



Lisbee Stainton

Girl With A Screwed-on Head

In the space of 18 months, Lisbee Stainton has played London's O2 Arena to a 30,000-strong audience, seen her debut single 'Red' playlisted for five weeks by the BBC, and toured as Joan Armatrading's support act across the UK and on the Continent. She tells Noel Harvey how she got there.

In a recent review of Lisbee Stainton's *Girl On An Unmade Bed*, *The Independent on Sunday* described the album as 'cultured folk-pop arrangements built around the thrum of Stainton's guitar, gently cushioning her

unaffected toy-soprano mini voice'. It's not untypical of the occasionally backhanded, yet ultimately complimentary phrases you tend to come across when preparing for an interview with her. She seems to have that effect on reviewers – not quite ready to

gush superlatives, but more than willing to acknowledge her as a cut above the rest.

BBC DJ (and pop star if you go back far enough) Tom Robinson, on the other hand, has had no such reservations. After discovering Stainton –

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and her single 'Red' – via her MySpace page, he's plugged her singles with a relentless zeal, invited her to sing live on his shows, and even rattled off a 'Wow! Sensational! Absolutely mint!' into the bargain, while Joan Armatrading (yes, *the* Joan Armatrading) was sufficiently impressed with her act to invite her along as support on a major UK and European tour. Most recently, Stainton landed a prime spot on BBC's *In Concert*, after a sound crew, arriving to record Armatrading, wandered in on her soundcheck. It was the latest in a series of extraordinary breaks that countless young artists can spend years chasing, and usually with scant success to show at the end of it. And in a business where there's no shortage of talented young singer-songwriters, both male and female, Stainton, aged 21, has achieved much in a remarkably short time – a little over 18 months. She may not be as commercially viable as Lily Allen, or as bold and serious a songwriter as Laura Marling, but there's no denying that she's managed to get herself noticed. And if her audiences – for the moment at least – are drawn substantially from the 'adult contemporary' demographic that comprises the bulk of Radio 2's listeners, that's absolutely fine with her.

What matters most, she insists, is that as many people as possible get to hear her music, even if it means losing out financially. And when she says fame and money aren't important to her, you get the distinct impression that they really aren't, and never will be. 'If people want to hear my music so much that they'll download it illegally, then fine... they can have it. It's the exposure that's important to me.' Not that fans – hard up or otherwise – would need to resort to such subterfuge. Along with so many of her generation who've grown up with digital downloading, she recognises the need to embrace, rather than fight, the technology. Before embarking on the Armatrading tour, Stainton made her latest album available as a download for a notional £1 – too cheap to steal. It's a business model she says suits her to a tee. 'I love playing live,' she says, 'so it's perfect for me. If I can sell some CDs along the way, that's fantastic, that keeps the ball rolling. That's all I want. The more people that hear my stuff, the happier I am.'

Stainton came early to music.

Prompted by her father's guitar playing, she wanted to play from the age of five, but her parents made her wait another three years until her hands were big enough for a full-size instrument. She started writing songs a year later, meticulously recording them in what was to become the first in a collection of songbooks that she keeps to this day. When we spoke she was on her fifth book, and by the time you read this will no doubt be on her sixth. These days she professes to having something of an obsession with the American folk singer-songwriters of the 70s: Carole King, Joni Mitchell, James Taylor et al, but during her early formative years she found inspiration in her parents' choice of motoring holiday music – The Beatles, Eric Clapton, The Police, Fleetwood Mac, Supertramp, Chris Rea.

At age 18, she abandoned classical guitar lessons and left home in Hampshire for the Big Smoke, in order to study for a bachelor's degree in popular music at Goldsmiths College in London. At the time it was still something of a fledgling course, its first intake of students having graduated only the previous year. But it was, she says, 'the most awesome creative process you could imagine. The tutors were amazing and there I was, studying with 30 other people, all different, creative musicians with their own unique styles. I spent the next three years working with as many of them as possible. I was being rather muso about it, I suppose, taking it to an intense, anoraky level, pushing my comfort zones. But that's the idea. By the time I came out of it, I could do so much more as a musician. When you've pushed the envelope like that, you're able to move around more; you've got so much more space.'

And this is certainly reflected in the musicality of her songwriting: a touch of jazz here, some Brit folk there, a flavour of 60s pop somewhere else. Ask Stainton how she sees her music in terms of genre, and she says cautiously that it's 'primarily folk', but quickly adds: 'Folk is a bit of a dangerous word at the moment. There are just too many definitions of it. I don't like this "nu folk" thing, because I don't think it's been defined yet. People are claiming to be nu folk that are completely different to other artists also claiming to be nu folk. So I just say my music is acoustic-folk-pop. It's interesting having to define yourself in an artistic sense,



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THE GUITAR

Stainton's trademark 8-string guitar is the brainchild of Aldershot-based luthier Joe White. Fitted with an under-the-saddle Fishman Matrix pickup, it has a AAA-grade Sitka spruce top with Hawaiian koa for the back and sides. The original request was for a 12-string, but when White mooted the idea of an 8-string (partially on the grounds that small female hands are not best suited to the more strenuous demands of a 12-string), Stainton agreed to be

guinea pig. 'I still maintain it was a mildly sexist observation,' she says with a laugh, 'but I was hooked after strumming the first two chords on it.' Tom Robinson has since described it as having a 'dulcimer-like' quality, and as Stainton says, 'It opens up so many doors in terms of picking and melody. You can have the bassline going like a normal guitar, with some exciting octave melody going on simultaneously in the mid section.'



because it's not something that you really think about.'

What Stainton does seem to think about, though, is where to go next as a musician, and how to get there. 'At the moment,' she says, 'I'm trying to broaden my horizons even more. My aim is to learn as much about music as possible. I've been listening to a lot of Frank Sinatra lately – it's good driving music – but my favourite thing is to walk into a CD shop and buy an album I've never heard of.'

But if Stainton's listening habits are relatively unbounded, her writing process comes over as rigorously structured. Perhaps what you'd expect from someone who's formally studied the practice as a craft, and has – presumably – had to write essays on the subject. 'I mainly come up with a chord sequence first,' she says. 'So it's chord...hook, chord...hook. If that clicks, a melody will usually begin to form



out of it. Sometimes I rewrite the melody two or three times over, just to explore the possibilities of what'll fit best with the chords. For some reason I usually start with verses, and the chorus tends to come later. Sometimes it takes half an hour, sometimes three weeks. It all depends on the song and what I'm aiming for. When I was at uni, everything had to be interesting and quirky and intricate and technically mad, but I've learnt you don't need to do that to capture an audience in performance, to be constantly wowing them with your technical prowess. Some of the best songs can also be the simplest. These days I tend to go where my writing takes me.'

And that, by any reasonable standard of measurement, is quite a long way and at a very nice pace. **Noel Harvey**