

**Kate Bush,  
1978**



## PERFORMER

# KATE BUSH

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HER INFINITELY RICH BODY OF WORK  
HAS EMBRACED THE AVANT-GARDE AND ROMANTICISM,  
CREATING HER OWN GENRE OF ART ROCK.

BY ANN POWERS

**T**he first star to embody twenty-first-century pop – in all its genre-defying, tech-forward, theatrical, profoundly feminine glory – made her recording debut in 1978. The rock world didn't know what to do with her. "What is this supposed to be?" wrote one flummoxed journalist about teenage Kate Bush upon hearing her debut album, with its single "Wuthering Heights" based on Emily Brontë's gothic romance. After the song hit Number One on the British pop charts, another critic described her wailing coloratura and unfettered songwriting as "a full-frontal attack on the brains of the nation." Other words often used about Kate Bush, then and going forward: *bewildering*, *spooky*, *original*. Critic Simon Frith called her the shape of things to come.

To the old guard, Bush was simply too much. An introvert whose musical curiosity led her to the cutting edge of digital technology, she was also a dance-trained diva whose choreography was infinitely complex and could even seem unhinged. Her songs had the complexity of art rock and the audaciousness of punk; in their lush melodicism, they were intensely personal yet wildly expansive, time-traveling, multidimensional. Into a pop scene dominated by the mellow Bee Gees and the *Grease* soundtrack came this self-begotten creature who, at all of 19 years old, dismantled the structures of popular song and built something bigger, bolder, to fit her shamelessly

flamboyant imagination. What did she want? Her answer lies in the description of dance she gave that flummoxed interviewer who'd called "Wuthering Heights" an assault: Bush was looking for "a pure art form, inasmuch as it's free." Thus began a career that would wrest the definition of art rock from the grip of her male mentors and open it up not only for women like herself but for the Black and queer innovators of today.

When Bush ascended to star status, pop was at a crossroads, with punk lighting a reformist fire meant to reduce the bloat of arena rock. Bush fit nowhere and everywhere. Born July 30, 1958, in Bexleyheath, Kent, she'd grown up playing folk music with her family of enthusiastic amateurs, her multi-instrumentalist brothers John and Paddy a particularly strong influence. At 15, she was introduced by a family friend to Pink Floyd's David Gilmour, who was impressed by her voice and ambition. (He was hardly her Svengali, though; she already knew who she was, presenting him with some four dozen songs.) Gilmour funded a professional demo tape and helped her connect with EMI Records.

Bush delayed her first album by two years, allowing her to spend time training with movement instructors, including jazz dancer Robin Kovac and David Bowie's mentor in mime, Lindsay Kemp. This embryonic period allowed her to emerge fully formed with *The Kick Inside*, the debut album that included "Wuthering Heights" and



**At home in East Wickham, London, in 1978, the year her debut single topped the U.K. charts**



its other hit single, the symphonic ballad “The Man With the Child in His Eyes.” *The Kick Inside*’s songs about love, sex, and creativity zing so far beyond the borders of convention both melodically and lyrically that calling Kate the new Joni Mitchell or Laura Nyro only partially worked; “comparisons with other vocalists are inevitable, but Kate Bush won’t be stuck with them for long,” wrote one reviewer. *The Kick Inside* made a unique space for Bush, who quickly recorded two more albums, *Lionheart* (1978) and *Never for Ever* (1980), as she balanced on the tightrope between cult status and superstardom.

With her fourth album, *The Dreaming* (1982), Bush took a leap into the weird, and toward utter independence. It was enabled by a new instrument – the Fairlight, the first digital synthesizer and sampler. Her friend and occasional collaborator Peter Gabriel (that’s her singing background on his “Games Without Frontiers”) introduced her to the rig, which allowed her to make musical the sounds she heard in her head when devising her song-length dramas: smashing glass, whirling helicopter blades, the cries of animals and demons. She and her then-partner, bassist Del Palmer, devoted themselves to mastering the unwieldy instrument and it became the basis for her songwriting. After a few experiments on *Never for Ever*, Bush employed it fully on *The Dreaming* to flesh out the cinematic scenes coursing through her mind. Already writing as much in charac-

ter as about her own experiences, Bush brought untold depth to her monologues on *The Dreaming* in the voices of dead soldiers, bank robbers, and Harry Houdini’s wife. She also dared to move into her lower vocal register, telling a reporter, “I can actually put some balls into my voice for the first time!” A LinnDrum “rhythm box” allowed her to expand her rhythmic range, and she brought in the Irish band Planxty to provide a grounding in traditional folk. As she’d always done with her multidisciplinary approach to performance and adventurous songwriting, Bush now anticipated pop’s next phases by eradicating borders with her beats.

