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At 25, Canto-pop star Joey Yung has compiled an impressive résumé – and there's plenty more where that came from, writes Winnie Yeung

PHOTO: OLIVER TSANG

DON'T CALL ME DIVA

YOU COULD BE forgiven for expecting Joey Yung Cho-ye to act the diva. After all, she has racked up 10 albums, 30-odd concerts and almost 100 commercials, and dominated the local music charts for the past three years – and she's only 25. When she arrives for her interview at the Yugapapa restaurant in Causeway Bay, it looks for a moment as if she'll live up to expectations. She glides in, wearing a red-sequined top, jeans and red boots, phone clasped firmly to one ear, and heads for her personal makeup artist for a 10-minute primping, talking on the phone the whole time.

"So pretty," an elderly diner coos. "She must be a star." Which Yung undoubtedly is. But a diva? Not really, despite her complaint about the air-conditioning (the unit was blowing directly at her, apparently). Five minutes into the conversation and the queen of Canto-pop seems more like a typical girl-next-door, with the same doubts and insecurities as any other girl her age.

In less than seven years, Yung has gone from a schoolgirl in a Ma On Shan public housing estate to a successful pop artist who's about to move into a \$46 million apartment in Happy Valley. She owes much of that meteoric rise to the Emperor Entertainment Group (EEG), which signed her in 1999 after she won three singing contests. The late Roman Tam Pak-sin was brought in as her vocal coach. Her debut song, *Unknown*, adapted from US singer Jennifer Paige's hit

Crush, became one of the most-played songs on the radio.

"I still have no idea what to do ultimately," Yung says. "I'm just going with the flow." Planning her career is best left in the hands of her company, she says. "Meanwhile, I'll do the best in whatever job they give me."

It's difficult to comprehend how a singer with a fortune that's reportedly in the nine digits could take such a backseat approach to her career. Which leads to the question of what ambition she actually has. The subject appears to touch a nerve and she momentarily loses her composure. "Do I look like I have no ambition?"

She answers her own question. "Of course I had ambition when I was 15. I was told I could release CDs and I thought I was going to be so good," she says. "But then the two companies that signed me, before EEG, abandoned me at the last minute." Go East Entertainment let her go and Golden Pony Records closed its Hong Kong business just days before Yung was due to record her first CD. It poured cold water on her dreams, she says. "You know how strong that bucket of cold water was?" she asks. "It woke me up completely. At that point I realised things are never what you want them to be all the time."



Joey Yung at the start of her career (far left) and on stage last month.

PHOTOS: DAVID WONG/DUSTIN SHUM

That's why I never have too many plans because I don't want to be disappointed and put too much pressure on myself."

Too much forward planning isn't appropriate in her line of work anyway. "The thing about showbiz is you never know what will happen tomorrow, let alone next year," she says. "This business is a marathon. There are many checkpoints in between, so I won't think about how to reach the finish line. I just think of how to reach each checkpoint."

The latest checkpoints must be different from those of the past. Yung recently appears to have had a musical change of heart after years of pumping out tear-jerking karaoke songs. On her new album, *Ten Most Wanted*, she has experimented with different genres such as rock. She also teams up with Taiwanese rock kitten Mavis Fan Hsiao-shuan on two of the album's techno-influenced tracks, *Get Fit with Jane Fonda* and *The Torned Tongue*, which Fan wrote.

"One can't keep singing karaoke songs forever," Yung says. "But I have to strike a balance, which is difficult. It's easy to go extreme – either very commercial or very alternative, but I'm a mass-market singer so I have to be careful and take the market into consideration."

Fans may find the shows in her tour next month a novelty. It will feature collaborations with Shanghai-born violinist Jue Yao and the Czech Republic's Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra. "I want to try new things this year – be it a new partner or new materials – because I've realised that what I'm supposed to do [to build up her popularity] has been done already."

Yung says her success during the past few years has encouraged EEG to give her more freedom to explore different musical styles. "I think they started to understand that in order to stay on top these days, fresh, new things are necessary," she says.

But don't expect a radically new Yung anytime soon – perhaps not even in the next 10 years, which is the length of her EEG contract. Only then can she start focusing on quality and not quantity – something she says she and her company aren't doing now. "Sometimes I suspect

"I'm a very mass-market singer, so I have to be careful and take the market into consideration"

people are annoyed about seeing me too much," she says. "But then it's not up to me to think about it."

