KT TUNSTALL SPEAKS AT THE CAMBRIDGE UNION

On the 6th November 2016 the Cambridge Union Society welcomed Scottish singer-songwriter and musician KT Tunstall. KT recounted that she had been brought up in Scotland by teachers. Her father lectured in physics at the University of St Andrews and her mother was a primary school teacher. Her childhood was ‘very achievement based’. The attitude prevailed that ‘if you work hard you can do it’, whatever ‘it’ is. As a sensitive person she found this ‘a bit overwhelming’.

KT did not have much exposure to music during her upbringing. A mixture of factors such as her her younger brother being deaf and her father’s very limited music collection led to this fact. But she had been interested in playing music since she was four years old. She was much more interested in playing instruments than listening to music. She was the ‘Mozart’ of her school in St Andrews, achieving a result one mark of the top grade in her first exam. Though the next twelve years charted a steady decline in musical achievement, with KT ‘just about’ getting to grade 6 in piano. In the meantime she taught herself guitar. At home KT depicted the battle over the remote of the TV, herself wanting to watch MTV but her father preferring rugby. MTV showed another side of music that ‘caught her imagination’, seeing extravagant artists like Madonna that she had hitherto never been exposed to.

At fifteen or sixteen KT knew she wanted to pursue life a singer. This was a hard decision as in the late 90s there was no job centre initiative for musicians. Unfortunately, as she turned 26 the job centre introduced an allowance for budding musicians but for the 16-24 year age group, but she remembers being pleased the the job centre was moving in the right direction. KT attended Royal Holloway, as in her family a university education was expected. She had expected to start a band at university but to her dismay ‘everybody went home’ on the weekends. But university was a ‘safe environment’ where she could get gigs. KT acknowledged that university ‘put her back’ in her pursuit to become a singer, and was unsure whether she would take the same path, but told the chamber to ‘everything you want to do’ while at university. After university it took her ‘ten years to get anywhere with music’. Looking back, she did not know how she ‘preserved for that long’.

KT reflected on the nature of success. Many consider success ‘money or financial security’, but KT’s vision of success was achieving her dream of doing music and not having to do another job. After 20 years of dreaming she achieved success. But the problem with success is that once achieved you miss the ‘visceral feeling’ of the journey to success. After her dad passed, she realised she had been trying to please people all her life, primarily her dad. Even though, her parents were horrified when they discovered she wanted to be a recording artist. KT related that ‘having a healthy and loving relationship with herself’ was ‘one hundred percent’ what she found success to be.
KT imparted life advice to the audience. Resilience is striving to achieve your dream no matter what. KT knew she ‘would prefer to be financial unstable and not have a two holiday’. She ‘couldn’t face not wanting to go to work’. Confidence is necessary. A book she read stated four important rules; that one should be careful with one’s words, not take things personally, not make assumptions and do as well as one can in the moment. If KT could go back she would ‘aim bigger’ and not be ‘scared’ to surprise herself. Finally, she related a quote from the Buddha that ‘life is suffering’. ‘It’s not easy’, but no one likes to hear songs about an easy life.

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For footage of the event go to https://www.youtube.com/user/cambridgeunionsoc

Monday, 07 November 2016