

# Fighting for Van Gogh

The painter's dedication to his art moved singer Stefanie Sun, who was determined to make her song about him the lead single



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Using SkillsFuture Credit, one can, say, learn to speak Korean or pick up bookkeeping.

In the case of local singer Stefanie Sun, it helped shape her new album, *A Dancing Van Gogh*, which was released on Nov 9.

And, no, it was not a masterclass on putting out a record. Rather, it was a course on basic watercolour techniques at the **Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts** that she took in March last year. She eventually stopped at the Advance 3 level.

Her classmates took it in their stride that there was a pop star in their midst. The first time the teacher took attendance, however, and came across Sun's dialect name, she said: "Oh, I thought that Sun Yanzi (the singer's Chinese name) was so free to come for my class."

The singer muses: "When I took up watercolour painting, I didn't think that it would (lead to) something. It was just, okay lor, \$500 (of SkillsFuture Credit), let's go."

Sun, 39, is speaking to *The Straits Times* at Capella Singapore after grabbing a quick bite of pizza and tom yum soup following a day of photoshoots and interviews.

The classes coincided with a growing interest in art, particular that of master painter Vincent Van Gogh. In recent years, she has been visiting the Netherlands "quite a bit" - her entrepreneur husband Nadim van der Ros is Dutch and there is a Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

The painter's dedication to his art, even though he was not recognised for it during his lifetime, moved her. She fought for *A Dancing Van Gogh* (music by Taiwanese band Tree Of Life's The Little Prince, lyrics by well-known lyricist Wu I-wei) to be the lead single, despite it being neither a conventional ballad nor an outright dance number.

"I remember we had a meeting with my record label and they said: 'Oh, we had a test, six out of 10 hated it, the other four didn't feel for it.'"

While she can come across as laid-back and easygoing in conversation, there is also a determined side to the singer. What felt like a risky departure to some was an obvious choice to her.

She says of the track: "The song is also about a mental state. It sounds a little dark, maybe it's the moment just before (Van Gogh) cut his ear. I feel that, increasingly, a lot of us are dealing with mental stress, there's this overload of information and this idea of where you think your life has to be."

Living up to other people's expectations is not something she is particularly concerned with - although the pressures of putting out hit album after hit album as a Mandopop queen are real.

After all, she has reportedly sold more than 30 million records in a hugely successful career that took off with her eponymous debut album in 2000.

She has also amassed a large number of accolades, including a win for



Mandopop star Stefanie Sun took up watercolour painting classes last year and developed an interest in the art of Vincent Van Gogh. PHOTO: UNIVERSAL MUSIC

Best Female Vocalist at the prestigious Golden Melody Awards in 2005 for the album *Stefanie*.

But she points out: "Music is also art; there's no formula. It shouldn't be, 'Oh yah, you need to have a popular song, and then you do this, then you can push out other things.'"

When it comes to music, she knows what she wants. And she wanted to end the album on a hopeful note after the darker start of *A Dancing Van Gogh*.

She was recording with local songwriter-producer Li Sisong when his son Tingguang, 23, dropped by. Li suggested that Tingguang take a stab at writing the elusive album ender.

The result was *Immense Beauty*, a wistful, tender ballad with a beautiful melody.

On her first listen of the tune, Sun said: "This is it, correct already."

She later wrote the lyrics for the

song ("Don't forget falling leaves return to the ground/We'll gather in the wheatfields, so beautiful, and celebrate").

The other lyrics were penned by the likes of singer-songwriter Hush (who wrote Kepler for her) and lyricist Kevin Yi (who wrote *Encounter* for her).

The singer has had a long and fruitful working relationship with the twin brothers Li Sisong and Weisong. They have written some of her best-known hits over the years, from *Cloudy Day* to *Angel's Fingerprints*. Between them, they came up with half of the music for *A Dancing Van Gogh*, including stand-out number *Windbreaker*. (The *Windbreaker* seen in the music video was designed by Sun and her sister Jeanette.)