A controversial album upon release, *The Dreaming* is now recognized as the paradigm shift Bush needed to enter the imperial phase of her career. She spent three years regrouping after it was dubbed “uncommercial” despite debuting at Number Three on the English charts and giving Bush her first spot on *Billboard*’s Top 200. She built her own home studio, spent time with family, and continued the education she’d been attaining on her own since dropping out of high school to pursue music. Living on the edge of the English countryside, Bush read the poetry of Alfred Lord Tennyson and watched “watery films” like the thriller *Don’t Look Now* and the war movie *The Cruel Sea*. From this nourishment came *Hounds of Love*, the 1985 album that broke Bush in America and yielded her most enduring hit, “Running Up That Hill (A Deal With God),”





**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** At an in-store promotion event for *The Dreaming*, 1982; performing on German television, 1985; with Peter Gabriel at the Brit Awards, London, 1987; onstage on the *Tour of Life*, Amsterdam, 1979.





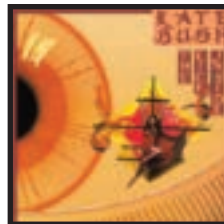


**In the studio working on *The Dreaming*, 1982**

which would reignite her stardom nearly forty years later when featured in the Netflix series *Stranger Things*. That album found her many new fans as she perfected her use of synthesizers to produce a more accessible, though equally adventurous, musical framework for songs that could work as the fantastic stories they were and as hits. For many listeners, “Running Up That Hill” is simply an inspirational anthem, but listen more deeply and you’ll realize that Bush is singing about mutual orgasm and the desire to know what a lover of another gender experiences during sex. Stranger things, indeed.

It may seem strange that Bush, a major star in Europe since her emergence, only found a major U.S. audience with *Hounds of Love*. The lag can be attributed to her lack of touring, connected to another way in which Bush precociously modeled a twenty-first-century pop career. She feared flying, and that’s one reason she didn’t tour stateside. More relevant, however, was her commitment to creating elaborate videos and short films in league with her albums, which took much time and energy. Bush has always been attuned to the potential of costume and set design; her first and only tour, which resulted in a concert film, involved highly evocative set pieces, and she created dozens of videos before MTV made it a pop-star requirement. By *Hounds of Love*, she could take her visions further. She enlisted *Brazil* director Terry Gilliam and *Don’t Look Now* star Donald Sutherland to make a short-form film for “Cloudbusting,” her song about psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich’s fanciful attempts to channel “orgone energy” to make rain. She also made an iconic video with Gabriel for his ballad “Don’t Give Up,” featuring

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



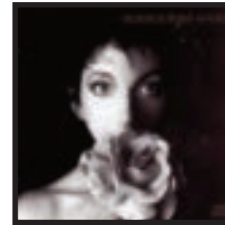
***The Kick Inside***  
1978 (EMI)



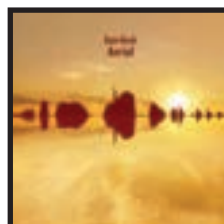
***The Dreaming***  
1982 (EMI)



