

The world is suffering, and **Yungchen Lhamo** has the remedy: kindness. One drop at a time. “I sing to help transform people’s minds,” she tells **Jane Cornwell**

**Y**ungchen Lhamo has been away. Having blazed a trail with early career albums including her award-winning 1995 debut *Tibetan Prayer* and the Real World classics *Tibet Tibet* and *Coming Home*, having toured over 70 countries, worked with the starry likes of Peter Gabriel, Bono and Annie Lennox and released two further albums distinguished by a willingness to experiment and a voice that feels heaven sent, in 2013 she stopped recording. For the longest time it was as if she’d disappeared.

“Peter Gabriel’s contributions, his bringing together of different cultures with peace and love, made me feel lucky to be signed by him,” she tells me from Kingston, an arty town in upstate New York, where she’s spent a decade working with addicts, people with mental illnesses, the sick and the dying, at homeless shelters, hospitals and hospices. “But I never wished to be famous, to be the first Tibetan singer to win a major award, to be the first anything.”

She pauses, unhurried, her lips moving in silent prayer. Ego is anathema to Tibetan Buddhism. Lhamo, 57, has only ever wanted to help others. To awaken, heal, connect.

“I sing to help transform people’s minds,” she says. “All sentient beings deserve unconditional love. We share the same earth. We all breathe in and out. And while I grew up working in a factory, not having much food, I did not see people isolated and unloved and with mental issues like I do here in the West.”

“People are suffering... We need to look after each other. Together, drop by drop, we can change the world.”

So comes *One Drop of Kindness*, Lhamo’s seventh studio album and her fourth release on Real World Records. Produced with John Alevizakis and recorded at his Little Buddha Studio on the forested slopes of California’s Sierra Nevada mountains, *One Drop of Kindness* follows on from last year’s meditative *Awakening* (Six Degrees), which she recorded in Spain (the track ‘Loving Kindness’ features flamenco icon Carmen Linares) after much mindful reflecting in the stillness provided by lockdown.

“My grandmother told me I should sing for the world,” says Lhamo, who was born in a labour camp outside Lhasa in Chinese-occupied Tibet. Her single mother sent her, aged five, to work in a carpet-weaving factory. The colonising regime banned and still bans Tibetan customs. But her grandmother, who raised her, secretly taught her the sung prayers intrinsic to Tibetan Buddhist practice, which Yungchen chanted as she worked, walked home and gazed at the big Tibetan sky. She wasn’t just a good singer. Her pure, sustained notes brought birds to roost nearby, had animals

creeping closer. (Alevizakis will later tell me of how Lhamo, arriving at his studio, becalmed his charging, barking dog with a raised hand.)

In 1989 Lhamo fled Tibet on foot for Dharamsala, India, and its exiled Tibetan community, a wildly perilous journey of over 1,000 miles made more dangerous with her baby son Tenzin Shaydrup strapped to her back. In Dharamsala she sang for the exiled Dalai Lama (“To be in the presence of his Holiness is the ultimate experience for all Tibetans”) and met a fellow Tibetan Buddhist, an Australian monk named Sam Doherty; they married and subsequently moved to Sydney. It was there, with her now ex-husband as her manager, that she ventured into a recording studio and laid down what came naturally.

“Australia is my second home, and where I have a [Buddhist] teacher,” says Lhamo, who impressed WOMADelaide this year with a set from *Awakening* emphasising the importance of compassion-based spirituality in our increasingly solipsistic era; a pick-up band of Australian musicians seemed sensitive to the fact that Lhamo was not there to entertain – but to enlighten.

Australia was the first country privy to *Tibetan Prayer*, whose merging of folkloric rhythms and Tibetan-language devotionals won Lhamo an Australian Recording Industry Association (ARIA) Award for Best World Music Album (the first major music prize received by a Tibetan artist), piquing the interest of WOMAD co-founder Peter Gabriel, who invited Lhamo to visit the UK and signed her to his Real World Records label.

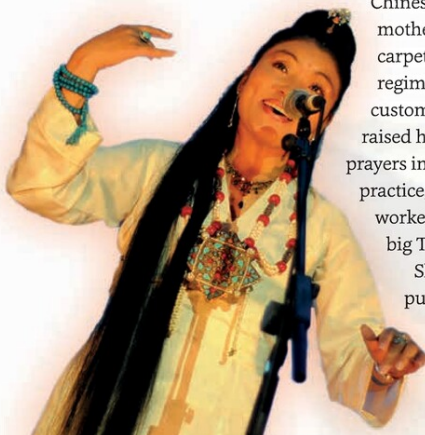
Featuring the likes of Richard Evans on mandola, Tibetan musician Dhumka on the strong *dramyen* and Japanese percussionist Joji Hiroto, 1996’s *Tibet Tibet* opened with ‘Om Mani Padme Hung’, which, as Peter Gabriel explained in his liner notes, was named for Tibetan Buddhism’s ubiquitous mantra. Other sung offerings include ‘Lame Dorje Chang’, which asks the Dalai Lama for his auspicious blessings; ‘Ari-Lo’ tells of entering a new land; and closer ‘Gi Pai Pa Yul Chola’ tells of the Tibetan people’s bravery and faith in the return of their homeland. Lhamo was used to singing unaccompanied, but the latter featured a full orchestra. “You can’t see the people, it’s an invisible orchestra,” she’d said playfully, “They fell from the sky.”

Her openness to new ideas was evident, too, in 1998’s *Coming Home*, an album of incantatory, metaphor-rich originals dedicated to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and helmed by late left-field French producer, composer and cross-cultural collaborator Hector Zazou, who set Western instruments alongside the chants of Tibetan monks and multi-tracked Lhamo’s voice into a celestial cascade. “‘Coming Home’ is a road song, the sound of travelling the road home,” she said of the closing title-track. “A home I hope one day to reach.”

She played Carnegie Hall, Royal Albert Hall, Sydney Opera House and the Louvre, in a cross-art form piece that included ▶

**“ALL SENTIENT BEINGS DESERVE UNCONDITIONAL LOVE. WE SHARE THE SAME EARTH. WE ALL BREATHE IN AND OUT”**

Below:  
performing  
at Festival  
of World  
Cultures in  
Dún Laoghaire,  
Ireland



Courtesy of Yungchen Lhamo. Dayong Zhao