

Singer Lucy Woodward shakes off musical shackles of constraint

BY STEVE WILDSMITH

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For years, singer-songwriter Lucy Woodward wore a set of metaphorical shackles.

They came with the contract that she signed with Atlantic Records, which released her 2003 debut "While You Can," and at first, she told The Daily Times this week, she wore them willingly. She was, after all, a 26-year-old singer steeped in classical and world music traditions, thanks to her culturally refined parents, but also just starting to find her footing in popular music. She listened to a lot of Sheryl Crow and Led Zepelin, she said, and the pop overtones of that first album seemed to Atlantic executives like something they could work with.

"It was a very strange world; in 2003, when that record came out, the music business was all about money, money, money," said Woodward, who performs Tuesday at The Open Chord in West Knoxville. "I was writing pop songs, but they were guitar-driven, so that record was just a natural thing to do musically. Then, when I got signed, I said, 'I want to wear this outfit,' but the label said, 'No, you have to wear this, because you'll look younger and relate to the 12-year-olds of the world.'

"You have to choose your battles, because it's the label's money. They own your masters, so you fight for what you can, but when you're young and hungry, you want to make everyone happy. And the managers and people behind you are just as torn — they want to keep the integrity of your music, but you have to appeal to the Nickelodeon audience. So eventually, you're grateful when you get dropped."

There are still pop overtones to the music Woodward makes, most recently on "Til They Bang on the Door," released last year. Pop isn't the focus, however,

LUCY WOODWARD

PERFORMING WITH: Dee Dee Brogan

WHEN: 8 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 21

WHERE: The Open Chord, 8502 Kingston Pike, Knoxville

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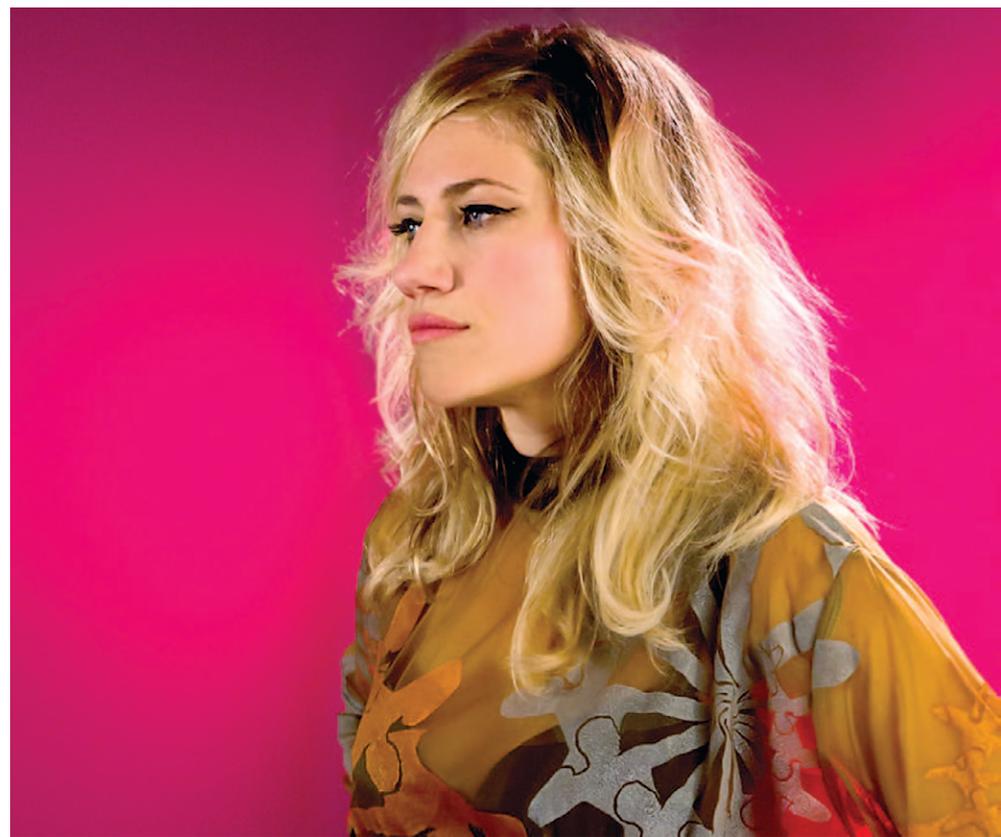
ONLINE: www.lucywoodward.com

and for the first time since her release from Atlantic, she felt free to explore an emotional range that borders on dark and raw, mixing that exquisite voice with elements of blues, soul, R&B and jazz. Those styles stand in stark contrast to the classical and world music that were ever present during her childhood, she pointed out.

"My parents were classical musicians, and my mom was a belly dancer in the '80s, so there was a lot of classical and Middle Eastern music growing up in our house — which is totally weird, because I grew up to become a soul/blues singer!" she said. "No one listened to that at all, but I think it's because I came from such musical parents. When they divorced, in the divorce agreement it said that their children had to play an instrument until we were 18, so I played piano and flute. We had to do it, which we loved.

"And it's not like I didn't go the opera singing or the Middle Eastern singing route. Whatever I'm doing, even if it's 16-bar blues, I do hear those styles in my brain. It's like they're embedded in me; it's a part of my DNA, the classical music and the weird rhythms and meters in Middle Eastern music. It's in the lining of my veins, and sometimes it comes out."

She took her first tentative steps down that new path on her 2007 release, "Lucy Woodward Is ... Hot and Bothered," inde-



COURTESY OF GROUNDUP MUSIC

pendently released and recorded in her basement with trusted peers.