***Hounds of Love***  
1985 (EMI)



***The Sensual World***  
1989 (EMI)

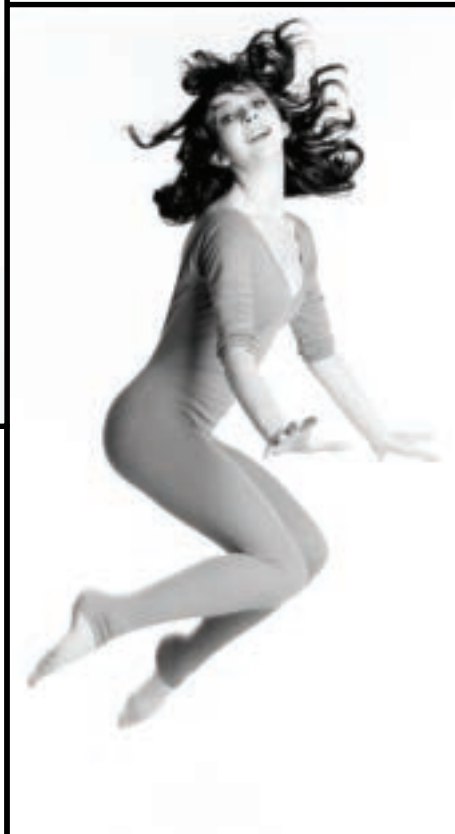


***Aerial***  
2005 (EMI/Columbia)



***Before the Dawn***  
2016 (Fish People/  
Concord)





**CLOCKWISE FROM  
TOP LEFT: First three  
photos: Bush the  
dancer, 1978;  
in London, 1979;  
around the time of  
*Never for Ever*, 1980.**







**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Onstage in London, ca. 1989; with early supporter David Gilmour of Pink Floyd, ca. 1990; onstage in Germany, 1982; fans celebrate "The Most Wuthering Heights Day Ever," Melbourne, Australia, 2017.**





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**A CAREER THAT WOULD WREST THE DEFINITION OF ART ROCK FROM THE GRIP OF HER MALE MENTORS AND OPEN IT UP NOT ONLY FOR WOMEN LIKE HERSELF BUT FOR THE BLACK AND QUEER INNOVATORS OF TODAY.**

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the two of them locked in a six-minute long embrace. These highly sophisticated videos made her an artistic rival of MTV-produced superstars like Madonna (in the U.K., *Hounds of Love* unseated Madge's *Like a Virgin* at Number One when it was released) and helped form her enduring legacy as a performer despite her decision to not tour.

Bush followed *Hounds of Love* with *The Sensual World* in 1989, notable for two experiments that took her into new territory. On three tracks she collaborated with the Bulgarian vocal ensemble Trio Bulgarka; as with Planxty years before, she let folkways guide her studio experiments as she pursued her goal of what she's famously called "applying the future to nostalgia," melding avant-garde techniques with musical sources that evoke the warm emotions of romance and familial love. Her other *Sensual World* adventure was more unexpected. Approached by the filmmaker John Hughes to write a song for a scene in his latest comedy-drama *She's Having a Baby* – the pivotal moment when its heroine endures a difficult childbirth and the hero, undone, paces in the hospital waiting room – she wrote "This Woman's Work," a stunning ode to childbirth from a male perspective. Thirteen years later, the R&B experimentalist Maxwell released his version of the song and it became a genre standard, illuminating the respect many hip-hop artists have expressed for Bush over the years, from Tupac to Mystikal to her self-described biggest fan, Outkast's Big Boi.

One more album, *The Red Shoes*, came in 1993 before Bush turned away from recording for a spell that broke the hearts of her avid fans. Family took precedence: She married the guitarist Danny McIntosh that year and gave birth to a son, Bertie, in 1998. Her choice to step

away from the spotlight and nurture her family was interpreted by some as a sign of her hermit tendencies, but in truth Bush has always been a stay-at-home genius, traversing inner worlds and uncharted sonic territory within a well-tended circle of collaborators. Her beautiful 2005 album, *Aerial*, explored domesticity with the profound curiosity and sensual power she had previously brought to more outwardly directed fantastic journeys. Six years later, in 2011, she revisited songs she'd felt had been inadequately recorded on *Director's Cut* and also released what is (so far) her final studio album, the jazz-tinged, reliably experimental *50 Words for Snow*, featuring the renowned drummer Steve Gadd.

Even in semiretirement, Bush continued to anticipate pop's next trajectories. In 2014, she shocked the world by announcing *Before the Dawn*, an epic concert run to be staged at London's Hammersmith Apollo. Over twenty-two performances, Bush revisited her entire catalog with a full cast of actors (including her son, Bertie) and dancers, along with puppeteers, 3D animation, and the illusionist Paul Kieve. Just as the era of extended residencies began to offer a new model for live music, Bush and her collaborators raised the bar on such productions to the heavens. Then, in 2022, when "Running Up That Hill" re-entered the charts – and topped them worldwide – Bush was again ahead of most artists: Her shrewd licensing decision made her the oldest chart-topping woman in pop history at 63 and helped usher in today's era of revivals spurred by placement on prestige television. Bush happily embraced a new generation of fans delighted to delve into her infinitely rich body of work. There she was again, making the future possible, comfortable, home.