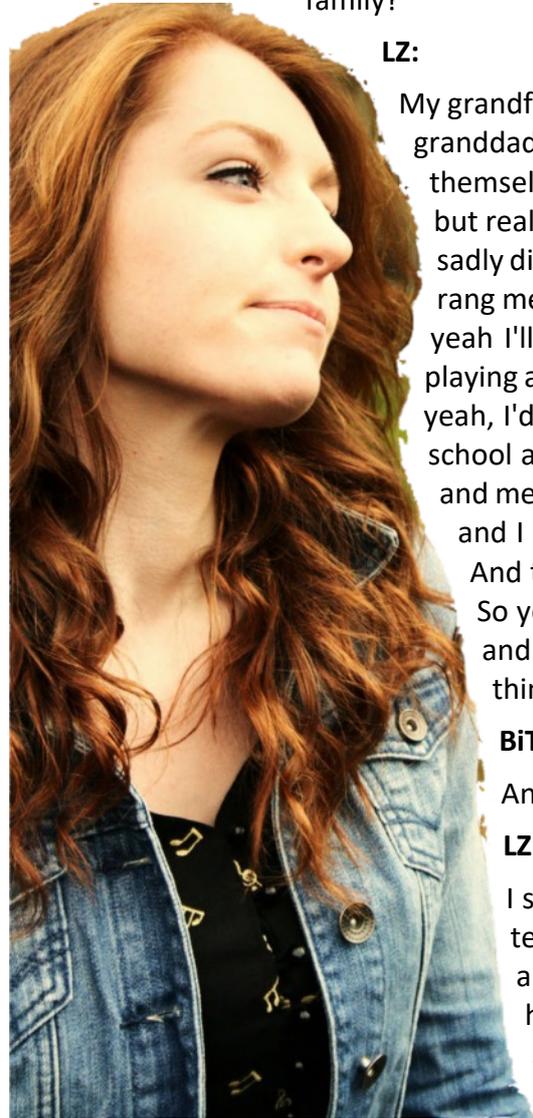


The BiTS Interview: Lucy Zirins

London based singer-songwriter Lucy Zirins had visits to Italy and France under her belt by the time she was 18 years old and began gigging solo at just 16. She picked up the guitar aged 12 after inheriting one from her late Uncle and began songwriting early on. Lucy has received a number of accolades including being picked by the PRS as one of their “Class of 2010” for her promise as a young UK songwriter. She was a UK Country Radio songwriter finalist and presented the awards in 2016. Ian McKenzie spoke to her.....

BiTS:

Let's start off by asking, if I may, how did you get into music in the first place? Were you born and raised in a musical family?



LZ:

My grandfather on my mother's side played accordion, so I've always grown up with my granddad and my uncle Chris playing accordion for ancient Irish music, but my parents themselves aren't really musical. My mum used to play a little bit when she was a kid, but really that was my first experience with it, and then when I was 12 my uncle Chris sadly died, and I inherited his guitar. So to me, that was how I got into music. My mum rang me and she said, do you want this guitar that he's been learning, and I said, yeah yeah I'll take it. Took all the books, and yeah that was just it for me. I just started playing and then I was writing before I knew it, and then I never really looked back. But yeah, I'd been singing for quite a while. I always tell the story of doing the nativity at school and not telling my mum and dad that I'd got a lead role, and them turning up and me singing a solo which they didn't know. They didn't even know that I could sing and I surprised everybody, and I thought, oh yeah, maybe I can do this a little bit. And then obviously when I got the guitar when I was 12, it just all came together. So yeah, I'm a bit of a black sheep in my family I guess because my mum and dad and everyone are all, you know, on the computer and science and maths side of things. But yeah, I'm the weirdo musical one.

BiTS:

And, did you have lessons on the guitar or are you entirely self-taught?

LZ:

I started off self-taught and then when I was at high school, my amazing music teacher and dear friend, Saph, who sadly passed away earlier this year, she arranged for me to have some lessons to help me a little bit, and I met Saph's husband who's called Paul Corry, who gave me a slide, and helped me learn some slide guitar as well early on. I was really lucky that I had a really nice blend both, you know, getting a few lessons to help with technique and everything but mostly finding my own way through it which I think is a

really nice way to learn the guitar particularly as an instrument, so yeah.

