, overwhelmed by the emotion in Jacintha's voice". She added that Jacintha's performance moved her and the crowd who gave her a standing ovation.²⁴

By the 1990s, Jacintha added radio and television work to her already long resume. In 1991, she developed and hosted a radio show "Over the Top Hour" that was nominated for an Asian Broadcasting Union Award and she hosted her own 18-episode television programme – Mum's not cooking – in 1993.²⁵ Subsequently, Jacintha signed on as a full-time artist with the Television Corporation of Singapore (now MediaCorp) and went on to act in the sitcom, "My grandson, the doctor" in 1996.²⁶

After a long hiatus, Jacintha returned to television in 2006 as a judge on the second season of Singapore Idol. She was chosen for the stint because of her experience as a veteran performer who was knowledgeable about the local music scene.²⁷

Jazz singer

In 1998, Jacintha married her third husband Koh Boon Pin and became pregnant with her first child.²⁸ That same year, she released her first Jazz album, "Here's to Ben: A vocal tribute to Ben Webster".²⁹ In an interview with Jazz Review, Jacintha revealed that she had always wanted to sing jazz. To explain why she had not released a jazz album up to that point, she said, "But you're young and you can sing anything, so you diversify. You try everything, but you try to sing it in the spirit of jazz."

Jacintha's move towards becoming a jazz recording artist came about when her friend Lim Kay Tong recommended her to music producer Ying Tan in the mid-1990s.³⁰ Tan eventually produced all of Jacintha's jazz albums so far under his Groove Note label.^{31,32}

In an interview with The Arts Magazine in 2000, Jacintha confirmed that her career trajectory was focused on jazz. She said, "...I could dabble... from painting to

²² Tay, M. (1993, November 7). Once more time with feline. *Straits Times*.

²³ Pandian, H. (1993, November 22). Near purrfection from audacious 'cats'. *Straits Times*.

²⁴ Chee S. L. (1993, November 26). Her voice broke but it worked. *Straits Times*.

²⁵ *Cameron Mackintosh and the Really Useful Company production of Cats*. (1993). Singapore: Playbill.

²⁶ Teo P. L. (2005, September 12). Ja rules. *Straits Times*.

²⁷ Ng, H. H. (2006, January 12). Jazzed-up Singapore Idol. *Straits Times*.

²⁸ Lim, R. (1998, August 19). And baby makes three. *Straits Times*.

²⁹ Lim, R. (1998, August 19). And baby makes three. *Straits Times*.

³⁰ Sudo, C. (2011, January 29). Jazz artist interview: Jacintha. *Jazz Review*. Retrieved from <http://www.jazzreview.com/jazz-artist-interviews/jacintha.html>

³¹ Lee, S. (2004, August 7). Ja will sing in Mandarin next. *Straits Times*.

³² Lim, C. (2007, September 7). Ja's typical mellow jazz style returns. *Straits Times*.

cooking, but it's one thing to multi-task and another to be multi-talented. From here, I'd like to do more jazz, have a long recording career."³³

It was with her jazz albums that Jacintha's music found an international audience. Her voice has been described as "nourishing – like food" by Japanese world music singer Sandii Suzuki.³⁴ Audiophile Audition review John Henry compared Jacintha to the jazz singers of the 1950s such as Peggy Lee as she "works very close to the mike for a sexy and intimate sound".³⁵ Singapore radio DJ Chris Ho said that Jacintha's popularity grew went in tandem with jazz divas, such as Diana Krall or Cassandra Wilson but "she was really in that style long before, and to her credit, she has led the wave of new Singapore jazz divas."³⁶

When asked about her approach to singing, Jacintha said that she was concerned with telling stories. She said, "When I sing standards I want the world of that song to be fully known to me. If I inhabit it, the story I'm trying to tell and all the possible stories under that tells itself." Her musical influences are diverse and include Barbara Streisand, Joni Mitchell, Stevie Wonder, Sergio Mendez, Karen Carpenter and Stacey Kent.³⁷

Quote

'With each album, I've gained more confidence, but I still don't know enough. Jazz is so intricate that you keep finding new things.'³⁸

Awards

- 1976 RTS Talente winner (As part of the group, Vintage)
- 1981 Best female performer (English-language), Drama Festival
- 1987 Best performer, ASEAN pop song festival, Kuala Lumpur

Albums

- 1983 Silence (WEA)
- 1987 Tropicana (WEA)
- 1991 Drama mama (Wave)
- 1997 My life (Springroll Creative Entertainment)
- 1999 Here's to Ben: A vocal tribute to Ben Webster (Groove note)
- 2000 Autumn leaves: The songs of Johnny Mercer (Groove note)
- 2002 Lush life (Groove note)
- 2003 Jacintha is her name (Groove note)
- 2004 The girl from Bossa Nova (Groove note)
- 2005 Love flows like a river – Mandarin (Groove note)
- 2007 Jacintha goes to Hollywood (Groove note)

³³ Tan, L. M. (2000, July-August). One more for the road. *The Arts Magazine*, p. 80.

³⁴ Tom, K. & Chow, C. (2005, January 25). Jazz right. *Straits Times*.

³⁵ Henry, J. (2007, August 4). Jacintha Goes to Hollywood. Audiophile Audition. Retrieved from <http://audaud.com/2007/08/jacintha-goes-to-hollywood-groove-note>

³⁶ Quoted in Cheah, P. (2003, August 2). Jacintha finds an audiophile niche. *Billboard*, Vol. 115, Iss. 31.

³⁷ Sudo, C. (2011, January 29). Jazz artist interview: Jacintha. *Jazz Review*. Retrieved from <http://www.jazzreview.com/jazz-artist-interviews/jacintha.html>

³⁸ Lee, S. (2001, November 30). All that jazz and Ja's life. *Straits Times*.

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