



IMELDA'S love of nightlife inspired the two-CD concept album, which features female singers such as Cyndi Lauper and Natalie Merchant

Try putting yourself in her shoes

David Byrne's odd new project: a disco opera with Fatboy Slim on the life of Imelda Marcos

BY ELIO IANNACCI • If David Byrne gets his way, Imelda Marcos will be the next Evita Peron. Or at least an off-Broadway version of the political icon. Byrne and music producer Norman Cook (a.k.a. Fatboy Slim) have released a two-disc concept album called *Here Lies Love*. The collection—also available in an edition featuring a booklet and a DVD with six music videos—centres on the scandalous life and times of the wife of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Depending on how you look at it, the timing couldn't be better, or worse. Now 80 years old, Marcos, who returned to her homeland in 1991 after her exile in 1986, is seeking a parliament seat in Ilocos Norte in the northern Philippines.

The album will surprise fans of Byrne's solo efforts or his work with the Talking Heads. Sounding like an amphetamine-spiked disco opera, it features 20 female singers (Byrne sings on a few tracks too) and reflects Marcos's lavish Studio 54-soaked tastes (think bass-heavy torch songs amplified by vocalists such as Cyndi Lauper, Tori Amos, Natalie Merchant, Martha Wainwright and the B-52s' Kate Pierson). Byrne divides Imelda's biography into 22 tracks. The first CD explores Marcos's poverty-stricken youth and fictionalizes her transformation from beauty queen to political wife. The second focuses on the pair's *Dynasty*-like spiral into excess and corruption. (One track, *Order 1081*, is about the tragic repercussions of Ferdinand's decree of martial law in 1972.)

It was Marcos's love of the nightlife that motivated Byrne to pen the libretto. "I read about Imelda's fondness of disco seven years ago and it immediately made me conceptualize her life on stage," Byrne says over the phone from his office in New York City. "Those '70s

and '80s dance hits expressed this romantic, larger-than-life, transcendent feeling of joy and opulence. She related to all that." In fact, Marcos was so smitten by the boogie that she had custom-built discotheques—with mirror balls and dance floors—constructed in a few of her homes (reportedly using tax dollars).

Byrne decided to ignore what he calls the "high-heeled elephant in the room"—all those shoes confiscated from the palace after the couple was exiled to Hawaii in 1986. "I had to get people past the 3,000 shoes," he says, "because I thought it would end up turning her into a one-note joke. Instead I decided to empathize with her feeling like an outsider. She was going to *force* people to like her and charm them to get her way."

One challenge was getting past the Marcos mythology. "They were pop stars in their own right and knew how to manipulate images," says Byrne. "They used John F. and Jackie Kennedy as models, and set up *Life* magazine photo shoots, which tried to mirror America's Camelot couple." For lyrical inspiration, Byrne collected speeches and quotes from interviews. "Some of Imelda's quotes say so much. They were gifts," he says. On *Please Don't*, electro singer Santigold sings, "Don't let them look down on us / Like they used to do to me." Imelda was referring to her hardscrabble childhood, Byrne says—and to her country's

place in the world. On *Don't You Agree*, Irish-born Roisin Murphy roars out lyrics such as "Who stood up to the Japanese? / Who cares about the Philippines?"

Fatboy Slim produced the music; Byrne took a hands-on approach with everything else, including the vocal direction. He chose the singers: "I knew Madonna and Lady Gaga were out of my league but I asked Donna Summer and Gloria Gaynor. Both said no—the project was too politically charged." Each singer got a preparation package. "For people like Cyndi Lauper," he says, "I analyzed each lyric and broke it down line by line because she wanted me to. It took hours."

The title track, says U.K.-based pop star Florence Welch via phone from London, involved the most work she's ever done for a song. "Before I got into the studio, I researched Imelda's life and ended up treating the song the same way a method actor would deal with a role. The song was a little creepy, since Imelda actually wants the words 'here lies love' engraved on her tombstone."

Now that the project has taken off—a musical with New York's Public Theater is in the works—does Byrne have his eye on other political heavyweights in heels? "I don't think Michelle Obama, Hillary Clinton or Margaret Trudeau have the tragic Cinderella story for a full-blown opera," Byrne says. "Sarah Palin would be a natural choice for a country musical, but she has so much more life to live and I don't think I am the one to write it." **M**



JUSTIN BIEBER... HAS SOMETHING TO SAY

Every guy you meet winds up catchin' feelings for ya / You can have any of 'em / You can take your pick / But you need to check with me / Girl I promise I'm legit / Yes we'd be goin' to the movies / In the theatre holding hands / I'll walk you home from school / I'll walk you to your classes / Playing my 360 yes you'll be my best friend / But most of all baby doll you'll be my love love love
—from *Pick Me*, off the album *My World 2.0*