BiTS:

What artists were you listening to at the time when you were learning to play, and gradually developing your singing style and so on?

LZ:

I was listening to a lot of what Saph gave to me, my music teacher, she gave me a lot of Eva Cassidy. I remember getting the Breathe Away album and just being like, this is best thing ever, this is what I want to do, I love this. She gave me a copy of Tapestry by Carol King which is still my favourite album to this day. Tonnes of really great female singers-songwriters, and also I had the blues rock stuff and the heavier rock stuff that my dad had brought me up on, so I had a really nice blend of the rock and blues side from him with some of the earlier blues stuff, some singer-songwriter stuff from my mum, who likes all 60's music, and then all the stuff that Saph was giving me as an influence. It was a real kind of mish mash of stuff and I still get a lot of people today that say, oh you really sound, you've got that like Eva Cassidy twinge about you, so I'm glad that it comes through somewhere. I'm glad that it's noticeable a little bit.

BiTS:

How did you start to play in public though, did you do open mike nights and that kind of thing or what?

LZ:

Yeah, again it all comes back to my music teacher and my friend Saph. I was performing in school concerts and I like I said, I'd started off with doing the nativity, and then I ended up going to an open mike in Hebden Bridge where Saph was based, and I just never really looked back. I started doing open mikes and then I did my first paid gig in a working men's club which was a bit of baptism by fire because the whole northern circuit is quite a difficult one at times, but yes.

BiTS:

I presume that this would be around Bolton, way? That's where you come from isn't it?

LZ:

Burnley in Lancashire.

BiTS:

Burnley, I beg your pardon, I don't know what made me say Bolton.

LZ:

Well it's not far so I'll forgive that, don't worry. But yeah, I did a lot of pubs and clubs and working men's clubs, but really it all started with open mikes in Hebden Bridge, and I just kind of went from there. I was doing that when I was 15 so I started very young, but it was a really good, like I said, baptism by fire really. I did some of the really tough gigs at the start and it teaches you stagecraft which is a wonderful thing, so yeah, all good.

BiTS:

When did you make up your mind that you were going to go and really go for being a professional?

LZ:

I knew pretty much straight away. Like I said, I'd been playing guitar since I was 12, I'd been writing for years and I just knew. I don't remember there ever being a day where I went right, this is what I'm going to do. It was just like once I was doing it, that was it, I was in it, and I don't remember wanting anything before it and wanting anything else after it. I just knew that that's what I, it sounds really clichéd, but this is what I want to do, I want to write, I want to play. So yeah, I just developed a passion for it really quickly. I was very young, and I'm very grateful for the fact that I discovered what I wanted to do so young and that I had a supportive dad, who, when I said to him, I really need to go to this gig, but obviously I can't drive myself there because I'm 15, my dad drove me around everywhere and did do for a long long time. I was very lucky really to have his support particularly.

BiTS:

And eventually you went into the studio and made I think your first album called Chasing Clocks. Is that right?

LZ:

Yeah that's right. It came out in 2013, we put that November 2012. I can't believe that it's five years. I think it's crazy how quickly time passes, but yeah, it was such an experience, and I wanted to make a record. I didn't know what I was doing and I was really lucky that I had my producer Michael Messer, who mentored me through the whole thing, and just did a fantastic job of not only producing the record but also helping me grow as a young musician, so we had a fantastic time, and that's where I met my drummer and base player as well, on the sessions. It was a really great experience, but it was also being thrown in at the deep end. Your first record. It's a big one.



BiTS:

I think most of the material on that album, in fact indeed on the more recent album, *Live at the Old Courts* is your own music. How do you go about writing a song?

LZ:

That's literally a big question. I think that it's such a difficult thing to pin down. I think Tom Waits has a quote where he says, a song is like catching something in the wind. It comes from somewhere, I don't know where that is, and I just think that you pluck it, and then 99% of what being a songwriter is, is learning to recognise when an idea's coming to visit and then putting in the work and pinning it down. I think a lot of it is, it sounds very like esoteric. It's a lot of hard work, I do a lot of reading as well as obviously practicing my instrument. A massive part of it for me is lyricism, so I read an awful lot, but most of it is experience. It's just life, I'm just channelling that through music and lyrics, but where they come from, I'm not 100% sure. I think a lot of it is just from wherever, and our job is just to pin the song down. So yeah.