She says simply: "They have a very innate talent for composing that fits me."

To her, the album feels complete, an achievement she is proud of.

And if some people do not take to it, that is fine. She says: "It's a very subjective thing. I've seen artwork that I don't like. But I don't think that 'don't like' is a bad thing. It doesn't subtract from what I'm trying to do."

"I always say an artist's job is not to be liked. It's to push, sometimes, to look at things differently."

Her most recent release was the EP *Rainbow Bot* last year, which captures the sense of innocence and wonder of childhood, and her last album was *Kepler* in 2014. When she is away from the limelight, her son, five, keeps her busy.

She has never revealed his name to the public, though her face lights up when talking about him.

She says with a laugh: "I don't know what is more difficult, doing mundane things like chauffeuring or tidying up, or asking him to sit down and stop moving about."

He is protective, and perhaps a tad possessive, of her too. "He'll be like, 'Why are you taking pictures with strangers? Stop taking pictures with strangers.'"

"And I'm like, 'Mama cannot, these people listen to mama's music, you know, they're very supportive.' I have to explain these things to him."

His music diet includes classic rock and pop by Queen and The Beatles, courtesy of his father, and Mandopop from his mother.

She adds with a touch of pride: "He would sing the last line of Huang Yida's *Ni Ming De Bao Bei* (*My Anonymous Babe*): *Ai ni zen me hui lei?* (How could I get tired loving you?)"

Now that he is older and "fully functional" - "can tell him to eat by himself" - she says she is more open to the idea of having more kids.

Ask how she feels about turning 40 next year and she says: "Forty lor, you can be whatever kind of 40 you want to be. You can be active, you can be very inactive. Just do what you want to do."

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• *A Dancing Van Gogh* is available in stores.

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**SINGER STEFANIE SUN** on making *A Dancing Van Gogh* the lead single of her recent album, despite it being neither a conventional ballad nor an outright dance number

## Music curveballs from Sun

1

### LEAVE AM ALONE



**Yan Zi (2000)**  
The debut album from the gamine and fresh-

faceted newcomer had uplifting tracks such as *Turbo* and singalong hits including the now classic *Cloudy Day*. But it also included *Leave Me Alone*, which did not fit neatly into people's perception of her musical DNA: positive, encouraging and girl-next-door.

Tune-wise, the mid-tempo track actually does not feel out of place, though the lyrics can be rather emotional, with its titular plea: "What am I thinking, what do I want, don't ask me/Can you leave me alone."

2

### SILENT ALL THESE YEARS



**Start (2002)**  
American singer-songwriter Tori Amos' lacerat-

ingly honest lyrics on *Little Earthquakes* (1992) can draw blood. Sample lines: "Boy you best pray that I bleed real soon/How's that thought for you." Sun's cover version is quite faithful, down to the piano accompaniment, and she acquits herself well with this unlikely choice of song. Chinese pop queen Faye Wong covered it as *Cold War* in Cantonese and Mandarin with completely different lyrics.

3

### MAGICAL



**To Be Continued... (2003)**  
The Bollywood-inspired

lead single for her sixth album featured traditional Indian instruments and the music video showed Sun sporting henna decorations on her hands and even a bindi on her forehead.

4

### MY STORY, YOUR SONG

**To Be Continued... (2003)**

Duets are pretty much de rigueur for a major Mandopop act, but instead of a love ballad with a male singer, she paired up with Japanese pop and R&B star Mai Kuraki here on an English number. They collaborated again on *Tonight, I Feel Close To You*, which is on the compilation album *The Moment* (2003).

5

### SWEET CHILD O' MINE



**Rainbow Bot (2016)**  
Instead of American rock band Guns N' Roses

frontman Axl Rose's snarl, we get Sun adding a touch of maternal warmth to lines such as: "O sweet child o' mine, o sweet love of mine."

## Inspired by art



SCAN TO WATCH



<http://str.sg/vangogh>