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# BOLD AND BEAUTIFUL

Before headlining Time Out's Big Night Out and releasing her second album, singer-songwriter Eman Lam speaks to Arthur Tam about challenging Hong Kong's weight-obsessed culture. Photography by Calvin Sit. Art direction by Jeroen Brulez

There is no room for fat in Hong Kong – especially when it comes to the female body. Women in Hong Kong are under constant scrutiny about their body weight, in the form of invasive, prodding relatives or by the bombardment of slimming advertisements that litter our streets. Compound that with being a female celebrity and the pressure to lose weight increases tenfold.

This is not something Eman Lam wishes to conform to, however. Ever since the singer-songwriter broke into the entertainment industry as one half of indie Cantopop duo at17 back in 2002, Lam has never been one to follow the grain, nor let the muddled distractions of others get in her way. With at17, alongside her musical partner Ellen Loo, she produced a unique musical offering of indie rock, funk and folk, which paved the way for other musicians that didn't quite fit into Hong Kong's pop mold.

After parting ways from at17, the now 31-year-old chanteuse has been gaining steady momentum as a solo artist, all the while challenging the preconceptions of body image placed on female artists in the city.

Ahead of the release of her second solo album, *On the Go*, and her headline slot at Time Out's Big Night Out on July 25 at K11, the confident and radiant Lam speaks to Time Out about the increasing limitations for full-figured individuals in Hong Kong's entertainment industry and how she wants to be seen as a role model.

**It's wonderful to see you Eman. First off, we're excited about having you headline Big Night Out and the release of your new album, *On the Go*. How would you say this album is different from your first?**

The biggest difference is it's in Putonghua. Secondly, the first CD is more tailored for my sound whereas the second one challenges it. For me, this album is really about the quality of the music and how, with just the raw sounds of guitar, drums, bass and strings, we've

been able to perform different genres that seem disparate but that actually go together perfectly in the album. I would say it's a mix of pop, funk and rock. It's not something that would be easy to sing along to. I don't do karaoke songs. I don't know how to do that.

**Why did you decide to do it in Putonghua?**  
I wanted to do a Putonghua album to break out into the scene in Taiwan and the Mainland. My experiences promoting my music in the Mainland and Taiwan have always been good. The audience there really likes to absorb new voices and content. Sometimes it even feels like they know me better than I do myself. Nevertheless, I want to make it clear that I am a Hong Kong artist.

**So it's partly to increase your fan base?**  
Yes! I definitely want a bigger one because there should be happier people. I think I can give people that. I want people to know that if they want to be like me that I have a lot in my life that makes me fulfilled. I have happiness, friends and support from people who truly love and believe in me for me.

**How do you think you've evolved as a musician, especially during your solo journey?**  
From the beginning, I felt like I had more attitude and a signature quality to my voice. Here, I feel like my voice is becoming more transparent, in that it blends harmoniously with the song that I'm singing. I can manipulate my voice to fit whatever I need to sing. My character seeps into the voice you hear in the song.

**Slightly separate from your music, one thing the media has often talked about with you – and this is a little sensitive – is your body image. What are your thoughts on that?**

To be completely honest, it's really difficult in this society. People usually think that

larger-sized, dare I say chubby, people have a hard time surviving in Hong Kong or Asia in general. People would much rather go for the Angelababy-type as a role model because they think if they become her, they can achieve something out of life.

The saddest thing I think about this city is that I don't feel there is a real sense of identity. Like, you have to either be this, or that. Actually, Hong Kong wasn't always like this. I also don't understand why there is this sense of fear now.

I remember one issue of *Time* magazine asked, 'Who is the next big star?' The answer was 'you' – meaning that everyone thinks his or her identity is the next big thing. However, I don't feel like this sentiment has come to Hong Kong yet. People here are too cramped and overworked to enjoy life. In this pressurised environment, all you think about is work, so it's useless to talk about identity and acceptance.

People these days have more knowledge and choices, but they don't have the courage to act on them because people are still, unfortunately, afraid of being judged.

**What kind of image would you say you carry?**

I carry the undesirable double image of a fat woman and a tomboy. While I think that it isn't as easy for me to gain as much popularity as Angelababy, I still perceive myself as an extremely lucky person. I sometimes even think that only I can achieve what I have achieved.