"The shackles were contractually lifted, but you're so broken in, the ghost of those shackles were still there, because you had that mentality," she said. "I felt like I had to do certain things, because that's how they trained me to be, but I trusted my producers and said, 'Screw all that Top 40 pop stuff; let's write a song a day and see what happens.'"

For "Hooked!," released in 2010, she worked with noted producer Tony Visconti, who had a hand in a number of David Bowie records, including "Blackstar," which won a Grammy last week for Best Alternative Music Album. Now on the Verve label, Woodward took additional steps to shed her strictly pop image and embrace her carefree musical spirit, and by the time it came to record "Til They Bang on the Door," she was a collaborator of jazz-pop ensemble Snarky Puppy and its musical mastermind, Michael League, who co-produced "Bang."

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late 2012, so while it hasn't been quite five years since the last Lonetones album, both McCollough and Gunnoe acknowledge that the wait has been longer than expected.

"That car wreck happened right on the heels of us buying and renovating a new house, and part of that meant creating a new recording studio in the house," McCollough said. "We were kind of ready to record an album when we did all of that, but it pushed it back by about a year and a half. But we ended up with a nice space in our house to record."

At their former home, the studio was located in the basement, where a wood stove made winter recording sessions impossible because of the heat. In addition, the acoustics were often so difficult that McCollough spent more time cleaning up recordings on the computer than his bandmates did laying the recordings down.

"With 'Dumbing It All Down,' I didn't have to sit there and work on them to make them sound nice," he said. "The space has been a real added benefit."

Another benefit — new players in the Lonetones lineup. Jamie Cook, formerly of the Black Lillies, is the band's new drummer, and Vince Ilagan and Bryn Davies are splitting duties on bass. Cecilia Miller is the lone hold-over from "Modern Victims"-era Lonetones, but her expanded role on the new album adds a sweeping sense of majesty to many of the songs. And when all of the members contribute to the arrangements of certain songs,

the results are sublime. Local jazz man Will Boyd pitched in for the song "Of Course," which Gunnoe initially brought to her husband as a song she was unsure belonged on the album.

"It was this sad song that was really super raw that I brought to Sean, and he's like this benevolent, wonderful dad, and you know it's not going to be too much for him," Gunnoe said. "He said something like, 'It's going to be OK. We can work with this.' And I said, 'We can work with that? It feels so dark and heavy!'"

"It's a heavy song, lyrically, and Steph was pretty set on the fact that this was maybe a song we couldn't ever perform or do with the band," McCollough added. "But the band came together and played around with it, and we put it to a sort of disco, roller-skating vibe, and it surprisingly came out sounding like it sounds. It was a community effort that turned it into what it is, and you come away from it feeling hopeful, even though the lyrics are heavy."

And that cuts to the core of The Lonetones sound. Life happens, and it's not always a pleasant experience. But with albums like "Dumbing It All Down" to get us through, we're going to be OK.

"I'm pretty busy, and I've got a lot of nice parts to my life, and I don't want to mess around with the art unless it's going to serve a purpose," Gunnoe said. "Sometimes, I kind of wish I didn't have to do it. It's a lot of work, it doesn't pay any money, and it takes you away from other things. But there's nothing else quite like it to serve its purpose, and because of that, we can't not do it."

ence singing backup for pop icon Rod Stewart and her collaborations with Snarky Puppy, and she's writing with that band's keyboard player for a project she described as "some crazy thing we don't know what it is yet." While she may always be associated with her first pop hit — "Dumb Girls," off her debut album — there's so much more to her musical bag of tricks that has yet to be revealed, she believes.

"I have a lot of other colors I need to get out; I've been shifting all these 15 years, so why stop now?" she said. "I'm never going to be one thing, because I have so much of that rich music inside of me from so young. I'm not afraid of doing things that are super musical and super deep and complex musical arrangement wise. I'm not afraid of embracing it."

"Again, it was about shedding those ghost shackles," she said. "It was still scary; as a singer, I was used to singing these takes and coming from doing records over 15 years, and when you're singing your pretty notes and riffs and your high notes, you're thinking technically about how to make your voice shine. But Mike and (co-producer) Henry (Hey) said, 'Let's go dark. Let's get ugly and dark and raw. Don't rely on your tricks and your riffs, because you'll have no emotion for these songs.' You know you're in good hands when your producers push you."

She also brought to the table experi-

HIGDON FROM 18

recording in the United States during the year." The site describes Higdon's piece as "a deeply engaging piece that combines flowing lyricism with dazzling virtuosity." Needless to say, the win only propelled an already flourishing career to greater heights.

"It gave me a certain stamp of legitimacy — the 'Good House-keeping Seal of Approval,' I guess you could say!" she said. "Now, it's easier to put together commissions when I'm doing projects to get lots of other orchestras signed on. And with my work schedule, I'm going great guns."

She's working seven days a week, she said, with plans for the premiere of a choir/mixed ensemble piece in Washington, D.C., and one for a piano trio in Tucson, Ariz., on the immediate horizon; she's also writing three different concertos that are co-commissions between three orchestras: a tuba concerto, a brass concerto and a harp concerto,

and she's preparing to do another chamber orchestra. In addition, she has a new CD coming out next month with the Nashville Symphony.

"It's really amazing how much is going on," she said. "Right now, I'm at the point where I have to schedule a vacation, but the composing part always replenishes the soul, and working with all of these people is something I find so interesting and inspiring."

Her UT residency, no doubt, will provide additional inspiration. In addition to several concerts, she'll guest lecture in a number of classes and hold several public presentations. And of course, she invites Blount County residents who may be in the audience to introduce themselves after the performances. She hopes to make time to visit Blount County while she's in the area, but time is short, and her schedule is tight. The mountains, however, are always calling, and she hopes to heed it.

"It's such a gorgeous place, and there's something about it that's so grounding," she said.



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