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How Florence Welch put the madness and self-destruction of her 20s behind her

Ghost *in the* machine

Florence Welch of Florence + the Machine has left behind the destructive wildness of her 20s, and the benders that went with it. **Julia Molony** finds rock's oddest superstar in calm and reflective mode as she looks back on the turbulence

Photography by **Tom Beard**

She's the wildcat of pop, best known for bringing down rock stadiums with her earthquake of a voice. But today, Florence Welch is as soft as a tabby.

She's made herself at home in the Covent Garden Hotel suite where she has been installed by her publicity team, ushering me in and offering me a drink. London doesn't have a rock and roll hotel like the Chelsea in New York — where Dylan Thomas drank himself to death and Leonard Cohen seduced Janis Joplin — so the Covent Garden, with its eccentric-leaning interiors and low lighting, will have to do. You'd never catch Florence Welch meeting the press anywhere as conventional or corporate as the Dorchester or the Ritz.

Her wardrobe is as original as her music, but she's understated today, playing down her witchy beauty in jeans and boots, a boho shirt, an embroidered gilet and lots of gold jewellery. With her trademark auburn fringe, long, lean legs and sharp cheekbones, physically, she seems all edges. But her voice is velvety and round — as rich and full of melody when she's speaking as when she sings.

Welch was a spirited south London girl from an intellectual family in arty, left-leaning Camberwell when she exploded onto the British rock scene as Florence + The Machine almost a decade ago, swiftly becoming a global star. Since childhood, creative output had been a reflex for her — drawing, singing, writing poetry; she's always needed an outlet for her "big feelings" which she translates into anthemic, poetic, gothic pop.

"I was always very sensitive and kind of afraid of the world in lots of ways," she says. "Really brave in odd ways, and then terrified in others. I didn't really understand myself but was also totally in wonderment a lot of the time. So I think making stuff is a way of making sense of perhaps being quite a sensory person, who is quite overwhelmed by things like colours and sounds — living things quite Technicolour-ly. I still have that. And I don't even take drugs anymore, so I can't even imagine what I was like when I was on them."

Broken heart

Her debut album, *Lungs*, reached number one in the UK charts and number two in Ireland. But the desire to live everything at full-throttle intensity had its drawbacks. With fame, came the mad storm of her 20s, and the associated wreckage of broken hearts and broken bones (she snapped her ankle crowd-surfing at Coachella) provided no end of material. Her last offering, *How Big, How Blue, How Beautiful*, was a raw howl of pain after the break-up of her relationship with events planner James Nesbitt, and her first album to go platinum in the United States.

"I was in such a bad place. Every part of the last record was like, dragged out of me," she says, though she admits that making it may have ultimately been the saving of her, "It definitely helped me so much, that record, and Markus Dravs [her producer] gave me structure when I needed structure, and the whole thing kind of pieced me back together." But it wasn't an easy rehabilitation: "Every bit of it was painful."

But it was touring the record that was the real salve. "I had a broken heart. I had poured all of that into this record, and it felt awful." But, she says, with performing it came the following realisation: "Oh! I can give people the worst parts of my life, and they will embrace it and protect it, and carry you and support you, and it was so healing... I've been thinking about this pact that I have with the listener, where I will be more honest with them than anyone else in my life... you kind of make these offerings, like, 'These are the things I'm ashamed of; these are the things that have hurt me. Can you keep this safe for me, and can you embrace it?' And people have!"

So things are better now. Calmer. She's given up booze and drugs. She's taken time to weigh up the intricate relationship between emotional turbulence and creative expression, and concluded, after much soul-searching, that she's a better artist without the drama.

"That self-destructive energy is incredibly powerful," she says. "If you pour drugs and alcohol onto that stage energy... all bets are off. It's probably going to be fun, but it's definitely going to end in disaster. Hold on tight!

"I kind of found, once I learned to harness that energy just in the right places, [that] the darkness and the self-destruction are still there, but it's almost like it's an animal that's helping you now, and you are kind of in partnership. It's not something that is actively dragging



you through the house and smashing the windows and flooding it. You are with that side of yourself, on stage and in your work. I just found that I could go to darker places in my performances. I could go to darker moments of pain in my work, because I wasn't battling myself, I was with myself. It's not like you're beating the fuck out of yourself. The part of you that wants to destroy you is now within you. And you can use it to make your work. When I've found a calmer way of living, my work became more kind of ferocious in a way."

She survived the turbulence of her 20s and she sees them with a new perspective now. That perspective became the starting point for her new album, which is reflective, and more mature in tone and scope than her previous ones. It has all the scale and depth that we've come to expect from Florence And The Machine, but with more emotional clarity. During the time of writing the album she was thinking a lot, she says, about family and history; her place in the scheme of it.

"There's this apocryphal family tale that we have," she says, setting off with a storyteller's flourish to relate a yarn about her American ancestors, who were living in Galveston, Texas, in the early 1900s, when the town was destroyed in a flood. "I might get all the facts wrong," she says with a laugh, "but as an artist it's much better to deal in myth than, like, to fact-check. But there was, like, an enormous flood, and in the early 1900s we had a house in Galveston, and there's this family myth. Our great-great-grandfather was a sea captain, and he knew that if there's a storm, you break up the boards at the bottom of the boat so that the water can rush in and rush out, and won't wash the ship away. So he broke up all the floorboards in the house and hid the family in the attic, and the water rushed into the house and rushed out. A lot of the houses were just washed away, but their house survived and the family survived, and hence I am here today, speaking to you. So I guess — I was thinking about the weather and floods in general and everything from the past seems to creep into the future..."

