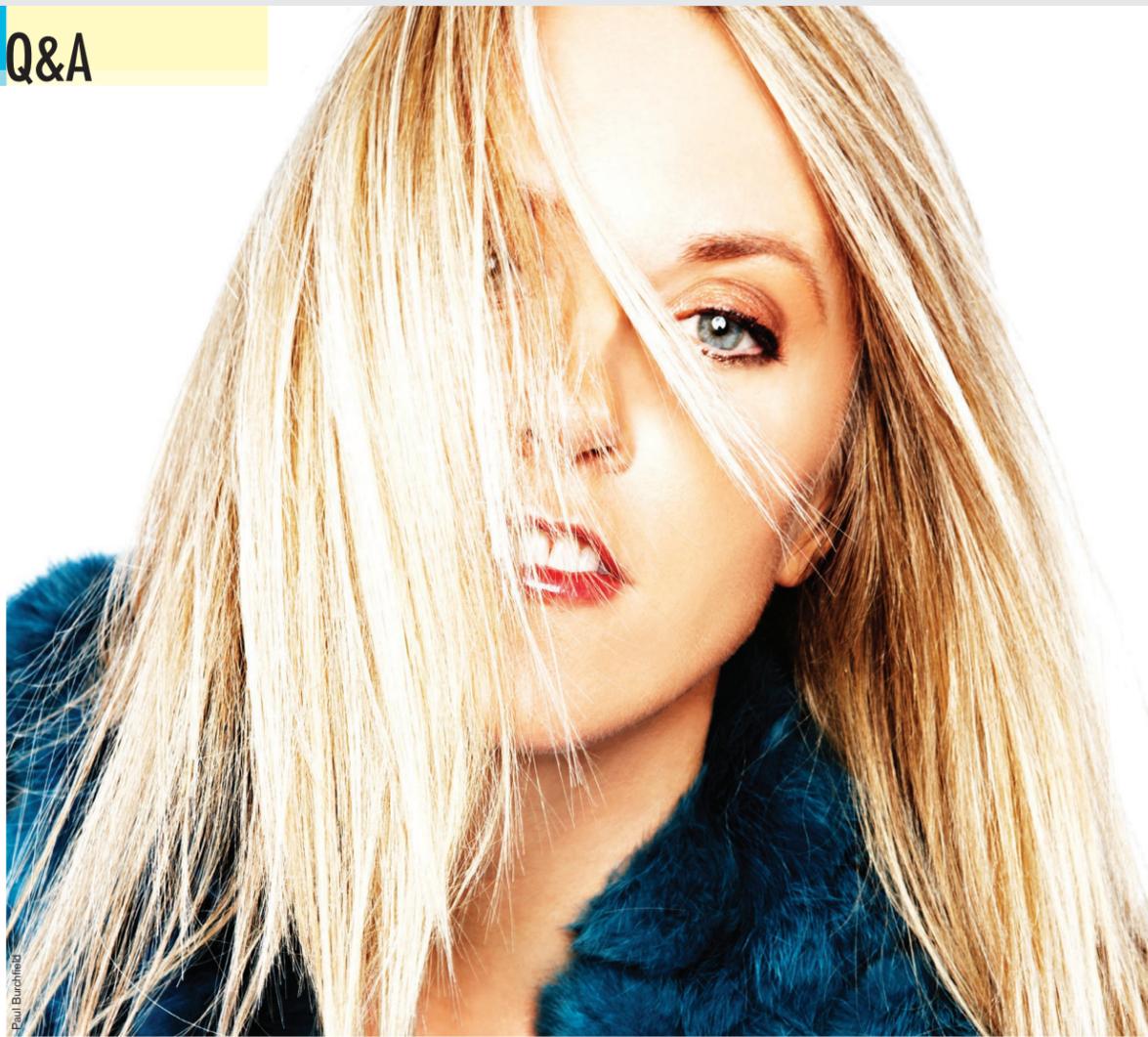


Q&A



Paul Buchheit

LIZ PHAIR

One of rock's most daring artists once again surprises her audience

LIZ PHAIR HAS BECOME ACCUSTOMED to ruffling feathers. Her now-classic 1993 debut, *Exile in Guyville*, exposed the boys'-club nature of indie rock with its frank explorations of femininity. Ten years later she infuriated her loyal alt-rock fans by issuing a self-titled album of slick, catchy pop songs. Over the last several years she has confounded expectations by becoming an award-winning composer of scores for television shows like *90210* and *Swingtown*. And in July she bewildered observers by

releasing—without warning or explanation—her first album of new material in five years, *Funstyle*, directly through her official website after parting with Dave Matthews' ATO Records.