**How so?**

I feel like I'm part of a beautiful group, which is the People Mountain People Sea crew. So whatever I do, people naturally think I am a musician first and foremost. On top of that, I'm surrounded by all these people, like my brother (Chet Lam), who are liberated and have this 'I am who I am' attitude. On that note, I think the most powerful thing about me is that I'm not afraid of people not liking me. ▶



“ **BELIEVING THAT YOU’RE BEAUTIFUL IS VERY IMPORTANT, BUT MANY PEOPLE HAVE YET TO DISCOVER THIS**

**So what do you think about the Angelababy image? Do you think that it’s a bad image?**

I don’t think so. There has to be people like her. I really believe there are many types of beauty, but there shouldn’t only be one that dominates.

**Do you consider yourself as beautiful?**

I am absolutely gorgeous. [Laughs]

**Has your size ever effected being in relationship with someone?**

My size has never really been an issue when it comes to relationships. In high school I had little confidence so it didn’t go so well. But from my first relationship when I was 19 to now, I have never felt like there was anything that stopped me.

**Do you think of yourself as someone to inspire other women in HK that might have image issues?**

I definitely think I’m an inspiration to other overweight women. I think I’m perceived as being very lucky, which is true, so I like bringing my positive energy to others. But I also wish that others didn’t feel the need to be dolled up or photoshopped. I think believing that you’re beautiful is very important, but many people have yet to discover this.

**Have you ever encountered any cruel comments on social media?**

There was one time on Weibo where this girl posted, ‘Everyone who stands beside Eman Lam would automatically look more beautiful’. I responded to this commenter and wrote, ‘With such a critical and sharp voice, you should consider working for the press to hone your talent. If you’re able to write something so cruel yet so poignant, why not take your abilities and use them elsewhere’. I wasn’t scolding her but I wanted to make her understand that what she said did make me unhappy but, on the flip side, encourage her to use her time and energy on something more rewarding. She responded by saying she was sorry and that she only knew me through my photos.

I want to remind people that writing hateful things behind a computer screen is cowardly. If they feel like saying something, they should say it to my face. It’s as if they just threw a shoe at me, ran away and hid. If you really want to be an angry person, then do it properly.

**So would you say you’re completely comfortable with your body image?**

Very comfortable. In the end, I realised that how the world perceives you is very different from your own perception of yourself. I will still be the same person whatever I wear and look beautiful in it. I think people here just don’t understand the contrast.

**So are you saying that people just don’t seem to understand you?**

I’m chubby and I have a masculine way of speaking, but my voice is actually quite feminine. I have a serious face, but I’m actually sweet. This type of combination is hard for the world to accept because it’s easier just to pick one thing – sticking to one stereotype. It’s like choosing between sweet, sour, bitter and spicy, where most people would simply choose sweet, especially in Asia. For those brought up in a western culture, they would completely understand where I’m coming from. In Hong Kong or Asia, they don’t seem to get it. While I’m not trying to create a revolution, I wish my work here in Hong Kong could help promote a more open-minded perspective. I mean... c’mon, we have to have more choices.

**You seem to wear a lot of black. Is that a conscious choice or is it because you want to look slimmer?**

Actually, no. I don’t care about being fat, but I don’t want to look bad in front of the camera. I want to be beautiful while being fat. I just wear black because it’s easier to match and blend into the crowd so people don’t recognise me as easily. I’m actually open to wearing pretty much any colour.

**Have you ever felt pressure to look different?**

For me, I get more pleasure from knowing that I haven’t changed on the inside – that I have grown as a person. If I were to change the physical side of me, it would be for health reasons. I don’t need to be slim, I just don’t want to be obese.

**On your new album, are these issues something you touch on?**

My music doesn’t really have that kind of attitude. I’m just not into songs that preach a certain message. I’d rather you feel the music and appreciate it that way.

**And just finally, what’s next for Eman Lam? What is your ultimate goal for the next couple of years?**

I think perhaps a mix between standup comedy and singing would be interesting. For example, there would be a topic and I’ll use my words and singing to express a message. Kind of like a life coach – part workshop, part performance. I’ve tried to do something like this in the past and it was quite successful. There’s also nothing like it here in Hong Kong. ■

**Big Night Out with Eman Lam + Yukilovey + GDJYB** K11 Art Mall, Fri Jul 25. Register at [timeout.com.hk/bignightout](http://timeout.com.hk/bignightout). *On the Go* is released on Mon Jul 28.

