

FEATURE

Lone Star

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Alt-pop musician Sophia Stel is ready to take on the world.
And she's doing it her way.

Chanel full look.





SOPHIA STEL WALKS THROUGH THE DOOR of her local Gastown café as the barista waves a mug in her direction. “The usual?”

The usual—dark roast drip, black, no sugar—is as unfussy as its drinker. Stel wears her waist-length brown hair parted simply in the middle and favours hoodies, low-slung loose jeans, and sweats. Nothing about the 27-year-old shouts “look at me,” and yet the past few months have seen her life transformed, with rave reviews and interviews in the international music press. In the weeks following our early Sunday morning coffee, she will step fully into that new life, walking the runway in Paris Fashion Week and embarking on her first European tour, with stops including Paris, Barcelona, and London. Until recently, she had barely travelled beyond B.C.

“I think I would be nervous if I thought about it too much,” she admits between sips of coffee. “Everything that I do lately makes me nervous.”

She may feel occasionally overwhelmed, but Stel has come by this next phase honestly, spending years working various jobs (sometimes three at once) to get by, funnelling all her creative energy into her music. Believing in her core that if she worked hard enough, became good enough, she could make a career out of it. That uncompromising commitment has finally paid off.

Her debut EP *Object Permanence*, released in September 2024, was an immediate game-changer, catching the attention of A.G. Cook (the U.K. record producer best known for his collaborations with Charli xcx), who asked her to open for him at a gig in Los Angeles. A year later, she released *How to Win at Solitaire*, another EP. In the meantime, a track from *Object Permanence*—“I’ll Take It”—had enjoyed a viral

moment when Australian pop sensation Troye Sivan clipped it for an Instagram post.

“It started to catch on and do quite well, and that was really cool without honestly a lot of heavy lifting from me, which was really nice because I’m not that good at that kind of thing,” she proffers.

“I don’t feel that good—I don’t know how to explain it—promoting music in that way, partially just because I’m too awkward. I’m too awkward to do a lot of the classic promotional tactics.

“I just think there has to be a really careful balance between the making of something and the promoting, and the way that the music industry is these days, there is way more on the promoting, and the very little bit that’s left is on making music. And so much more focus on how well it does and how it’s received and how to mimic that again, which I think is just the enemy of ever making something new or creative.”

Stel speaks quickly yet thoughtfully. There is an intentionality about her that screams artist; there is no one behind the scenes manufacturing her sound or her image. And that’s what makes her music resonate: at a time when we are drowning in profit-driven fakery, authentic voices still have the power to break through the noise. Hers is an ecosystem of sound built from the ground up. Hard to pigeonhole, it evokes 1990s trip-hop with a healthy smudge of maximalist hyperpop made edgy with the emotional dissonance of autotune. Its hazy moodiness quickly gets under your skin.

“I think it’s been hard to define for a number of reasons,” Stel says of her music. “One is that it is self-produced—which maybe should make it easier—but what I mean is the process of making

it is that I try and never go towards one sound.

“I think there are always things I try and incorporate based on my taste,” she continues. “I really do try and make what I want to hear, which is my truest guideline, because I can’t focus on what I think other people might want to hear or what I think might be considered cool.” She breathes and looks straight at me. “Because then it’s all over.”

Her early experiences working with producers were not great—partly down to her inability to overcome self-doubt and communicate what she wanted, a situation, she says, not helped by the male dominance in the industry. “I think that was a sign I needed to spend more time working on things myself and growing in my technical skill and confidence.”

She did exactly that, and her recent studio sojourn in Los Angeles was a different story. “It was the first time I felt that I was able to be in a room with a producer I didn’t know, someone far more technically skilled than me, and I really still felt confident to say what I wanted and directing things to go the way that I wanted. Having value in my voice.

“The thing about having spent so much time on my own doing it myself,” she says, “means that at the age I am now, I am more confident, and I am ready. I am confident in my image. There is only one person I can be. And that’s the truth. I try and lean as much as possible towards what makes me comfortable, keep my autonomy, and obviously keep people around me who really know me.”