Critics and fans spent the summer arguing about the merits of *Funstyle*, a flip, whip-smart and often self-referential set that draws upon a dizzying array of styles from somber balladry to Indian-flavored rap. And now that it's just been released on CD, the arguments will doubtless renew apace.

"I'm very proud of it, and I'm glad to see it getting its due," says Phair. "For better or worse, I won't look back and feel that I caved to pressure. I did what my inner voice was telling me to do." The new *Funstyle* CD release pairs the original album with a bonus disc comprising the first legitimate release of the Chicago native's much-bootlegged early demos, dubbed *Girlysound*. We caught up with Phair *en route* to a show in Vancouver, B.C., to discuss her rich history and unpredictable present.



'I'm always up for adventure, and I'm always up for learning new things.'

When did you start the process of recording *Funstyle*?

About two years ago. Lately in my career I've taken to recording all the time, and by the time I put the album together I just pick which songs I think work together as a piece. I like to group things. Some people don't care so much about that anymore—they just want to have the single or whatever it is they're going for. But I think when you group things they stick around longer.

So what binds these songs together?

These songs have a *joie de vivre*, a sass, a going-for-the-moment production style about them. They're all inspired and came together swiftly. The other songs, the ones that didn't make this cut, were a little more self-conscious or constructed.

Is the diversity by design?

Not really. I'm a longtime omnivore. I like a lot of different sounds when I'm listening to music at home. I have stuff on "shuffle" constantly. That's satisfying to me, and I think that's reflected in my output. When people ask, "What kind of music do you like?" what they're really trying to get me to do is to identify what scene I'm a part of. They think that I like this kind of music or that kind of music. As a creator, it's a little different for me. The part I'm identifying with is the lyrics and the melody, and I'm much more free than a lot of artists in terms of how to produce something.

Why release it this way?

I had to go rogue and put it out there fast, before anybody could talk me out of it. These songs almost never came to see the light of day. They were part of a group of recordings that had been confounding, and even upsetting, to the people I was working with [at ATO]. I was surprised by that, and I put it away for a while. I was about to move on and record something that everybody wanted—something more sensible and mature, I guess. But I had this strong passionate reaction against that at the 11th hour. I was just like, "No! No. You tell me the guillotine is coming down on my head, but this is what I feel passionately about. This is the stuff that speaks to me." So there was no other way. Sometimes you've just got to break the rules.

Why include the early demos?

A bunch of reviewers picked up on [the similarity of *Funstyle* to those tracks] early on. It hadn't been in my mind, but once I read that I thought it was brilliant. That stuff has

never been released. It's been on websites, but it's never been put together formally. There are a lot of people who don't obsess over my career enough to even know about it. I wanted to show those people that this has always been a part of my style—playfulness, mash-ups, irreverence. The two discs make nice bookends for one another.

Can you relate to those early songs?

I feel right at home in them. I feel like the same person. Some part of me thinks it was really cute what I was doing, and some part of me thinks, "Wow, I wish I could do that again." I have a mixture of feelings about it, but they're all good feelings.

Those tapes are very raw. Did you ever consider re-recording them?

No. I play them live in a more polished way—we add the band to them, and it's fun to hear them come to life like that. But no, they are what they are. I love things being what they are. That's what *Funstyle* is about. I played it for my friend Pete Dinklage, and he was like, "So these are demos, right?" I had to say, "Uh, no, this is the real thing." (laughs)

How have you evolved as a writer?

I truthfully don't have any way to formulate that, so I leave it to you guys. If I was that in touch with my writing, I don't think I could write from the heart. I'd be censoring myself too quickly. I couldn't come up with anything new if I thought like that.

What is your method like now?

I just wrote my first new song on guitar in almost eight months, because I'm out on the road and the guitar is in my hand again. Then I'll stay up really late at night finishing something. I'm very loose like that. If I'm in the studio for any purpose I immediately get creative and want to write something. But I don't have a schedule. I do not require myself to write six songs per month or something. I'm not that formalized.

Do you have a goal at this point?

God, there's a million things I haven't done that I want to do. I'm always up for adventure, and I'm always up for learning new things. Those two things are like a drug to me. I love being in musical environments that I've never been a part of before. I've been very



Albert Ferrera/Reuters/Landov

Performing at Madison Square Garden in New York City

'These songs almost never saw the light of day.'

Sometimes you just know when the song has been realized the way you heard it in your head. That may not be as polished as some people would like it to be. But I'm more comfortable exposing my flaws and foibles, I think, than other people might be. Some things are beautiful when they're worked on and worked over—in fact, some things require that. But these days my taste runs toward the wild, frothy, on-the-fly, catch-the-moment sort of thing.

lucky that way, because it keeps you working and expanding your repertoire. It also makes me fall flat on my face every once in a while, but those things are what I'm in it for. That's my junkie's high.

—Chris Neal