



# Luck be a Ukulady

Introducing the lovely Mara Carlyle, London's own (by way of Shropshire at least) ukulele-strumming, opera-loving, never-sleeping anti-diva. Her reputation as one of the busiest and friendliest people in the business is not just PR propaganda. Still working her day job with Euston's young and underprivileged, Mara's enthusiasm for, well, everything is unbelievable. How can anyone be so alive? **Rod Thomas** popped a Pro Plus and went to get the low down...

Located right in the heart of London, The Social has been a staple of the city's competitive music scene for over half a decade. Its stage has showcased the likes of Beth Orton and the Chemical Brothers, but in recent years it's fair to say that it's lost some of its status outside of the DJ scene. Even so, it's surprising to find Mara Carlyle at the bottom of an otherwise nondescript line-up, on a Wednesday night no less. But then low-key suits her perfectly. Tonight is a testament to her talents, showing that not only can she shine as the opening act for a range of big name performers, but that, like few other artists working today, she can still The Social's trendy and raucous after-work crowd into hushed, attentive silence.

Accompanied by acoustic guitar, occasionally breaking out her ukulele and wielding a shiny household saw, her soaring voice and command of the stage quickly win over any skeptical onlookers. That, and her undaunted approach to straddling musical genres and fearless deconstruction of other artists' songs alongside her exquisitely self-penned material. Last year's debut album, *The Lovely*, was universally acclaimed, and this year has seen not one but two brilliant EPs – the wickedly titled *I Blame Dido* and the graceful *Baby Bloodheart*. I was lucky enough to grab a few moments to ask about her ever more hectic life...

*Wow, you seem so busy. How on earth do you manage to balance your day job with all this amazing music?*

It's a lot easier since I went part-time but still, if my colleagues and managers weren't so utterly cool and supportive and wonderful there is no way I could continue to do my music. I owe an awful lot to the good people of New Horizon Youth Centre.

*It seems like it's working really well for you. You've done quite a few impressive support*

*slots... what was it like opening for a giant chart act like Will Young?*

That was a real eye-opener... dipping a little toe into the world of pop. Provided some quite surreal moments though; playing *You'll Never Walk Alone* on my saw while five thousand Liverpoolians sang along was a strangely moving experience...

*Sounds it! Is the saw your favourite instrument then or does the ukulele clinch it?*

I love my ukulele, but I think the saw is probably my favourite. I'm going to try and learn how to saw and sing at the same. That's my next mission.

*Who's been your favourite touring partner so far?*

Hmmm... well in terms of pure fun, touring with Willy Mason was a very good way to spend a few weeks. We just laughed so much and his audiences were great to play for. He's a terrible influence though... made me drink a lot of booze...

*[laughs] I'm sure you really protested too! Now, you've already worked extensively with Plaid who produced your debut album. Are there any other artists you'd love to work with? Any current favourites?*

Well, apart from Andre 3000 (I have something of a crush on that fellow), the people I most want to work with are my friends... Willy, Max de Wardener, Jamie Liddell [whose *Game For Fools* Mara covers on the *Baby Bloodheart* EP], Jackson, Jade Fox... I've got plans for them all! And I'm really crazy about my brother's new band Deep Elem; pure traditional bluegrass music made by two blokes in Shropshire. Really the best thing I've heard in aaaaages.

*I heard your much-touted covers album got put on the backburner for a while, but at least you've treated us to a typically eclectic range of interpretations on the new single [one track, Piximerie, infeasibly*

*bly splices The Pixies' Hey with Amerie's 1 Thing to startling effect]. How do you find the inspiration for your covers?*

I don't really rate myself as a songwriter, but I think I'm quite a good arranger and I love to mess around with songs, it tickles my brain.

*OK, so say someone wanted to cover one of your tunes, who would you like it to be? Missy Elliott... just an idea.*

*Just one more question, I know you're busy! What are your plans for the future, any exciting tricks up your sleeve?*

I have just made the most amazing video for *Baby Bloodheart* and I am completely focused on getting as many people to see it as possible! It was directed by this gorgeous French genius called Gaelle Denis and she turned me into a mermaid, playing the ukulele, in a bath on wheels on Hampstead Heath... and my love interest in the video is a lobster! Other than that, I'm just cracking on with my new album and I recently DJ'd for the first time, which I'm very excited about... although I don't have any records... or CDs... or mixing ability... hmmm...

The next time I hear from Mara she's telling me how she's learning Vietnamese so that she can sing a national song at a festival, which, by the way, goes very well. So well in fact that one listener who'd been looking in the other direction mistook her for a native. Random, sure, but I get the feeling it's not even close to the strangest thing she'll ever do in her unstoppably illustrious career.

Though she may not have 100% confidence in her songwriting skills, her talent and dedication to all aspects of her work overcome her doubts. Singer, saw-wielder and sometime DJ, it's hard to imagine that Mara Carlyle will remain one of music's best kept secrets for much longer. ■