

GHOST IN THE MACHINE

“Holiday? Hah! What’s that?” she snorts, with an echo of dry laughter.

The girl is Florence Welch, eponymous 22-year old starlet of the critically-beloved Florence and the Machine, whose brand of compelling, soul-etched bohemia has graced every chart and festival of the summer, and whose name is now manically scribbled on every editor’s “must have” list. And she’s unceasingly busy. For this is the year that Florence scooped the Critics’ Choice at the Brits, the month that she broke the Top 20 with single Rabbit Heart, and the week that saw the long-anticipated release of debut LP, Lungs. By the time I catch up with her, the album has already gone Gold.

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Decamped to an Edinburgh hotel following a breathless run that has taken in Oxegen, T in the Park, and a stint with Paul Weller at the Eden Project, I’d ventured she might be due a break. But Florence’s sardonic laugh said it all – she clearly has no time to rest. Around her, the promotional machine grinds noisily as we talk, interjecting with mechanical regularity to take her photos, get her answers and plan her time. Florence apologises for every interruption with a politeness that seems to isolate her from the bustle. She talks softly, a fragile flutter in the whirring din, and she’s much more placid than I’d expected. I wonder if it’s her way of coping with the frantic pace. “It’s just I’m not really sure when it stops,” comes the sigh. “I haven’t been home in ages and

I’m feeling a bit weary.”

The fatigue is understandable, yet I’m surprised to find such meekness. Welch is renowned for her wild streak – a fiery waif that cavorts across the stage, leaping into the crowd at every opportunity, and forever bejewelled in a home-made finery that she’s cut from chain-mail, or curtains, or anything in between. And her music thrums with a similarly passionate verve: a remedy to the prosaic that soars majestic, twinkles darkly, and tumbles carefree, always smouldering with a mystical depth that is at once soulful, wilful, and eclectic. I suggest to her that I’m struggling to match this “calm Florence” with her many creations. “I’m productive when I’m calm,” she explains, “I think that’s where some of the dreamier imagery comes from – when I’m actually in quite a calm place and can just write. When I’m manic, then I can’t think of anything apart from, you know, heaven and hell.”

This penchant for dramatic imagery is what has corralled Florence and The Machine into the bracket labelled ‘kooky’, drawing flattering, if overly frequent, comparisons to Kate Bush, or Natasha Khan’s Bat For Lashes. There’s certainly an art-installation feel to parts of

Florence’s work – a sense of the deliberate in her creativity that she’s happy to acknowledge. “There are a lot of big statements on the album. I’ve always liked dealing with those – with that poetic kind of grandeur. I’m exploring with each song. You know, really taking it to the extreme. I want it to be timeless.”

And yet, while seemingly penned with a grand design, Lungs still retains an unwieldy charm (Welch calls it “fractured”) that speaks of a spirit more unruly. Kiss With A Fist, her vitriolic ode to “giving as good as you get”, is a raggedy brawler of a track that’s at

odds with the album and, fittingly, seems to have scrapped for its own inclusion. Girl With One Eye, pared down and jolting along at half-pace, also stands alone. What brings them together is Welch’s keen sense for the inherent drama of life, or what she terms “the grand tradition of emotions”: a subject that makes her immediately more animated. “I think each song comes from a particular moment. Any extreme of emotion, I think, leads to good music. It takes you to places that maybe, otherwise, you wouldn’t have explored. You feel so lost and free that you need to record [it] to kind of save yourself.”

Florence’s love for this freedom of expression is utterly convincing. She talks vividly of following her feelings, as they run the gamut from manic rage to pure joy, and how she discovers herself in their performance. Welch seems a rare example of the musician who has successfully translated from life into art, and, in no small part, she attributes that ability to Island, the label with which she signed earlier in the year. She talks happily of creative control on the first album – a gamble for the label to take on such a young, and adventurous, singer. And yet, I put it to Welch that such untempered creativity has been a gamble for her too – especially when releasing second single

Dog Days: a brilliant follow-up, but also a huge shift in style. “Yeah, totally. I was worried that after Kiss With A Fist, people would be like “What the fuck? What’s she doing? Cos I feel that [Dog Days] was like the song that most represented where I was gonna go as a musician. And I felt like that was more, much more me, and what I wanted to do. When people accepted that positively it was like “Hoh! Fuck! That could work! This could work!”

As we speak about that moment, it’s clear that Welch doesn’t view her music as just something she’s made. She’s intertwined with it – poured out into it. So much so that she speaks not about success, but of validation as a person. “Sometimes I can feel quite exposed,” she explains, “because it is just me up there, you know. I haven’t tried to create something, it’s just sort of happened.” And you believe her. On stage, on record, or in person, Welch’s gift is to maintain no boundary, and it’s both thrilling and brave. “It feels quite vulnerable sometimes. I don’t have any sort of a persona to hide behind. But then, performing is what I love and I love making music, so... I don’t think I could do anything else.”

When our interview draws to a close, and Florence Welch disappears into the PR maelstrom around her, it’s clear she really could never take a holiday. This is not a job – this is her life. Welch’s music and performance may be newly ensconced in the trappings of a burgeoning fame, but there’s no doubting they remain an extension of her. It’s unmistakably Florence whose pulse beats through every song: pounding, exhilarating and vital. It’s Florence whose breath fills every inch of Lungs: its grandly swelling sighs; its wild exhalations. It’s Florence that gives The Machine its soul.