She says she isn't confident enough of her singing abilities to take risks that could affect her relationship with the company. "I know one can change," she says. "But I haven't done enough to reach that stage yet." For now, she just wants to sing every song the best she can.

When violinist Yao first approached her with the idea of a concert, Yung was hesitant and didn't think she had enough stage experience or vocal skills to hold her own with a professional orchestra. Her lack of confidence is one reason she

hasn't pushed herself in the direction she wants to head: the theatre. "I'm not good at acting and I don't think I'm ready for it," she says.

This lack of confidence contrasts with the public image of the driven pop star, wearing revealing outfits, striving to hit the high notes. Staying on top of her game can be overwhelming. "The feeling is very abstruse," she says. "I try my best to keep my feet on the ground and remind myself of who I am and what I'm doing. I'm lucky to have people around me who push me to achieve better and stay on top."

It's not that she's afraid of failing, but that she has high expectations of herself. If anything, she gets frustrated when she can't do more. "Just the other day I wasn't feeling very well, but I had to sing live on a programme," she says. "I was really angry at myself for being sick." The pressure can get too much. "Sometimes I hide away and cry when I don't do too well."

Her heavy workload has taken a toll on her health as well (she gets only one day off a month), but she seems in good spirits about it. "The company is famous for not leaving any empty spaces in schedules," she says with a laugh. "I want to have a break when I can stop working and think

about what I really want. But I know this will never happen."

To balance her hectic work life, she keeps her private life low key. "I always go home after work," she says. What gives her satisfaction is cooking a good meal for her family. As a result, she's rarely paparazzi fodder, despite having had her share of bad press over the years. "They think I'm too boring to talk," she says.

But that doesn't mean the press can't get to her. In 2001, she hit a low point with the media, when she was taken to Kowloon West police headquarters in connection with an assault on DJ Leung Sze-ho, who had made fun of her on a TV programme. She was released unconditionally, and no charges were ever brought. But her treatment by the press during that time – and later over her looks, fashion sense and reputed plastic surgery – taught her a lesson. "If you say I dress horribly this time, then I'll dress better next time," she says. "It's the criticism that has pushed me to where I stand today."

Yung may not have the clearest idea about her career path, but she's clear that this is the life she wants. And don't believe there has ever been a question of giving up. "If I gave it up, I would have nothing left."

TOP OF THE POPS: YUNG'S ROAD TO SUCCESS

1995/1996 Wins Big Echo Karaoke Contest, Clean Hong Kong Campaign Singing Contest and New Territories North Crime Prevention Campaign Karaoke Contest.

1999 Records debut album, *Unknown*, which includes hit song of the same title; remains at No 1 in the IFPI album charts for 23 weeks. Wins seven music awards at TVB's Jade Song Gold Best 10 Awards Presentation.

2000 Stages first concert at Coliseum and wins two best female singer awards at Metro Hit Radio and

Commercial Radio Music Awards. Stars in first TV drama, *Green Hope*, on TVB and first movie, *Winner Takes All*, starring Sam Hui Koon-kit.

2001 Releases second album, *Like Joey*, which becomes the highest-selling record of the year. Arrested for suspected involvement in assault on TV and radio artist Leung Sze-ho. No charges brought.

2002 Releases *Like Joey 2* and *Solemn on Stage*, which are among the 10 highest-selling CDs of the year. Wins best female singer at Metro Radio's Awards.

2003 Stages six concerts at the Coliseum. Records *My Pride*, the year's most-played song, and wins the best song of the year at all four music award ceremonies. Is the year's top-selling female artist. Her TVB drama *Pretty Face* is one of the highest-rating shows of the year.

2004 Wins best female singer and most popular female singer awards in three ceremonies, and again wins the most awards among all singers, scooping 13. Is the year's top-selling female artist, with three albums: *Give Love a Break*,

Nin9 2 5ive and *Show Up! Concert Live CD*. Tours Australia and Malaysia.

2005 Wins the most awards out of all singers, with 20 awards from the Big Four. Stages eight concerts at the Coliseum. Is the year's top-selling female artist.

2006 Wins best female singer and most popular female singer at all four award ceremonies; wins most popular female singer award at TVB for third year in a row; wins China's most popular female singer at RTHK's Top 10 Chinese Gold Song Awards.