BiTS:

Most of the people that I speak to and ask about their songwriting, they tell me that when they perform a song for the first time, it very often changes or at least they have to change it because it didn't work or something like that. Does that happen to you?

LZ:

I think as a songwriter that's part of the craft and for me, yeah, I mean you really do see songs change especially when you go into the studio. I'm experiencing this with the studio album that I'm making at the moment. I've written and performed the songs a few times and when you get into the studio it changes again because of things like production, and the way you're feeling when you're making a record. I think that as a songwriter, one of the best abilities that you can develop is a thick skin, and just to be able to take criticism from people, and understand that if a song's not working, you have to do something to either to make it work or you have to let it go, and you have to be quite strong about that. It's difficult because songs are so personal, they're an extension of yourself but yeah, I think it's incredibly important to have the work ethic behind the writing because I do think that a lot of the time that's what makes a good song. That's what makes a great song, is the work that you've put in behind, you know to get it to that point.

BiTS:

Let's talk a little bit about *Live at the Old Courts*, your current album which came out on 18th December, and was recorded at a place called The Old Courts in Wigan. What is the Old Courts?

**LZ:**

It's an amazing, beautiful arts venue that's in Wigan that's completely non for profit, and the venue itself, the reason that I played there was through an organisation called Acoustic Roots, who hold nights there. So I played in what was an old court room, so it was really beautiful and unusual venue with really great acoustics but yeah, I was invited along by Ian and David, and we just had a fantastic night. It's a really really amazing venue, state of the art and it was really nice to do a gig in the North in a beautiful arts venue and I'm really glad that we got a great record out of it.

BiTS:

Now this is a live album, was it recorded all in one night? Sometimes people do them over two or three nights.

LZ:

No, it's one night. No overdubs. What you get is what was there on the night, and I think that that's the beauty of it. It's a moment, and that's what we wanted to capture. So yeah, completely natural, all done in one night, and I think out of the 19 tracks, we had 19 tracks that we recorded and I picked 15, so yeah, we did pretty good out of it really.

BiTS:

All of the songs on it again, or many of the songs on it are yours, with the single exception of the Mississippi John Hurt song, or at least the Mississippi John Hurt version of a song, to be more accurate, Make Me Down a Pallet on the Floor. What made you choose that one?

LZ:

The story behind that is that blues broadcaster, Dave Raven, when I was still living up north, I came down to London to go and do a session for Dave Raven, and he said to me, can you do something that's exclusive

for the show, and I was like, right, what am I going to do? I need to pick a cover. So rather fittingly, I was kipping at a friend's, so it just seemed like the perfect song. It's about finding somewhere to hang your hat for the night. So I ended up learning it in the morning of the session, which sounds so unprofessional. Literally learnt it and then went and did it, and it's just been with ever since. It's a song that's obviously, whenever I pick a cover it's got to have personal meaning to me, so that's why I picked that. Then there are two other covers on the record, In Tall Buildings by a songwriter called John Hartford, and there's a Ben E King's very famous Stand by me, and both of those songs have huge personal meaning to me as well. So it was really important, this is the first record I've ever put a cover on and I wanted to put the right covers on there, so it's part of the story telling of the night, and I think it's just cool to have those interpretations on there so hopefully people like them too.

BiTS:

Well the other cover on it is the absolutely fabulous version, I love it, of Stand by Me which I think is absolutely terrific, congratulations on doing that. Again what made you choose that one?

LZ:

For me it's such a lovely song, and it's about friendship isn't it? And for me when I do a gig, I want every single person in that crowd to feel like they're my friend, and like know me. My songs are a personal history and I think that me and Andy, my dear friend Andy who plays bass on the record, Andy Crowdy, it's a special song for us as well, we've performed that at gigs, it's just got that lovely air of friendship about it. I think that on the night it went really well with the crowd, and it conveyed that, so I'm really glad that you like it.

BiTS:

I think it's an absolutely outstanding version, I have to say. But let's talk about one of your songs. It became one of my favourites on the album, and that is Worry and Wine, I love it, it's such a clever song.