BORN INTO A RELIGIOUS FAMILY ON Vancouver Island, Stel lived with her parents and 10 siblings in Saanich—until she moved out,

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Dior full look; Balenciaga sunglasses from Holt Renfrew.

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as soon as she graduated high school. It is clear there were tensions and conflicts growing up, but she is understandably careful about what she shares; there are siblings still living at home. Her eldest sibling is 29; the youngest, 12. She is third in order of birth.

“Growing up with so many siblings can be very cool,” she says. “But there are large family dynamics that are very complicated, particularly the parentification of older children, and

that is something that is very hard for a child psychologically to understand when they are put in that position to ever get out of the role or responsibility.

“That is something I have struggled with my entire life,” she adds. “To alleviate myself from the pressure of feeling like a mother. And I’ve always felt that way, and it’s very strange, because in some ways I’m so Type B and airhead.” She pauses to think for a moment before adding:

“I’ve never been a good mother per se, but I have always had the anxieties of a mother.”

Two of her brothers live with her. Stel delayed moving to Vancouver until the younger finished high school and she could bring them both with her. “I was, like, 21 and going to parent-teacher evenings with a 17-year-old,” she recalls. “Very strange, because I’m not much older, and I’m not much smarter, and I’m talking to the principal.” She shrugs. “As if he’s going to listen to me.”

I tell her I’m not sure that is something many people would be prepared to do, and her rebuttal comes quickly. “I think most people put in my position would, actually. For the reasons and connections that I have had, I believe most people would. Out of love. I guess I think highly of people in general. Or,” she says, quietly, “at least I try to.”

Leaving home so young, with no support system, she had to start over from scratch. She found safety in Victoria’s skate community, became pretty good at skateboarding herself, and says she still has “a lot of love for that culture.” Eventually, she felt able to come out (her ex-girlfriend is a professional skateboarder).

These days, she is surrounded by a tight group of close friends who travel with her on their own dime. “This is them buying their own flights, finding places to stay,” she explains. “I’m not at a point to do that for them, but they come, and they support me and just look out for me. And right now, as I’m having to navigate new environments and interact with the world in a whole new way, that has been quite humbling. Having friends there to help me still feel like myself is really lovely.”

I ask her what the next step is in her plan to build a career with longevity. “Being in front of people, physically present, is key to that,” she answers. “I’m doing a lot of smaller shows—I think it’s very personal at this point—and that feels really good.”

Still, performing doesn’t come easy to her. “It feels so good to make music. I’m usually on my own, and I have this amazing high that comes from making music I like, and that part of it is so special,” she says, her smile affirming her words.

“Nothing else makes me feel so in touch with myself and emotionally happy and healthy.

“Being on stage, there’s a part of it that it is very vulnerable for me,” she adds, the smile fading as



This page: Hermès full look.

Opposite: Michael Kors suit and belt; Valentino boots from Mine & Yours.



This page: Prada look.

Opposite: Rick Owens top from Bacci's; Loewe trousers from Holt Renfrew; Rachel Sudbury hat; Hermès loafers.

Makeup: Timothy Hung

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Post-production: Marius Burlan



she articulates her thoughts. "It feels very good to sing, and it feels very good to sing with people in the crowd—and often that's the most enjoyable part for me.

"But my performance right now is just tracks, it's just me and a video, so the focus is all on me, and for me my music is very emotional and personal," she continues.

"I think there is something important, maybe, around me being willing to put myself in that vulnerable position," she adds, after a pause. "It creates the final connection between me and the music—I don't really know how to explain it, but I end up kind of loving it."

"I'LL TAKE IT. I'LL TAKE IT." I AM SURROUNDED by joyful faces jumping up and down, arms in the air, singing along to that viral track. Stel is on a tiny stage at Performance Works on Granville Island, a bouncing blur of hair tumbling from under a hoodie. Now and then she lifts her head, and I catch a glimpse of her face, microphone held tight to her lips. The anticipation in the room has been rising steadily since the set began, the audience revelling in that delicious tension that comes before a sonic break. This is the song that releases the pressure, the chorus turning trance-like in its repetition. And the moment where Stel becomes as one with her fans. She'll take it. ■