

(from top) Welch is known for her eccentric style; the singer is the darling of the UK scene; backstage at Coachella festival in California, in April.



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STORY NICK SCOTT



“THE SONG I DREAMT LAST NIGHT – IT WAS SO, SO LOUD IN MY HEAD”

Florence Welch stares intently at a wall in her dressing room at London's Hammersmith Apollo theatre. Emerging from her trance, the 23-year-old's eyes meet mine. “It started off weird, then turned into this sing-a-long, guitar-y chorus... then it tuned itself out and I woke up.”

The ability to dream up songs is part of what makes Welch one of today's most electrifying artists. “I often sit at the piano with a notebook to jot things down in and, from there, it's like conducting a seance,” she adds. “I'm not a skilled musician – more of an instinctive one.”

The fruit of these celestial efforts is Florence + The Machine's phenomenally successful debut album, *Lungs* (featuring hit single ‘You've Got the Love’), now platinum in Australia. Written in the throes of a painful break-up (they've since reunited), it is, Welch hopes, “the transformation of darkness into something beautiful and joyful”. How to describe her sound? Theatrical, harp-laced soul-rock, maybe? Anthemic chamber pop? The flummoxed music press often resort to plonking her in the ‘Kate Bush and Björk’ camp.

If Welch's music is ‘out there’, her dress sense is from planet Zarg. An ankle-length mesh cape over gold sequined hotpants isn't uncommon.

Today, she's in clown chic – an embroidered blouse tucked into cream trousers that go up to her navel, topped with the radiantly red hair she began dyeing when she was nine.

Onstage, she commands attention with her chandelier-cracking vocals, but one-on-one, she seems almost fragile, her voice all wavering uncertainty. Does she harbour some self-doubt under that flamboyant exterior?

“Doesn't everyone?” she retorts. “Performers have an ingrained self-loathing – dissatisfaction generates creativity. Offstage, I feel shy and awkward; nothing's under my control. Onstage, it's a moment of clarity and release.”

Welch's backstory is as unconventional as her music and style. When she was 13, her art historian mother left her advertising exec father for a neighbour, forcing a family merger the singer likens to *The Brady Bunch*. At 19, and a year into art school, an impromptu – and boozy – audition in a nightclub toilet landed her a manager. A European tour with electro giants MGMT followed. Her fee was €75 (\$105) a gig.

In the wake of the critical success of *Lungs*, her current tour is a more gruelling and elaborate affair. But Welch is no whiner – there's nothing she finds funnier than herself, and her crazy life. **SM**

Lungs (Universal) is out now. Florence + The Machine tour Australia in August. Visit www.ticketmaster.com.au or www.ticketek.com.au.

FACT FILE

WHO Florence Leontine Mary Welch. **AKA** Frontwoman and creative force behind Florence + The Machine. **BORN** August 28, 1986, in South London. **PARTNER** Stuart Hammond, book editor at *Dazed & Confused* magazine. **DRESS SENSE** In her own words: “Half gothic bat/crow winged fantasy, half golden '70s Stevie Nicks white witch. And a smattering of disco go-go hotpants.” **IN A NUTSHELL** The high priestess of wacky haute couture and macabre melody.