LZ:

Oh, thank you so much. There's a funny story about this one where I'd just finished a three year degree in songwriting, and it's funny because it's a song that a lot of people really love. The story behind it is that I wanted to write a character song that blended almost the naughty, bad part of myself with kind of a character, so I always say it's about a bad bird. The story behind it is it's about a woman who lives in the woods and has civil war soldiers come to her to her cabin, and I loved that imagery in my head, and I wanted to kind of blend that with my personal experience. That's where the song came from, but the funny story is that most people absolutely love it, and they always say what a great song it is, but when I submitted it for one of my assessments for my degree, it got the worst mark out of any song that I ever submitted. It just shows, doesn't it, that for every person that loves a song, there's one person that doesn't. In my criticism it said, I don't think your chorus works, and it's so funny because that's exactly, almost how I wrote it, I wrote it as an anti-chorus because it goes to the minor, it's not meant to be a big flashy kind pop thing.

BiTS:

I take it when you say you submitted it, that's a reference to some sort of undergraduate degree or something in music that you are doing, or have done?



LZ:

So I've finished it yeah I graduated in June/July this year with a First Class Degree. BA Honours in Songwriting, so yeah I did a music degree with a specialism in songwriting.

BiTS:

And that was done where?

LZ:

That was done at the British Institute of Modern Music, British Irish, I can never remember what it's called, the acronym but its BIMM, which is in London, and it was a really good experience. I moved to London to be able to do that degree so it wasn't just, for me, about having the degree, it was about going and moving to a city and going out and experiencing life for the first time.

BiTS:

Congratulations on that. There's a growing number of lady blues singers and singers, I'm thinking of Dani Wilde as I'm speaking who are getting academic qualifications in one way or another.

LZ:

Yeah, well I think it's great now that education is accessible for more people, and I think that if you can do it that it's great. For me it wasn't about going and just doing a degree so I could get a job because, frankly, if I wanted to do that, I would have taken something like engineering. Not that I probably would have been any good at that. But for me it was important to go and learn, and to really engage with my craft. I know that sounds a bit like twoofy, but for me, the most important thing as a songwriter is the work ethic, and for me going to university and doing it in an academic way has taught me that, so it's been a really fantastic experience. I'm really glad that I did it.

BiTS:

Tell me about working with Dave Arcari, I can't imagine anybody more different than you to work with. Do you actually play with him or is it just opening and closing or something?

LZ:

We did some shows in September, and Dave is a dear dear friend of mine. Dave and Mags, his lovely wife and manager. I've known them for years. We did some shows back in, I think it's 2010, and just became really, really good friends with them, and we did the shows in September and I opened for Dave, and actually, we are, we're so different and I was very aware of that going up, and I thought, is this going to work? But whenever we've done shows together, I think people love that contrast, and actually one of the great things that I've taken from Dave is watching his stage performance. I don't know if you've seen Dave, and you know his music, but he's just got such an incredible energy on stage and for me as a singer songwriter, it's very easy I think, for me to get into the, sitting on a stool and playing the song, and just settling in with the crowd. And I



thought on the gigs, I thought, do you know what, I'm going to stand up, and I'm going to make something more of this, and actually they were some of the best performances I feel that I've ever done, personally, and that's really come through and carried forward now from the gigs we've done. So yeah, he's great and I love him dearly, but don't ever drink whisky with him because you will have the worst hangover of your life, I'm telling you that now.

BiTS:

You're going up to Scotland in February to do some more work with him?

LZ:

Yeah, we're going to do a show, so the idea is that I'll be opening again for Dave, but then we're hoping to maybe do a song or two together on the night as well, so we're going to try and get that organised. Yeah, it's in Balmaha on February 10th, so it will be fantastic.

BiTS:

Now Dave is a very interesting player and singer. He thrashes away and I use the word thrashes quite deliberately at a resonator guitar. I've seen some photographs of you on the Internet with a resonator but I can't find any recorded versions of that. Have you done anything recorded with a resonator guitar and slide?

LZ:

Yeah, very early on. I did a couple of now you can't get them anywhere recordings, in the studio of me playing slide, and on my first album Chasing Clocks, I am playing resonator on some tracks. Lullaby is recorded with the resonator, Hours to Waste, that's me playing slide guitar on that track, but for me, because when I moved to London I didn't have a car and I was travelling around a lot on trains to get to gigs and stuff, I put the resonator to one side because, I know it sounds really silly, but it's a very heavy instrument.

