

Yu promotes her debut album

IF GOOD looks and talent guaranteed a spot on the top of the pop charts, Kaila Yu would already be there.

Her debut album "Kaila" is a perfect commercial mix of catchy hooks, pithy lyric images, dynamic guests and a seductive voice that easily equals the recent work of Britney and J.Lo. — just as its opening track, "What I Want" is worthy of radio airplay.

But Yu knows you have to go that extra mile to get your product known to the public.

"We've been doing heavy West Coast promotion, and now we're heading towards Chicago, New York and probably Canada at the beginning of next year. We've been taking our time targeting certain areas, but now we're hitting Hawaii," Yu said while we chatted earlier this week.

Her album has already been available here for months, in counter displays at convenience stores as well as in conventional record stores.

"We tried to make it a fun record (about the highs and lows) of the partying and dating scene — guys cheating, girls cheating, partying," she said. Yu explained that she opened the album with "What I Want" because it's "an independent kind of woman song ... 'cause that's a good attitude for girls to have. I loved that track the first time I heard it."

Yu admits that writing songs has been more difficult for her than singing them (she co-wrote eight songs), but "now I definitely love (to write). I sing songs by other people (but) it's much more fulfilling and much more personal when you write the lyrics. Singing somebody else's song is just not the same."

"You write some songs that suck, but you just keep going and going."

"I feel like the vibe in Hawaii, out of all the places I've been, is always the best," she said, as the conversation drifted towards her plans for the weekend. Yu arrived here last night with hopes of catching at least

part of Ashanti's one-nighter at the Blaisdell Arena. She appears tonight as the celebrity host of tonight's "Pimp N Ho Halloween Party" at the Waterfront Cafe at Aloha Tower Marketplace.

Yu will not be performing, but it's one of several opportunities to meet her and get an autograph. She will be doing at least one other public autograph session before she returns to Los Angeles tomorrow afternoon and hopes to catch up with some of the people she's met during previous appearances in local nightclubs and car shows.

Yu plans to return in December for a show or two and a meet-and-greet at the Import Revolution Car Show.

As for her Halloween costume? "I think I'm gonna dress as a Girl Scout, in a cute little uniform," she said.

When asked about her "Get Up On You" music video, she said that "doing it was the most fun I've had ever. We gathered a bunch of all my friends and got them involved. We had all our friends bring in all their import fix-up cars. It was hard work, but it was a party for three days, too."

IT'S HARD to imagine Yu as a shy girl who felt "outcasted" and ignored in high school, but she says that's how it was. Born in Taiwan and raised in the U.S. from the age of 3, she's working parallel careers as a singer, model and actress. Yu made her debut as a recording artist on the West Coast with a single, "Our Last Night," in the spring of 2002.

Two tracks on a Bay Area compilation album also helped her get introduced as a recording artist before her album was released earlier this year.

And, not surprisingly, Yu upped her public profile more by doing a Playboy photo spread, an experience she describes as "one of the best things that I've ever done."

"It's definitely how you use it (to promote yourself). Obviously, Pamela Anderson and

Carmen Electra used it to the fullest, but there are so many girls who just squander (the opportunity after posing for Playboy).

"Growing up, I never had that stigma against posing nude, and when I was shooting for a calendar, the photographer asked me if would I be interested in doing Playboy, and I thought it was cool. I got in the magazine and that's how it started."

But Yu intends to build her career on more than a seductive voice and sexy body. Her biggest career step recently was going to mainland China for a role in a Chinese mini-series called "Jade Buddha." Yu appeared in "probably five episodes" as the ex-girlfriend of a churlish man who leaves her at the altar.

"He was a real jerk to me in the story. I get dumped and I still want him but he's in love with another woman. I have yet to see it, but it was interesting because I had to learn everything in Chinese," she said, explaining that her fluency is "good but it's not great."

Unlike many Asian Americans of her generation, Yu can still converse in her homeland language, but mastering its subtleties, so that she could give a convincing performance as an actress, helped sharpen her language skills.

"I meet a lot of Chinese kids (here in California) who don't speak Mandarin or Cantonese these days. I think it's very important to teach them the language and their heritage."

Yu admits that she wasn't

happy when her mother forced her to go to Chinese language school on Saturdays. "but now ... I do appreciate it."

Halloween fun

"Pimp N Ho Halloween Party" hosted by Kaila Yu
Where: Waterfront Cafe, Aloha Tower Marketplace
When: 10 p.m. today
Admission: \$10, \$17, 18 to 20
Info: 591-3500 or www.double-0-spot.com