Decade of chaos

"So they were all in the attic and they came down and opened the front door, and the street was just covered — dead horses had washed up on to the steps and bodies and this chaos." It says something about the breadth of Florence's imagination, that this image spoke to her deeply on a metaphorical level — it seemed to represent what she's been living in the last decade or so.

"I was thinking, 'Right, so there's your 20s. You're a kid and the flood is coming, the flood is coming. Then it's your 20s, and then the flood hits. And the water rushes into the house but you, or your psyche, is in the attic and you're like, "It's OK, I'm OK. I can survive this".' And the water is rushing around and it's chaos and then it finally leaves and your are in your 30s, and you're like, 'OK! I think I got through this'. And then you open the door and you're like, 'Fuck! Have to sort this out'."

So she's been sorting it out. The new album was written in a low-key, pared-down way, in her local studio with minimal outside involvement. She started work on it as soon as she returned from her last tour and it was written quickly and easily. "When you're not smashing yourself to bits with booze, you've got a lot more energy," she says. "And I used to go on some enormous benders when I came back from tour as a way to let off steam. And I don't really do that any more, so I was like, 'I better crack on, then'."

It represents the reckoning she's been through, having survived the chaos of the last decade and having gained, finally, the courage to face the wreckage it left behind. One of the songs is a beautiful, heartfelt apology to her sister, Grace, in which she sings, "*You are the one I treated the worst — only because you loved me the most. We haven't spoken in a long time. I think about it sometimes. I don't know who I was back then. And I hope on hope I would never treat anyone like that again. This is the only thing I've ever had any faith in*".

It sounds, I say, like she was being quite hard on herself. "Super hard on myself," she agrees. "It used to be worse. It used to be that I would rip myself to shreds internally about stuff. And it's definitely got better over time."

But apparently, whatever the transgression was, some grovelling was warranted. He sister agreed it "was pretty bad," she says with a laugh. "But she was like, 'It's fine now, you've apologised, you don't drink any more, you're figuring it out'. And also, 'Just fucking tell me you love me, why do you have to make a big pop song about it?' It's so British. You can tell a million strangers, but when it's me and her..." she trails off with a dry laugh.

But for Florence, this is exactly the point. Her compulsion to write comes in



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part, at least, from the need to confide in strangers the things that she can't say to those whom she loves.

Welch grew up one of five children in an intellectually lively family. Her mother is a professor of medieval literature and her father is a writer. They split when she was small.

"We come from a family were you kind of hide behind humour, and it's all kind of cerebral and intellectual and lots of chatting, but the deep feeling gets batted away with a joke. No one ever says anything real without them taking the piss out of it afterwards. I think that's probably why I make the music I do, because you're in a house where your emotions were always batted away with a joke."

There is this line, she goes on, in the new song *South London Forever* which goes, "*And everything I ever did was just another way to scream your name over and over again*", about which she's puzzled over herself, wondering, "Is that word 'Mum'? I couldn't figure out who I was talking about. Having very big feelings in a house where you didn't really know where to put them definitely informed the work." It has sprung, she says from "that first kind of amazing exchange where I realised there were people who would listen and understand. And then that strange Faustian pact of being able to be very honest and intimate with an audience," even though, she says, "I can get very confused with my real-life relationships." Those, she says, "I struggle with. I don't know how to fix that."

There are lots of things that she is gradually accepting that she can't fix. All the longing and the loneliness that she channels into her music, for a start. "I quite like the idea of putting unanswerable spiritual questions into a pop song," she says. "It's like, 'I don't know what the answer is, but we can dance about it!'"

Still searching

"All I know is that whenever I have tried to fix that feeling with something that was outside myself, it doesn't work. And it just moves further away." She has, she says, exhausted all avenues. "Maybe it will be this moment of success? Maybe if I get this handbag?" Or this person, I prompt? "The person is the big one," she agrees. "This album is definitely a realisation that it's not going to be another person that fixes that. I still don't have — I'm still searching myself... I think a lot of the way I dealt with love before was coming from a place of deep lack and insecurity and need, to sort of fill this bottomless pit. I kind of realised with this record to try and love from a place not-of-lack was really the answer. It's fucking hard. Just because you know that you should try and do that, doesn't mean that it's easy."

She's aiming now to think of love "in a bigger sense, in a collective sense. In a sense of wanting to encourage connection in some way, and by maybe making myself vulnerable in a way. And to say, like, 'I have this sense of loneliness that has plagued me since I was small and doesn't seem to ever really go away, and maybe everyone else has that too?' I'm just as likely to be in on a Friday night, crying and eating crisps and looking at my phone as anyone else. But what is liberating is when you say that to someone else and they say, 'I feel that way, too'. If by making myself vulnerable, I can encourage connection in that way, then, I don't know, I think there's a purpose to that."

She's learning to seek pleasure, and validation, in the quieter moments, not just those where she's headlining at Glastonbury. "When I was a teenager, I just like, 'No, get me to the Pyramid Stage. That is where life will be'. And it was amazing. I can't believe that happened; I'm so overjoyed. But then, to learn how to take pleasure in everyday-ness. That is something I've really learned over the last couple of years. I thought that my greatest happiness would come from those big achievements, and in some ways, if I think about the fact that something that was a childhood dream [actually] came true, my mind is like, 'What? This all actually happened? That's crazy'. And I'm so grateful and still a bit in wonder about it."

But now, she says, she's starting to appreciate equally "those calm moments when I'm at home and reading and I'm very still; that's kind of where life is. Not always chasing the next big thing, the next high, the next achievement, but just to sit in stillness and to be a sort of..." She pauses. "I guess it's at peace." L

'High As Hope', the new album from Florence + the Machine, is out on Friday, June 29, from Virgin EMI and is available to buy on LP, CD and download at florenceandthemachine.net