BiTS:

I know that I've got one, I play one.

LZ:

So you know, lugging that around on trains wasn't practical, so a lot of what I played, I reworked on an acoustic guitar. I also felt slightly that the resonator, the female playing a resonator thing overshadowed my writing a little bit, and people started to focus on the shiny guitar rather than the songwriting. So for me, it was very important to pull back a little on that, and almost get back that ownership a little bit, of where I wanted to go with what I'm doing. So really the idea is to, at some point, bring that back into what I do, and bring back playing some slide into what I do. But for now, I've kind of put it to one side slightly just to figure out who I am. I'm still very young, I'm still figuring out where I am with my career, so we'll see what happens.

BiTS:

That's terrific. Now finally let's talk about the Great British Rhythm and Blues Festival [Colne] that you played at this year on the acoustic stage and then I think got surprised afterwards?

LZ:

Yeah, it was a bit of a shock. Yeah, you can tell on the clip of video with me and, I was outside and Jason and Tom Attah again, Tom Attah being a very dear friend of mine, and another blues academic, and Jason obviously, I've known him from Hebden Bridge, they just pulled me to one side, and they started videoing and I thought, what's going on and they said, it's going be you next year, and I'm like, what? I had no idea, very humbled. There's been a lot of work that's gone into it, particularly in the last month, the announcement's now been made with the line-up and everything, and yeah, it's brilliant. I'm really humbled that, having been involved and played at that festival for ten years, to have a stage named after me, it's pretty amazing and for Tom, and Jason as well, to trust me with the curation, and the booking of all those acts and everything. Yeah it's been great and it's been a really good growing experience seeing it from the booker's side as well has taught me quite

a lot. So yeah, I can't wait, it's going to be brilliant. So we've got two days of really good music on Bank Holiday in August next year, and I've lots of fantastic musician friends coming to play.



BiTS:

Are there artists booked yet? Are you able to say who they are?

LZ:

Yeah, yeah no they're all booked, everybody's confirmed. So I've got Benjamin Bassford coming, who is an amazing young musician, who I met actually judging the Jessica Foxley panel a few years ago for the festivals. It's great to have him coming back to the fold almost, and coming and playing the festival. Got Jack J Hutchinson coming. Jack's a Burnley lad, from the same place that I'm from. So that's really exciting to have him coming. I've got Niall Kelly coming who's an Irish musician, who was in London and did a lot of the Ain't Nothing But Blues board nights. It will be great to have him coming. I've got some fantastic female musicians coming. Becca Langsford. Who else have I got? I've got Fran coming, Bella Collins, there's going to be a really, really great mix of female and male musicians. Most of them playing original material so it will be really exciting to push that writing side on the acoustic stage this year and next year, and honestly, I can't wait.

BiTS:

Well I'm delighted to hear that Becca Langsford is there. I know her, I've never met her but I know her because she comes from the same area as me. I live in Exmouth in Devon which is where I'm calling you from, she comes from Plymouth.

LZ:

Yeah, so she's coming all the way up. Yeah, I'm so thrilled that she's able to do it this year and she's coming up with a driver and everything, so it's pretty brilliant that she's going to be able to make that trip because it is a long way for them.

BiTS:

Excellent. Now tell me something about the new record that you're working on at the moment. Does it have a title?

LZ:

No title yet. We are, I can't remember how many songs we are in, seven or eight, I can't remember. I think we're going to go for 12 songs overall. I'm working with a really amazing producer, A friend of mine, Jim Knight who I've known for years. He did the EP What's in Front of Me that I released a few years ago, and we're in the studio, the two of us so far have played everything on the album between us. Jim's been helping with the writing and stuff and restructuring the songs, so it's been a completely different way of working on a record this time, and I'm hoping to have it out by Autumn 2018, but we'll see because it's taking a long time to get what we want, but I think that's a really good thing, and it's really important to get the studio album right,

BiTS:

And when are you hoping to release that?

LZ:

Yeah so we're hoping for autumn 2018 so it's probably going to be October/November time depending on the scheduled recordings.

BiTS:

Lucy I won't take any more of your time. Thanks for speaking to me. Good luck with the CD and with the Lucy Zirins' Acoustic Stage.

LZ:

Thanks Ian, It has been fun. Bye!

