

SOUND OFF Special Interview: Lisa Howard on William Finn Album, TWILIGHT: BREAKING DAWN, and More!

by Pat Cerasaro
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This week marks the release of Lisa Howard's stunning new collection of William Finn songs, SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE, as well as a showcase at Birdland featuring the selections from the album and some special surprises, so now is certainly the best time to catch up with the 25th ANNUAL PUTNAM COUNTY SPELLING BEE star before she takes on Mother Abbess in THE SOUND OF MUSIC and Paulette in LEGALLY BLONDE later this year. Additionally, Ms. Howard shares with me all about the filming of the highly anticipated conclusion of the TWILIGHT series, TWILIGHT: BREAKING DAWN Parts 1 & 2 in which she plays a central role: that of Siobahn, an ancient Irish vampire. William Finn, Dan Fogler, Bill Condon, Michael Sheen, Robert Pattinson, Taylor Lautner and stories about working with many more of her exciting co-stars and collaborators await in this comprehensive conversation. Also, be sure to pick up the Finn album available at GhostlightRecords.com to enjoy

Finn favorites old and new, plus the premiere of a number of songs from ROMANCE IN HARD TIMES, THE ROYAL FAMILY and the titular song cycle itself, SONGS OF INNOCENCE & EXPERIENCE.

Listen To The Buh-buh-buh-buh-buh-buh-buh-Beat

PC: What was your first exposure to the music of William Finn?

LH: Well, first, I was in a workshop of FALSETTOS as Dr. Charlotte in college and, then, later, in the summer production, I played Trina. I just fell in love with his material. And, it just so happened that my Broadway debut was in SPELLING BEE.

PC: So, to dedicate your first album to his material is pure destiny, then?

LH: (Laughs.) When I first thought years ago, "Oh, God, I want to do an album!" I always planned on doing all Bill's stuff on it - it just took me awhile to get there and actually complete it!

PC: How long did it take to get the album all together? It's a dicey proposition these days, as I'm sure you know.

LH: Well, let's see, I think it's been on the back burner since 2007. Then, when I met my manager Jen Namoff, she said, "Why don't you have an album?" And, I said, (Nervous Laugh.) "Ahh, I've been working on it! I don't know - it's such a big undertaking!" So, she helped me make that happen.

PC: You have a clarion sound to your voice and one of the most purely enjoyable tones of anyone on Broadway.

LH: Oh, thank you.

PC: Do you find you have to take any special precautions to keep your voice in top shape - especially singing tricky Finn songs!

LH: (Laughs.) I'm probably going to make some people mad, but I don't do anything special; no. Yes, I guess I was just blessed with a clear tone. Now, granted, if I don't drink enough water and stay up late and drink alcohol, of course that affects my voice; but, no, on a regular basis I don't have to do anything special.

PC: John Leguizamo was telling me he has to keep close watch on not drinking even coffee or anything to dry out his instrument - but, then again, he does a one-man-show every night.

LH: Sure! Sure. Of course, it all depends on what I am doing in my life, you know? Like, if I was doing a major show where I had to belt my face off every night, eight nights a week, maybe I would change some things and not have that glass of wine after the show or not as much caffeine - but, really, it just depends on what you are doing at the time and what it requires of you.

PC: Speaking of belting: what is your range? It must be gigantic - "When The Earth Stopped Turning" to "The I Love You Song"?

LH: (Laughs.) It's big! I do do the soprano stuff, as well.

PC: It's like two different voices almost.

LH: I studied classically at school, but, obviously, musical theatre is my passion. So, I learned how to do both.

PC: How?

LH: Well, funny enough, I'll give you an upcoming example: this summer, I am going to be playing the Mother Abbess in THE SOUND OF MUSIC.

PC: No way! Where?

LH: At the Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera. I have never worked there and I am really excited.

PC: They do some great work. What beautiful material you will be singing - and what perfect casting!

LH: I actually think that because I stretch my range high and sing legit up that way, that it helps everything else down below, too, you know?



PC: That's a fascinating vocal theory - you stretch your range with every role. What other parts are coming up?

LH: I am also going back to the Muny in St. Louis and I will be playing Paulette in LEGALLY BLONDE. I'm going to have a varied summer! (Laughs.)

PC: "Ireland" to Vienna!

LH: (Big Laugh.) Exactly! Exactly.

PC: It's a great show. It's really in the Michael Bennett tradition, structurally - it's so seamless and well-written.

LH: Right. I think it's such a fun show and a great score. I'm really looking forward to doing it.

PC: It's a huge hit in the West End!

LH: Oh, that's true! I haven't been to London in years. I have to go back and check it out.



PC: What Finn pieces have you seen? A NEW BRAIN at the Mitzi E. Newhouse?

LH: I actually never did get to see it, but I am uber-familiar with that score and all of his scores.

PC: How did you get to premiere so many songs? THE ROYAL FAMILY material is so thrilling, but the ROMANCE IN HARD TIMES stuff is the Holy Grail to many of us. How did you make that happen?

LH: (Laughs.) Well, I tried and tried and dug around and found the music. I specifically knew the fans would want some different songs because, you know, he had some of his live performances recorded. So, I wanted to do the hits, but I also wanted to do some of his stuff that hadn't been done. So, I did some digging and got those songs from ROMANCE and talked to the music director and then listened to the score.

PC: What do you think? I think it's one of the finest musicals of the 1980s.

LH: I think Ted Sperling gave me the tape and I just adored it. I went through song by song and tried to see what would fit my voice and fit the album the best and that's how we came up with the ones we used.

PC: What a phenomenal score - and, of course, Finn rewrote the show nightly for the whole run so there is no final version of the show.

LH: That's hilarious! I'm so glad to hear they are still trying, though, didn't they just do a concert? I was doing a benefit that night so I couldn't go.

PC: "You Cannot Let Romance Die" is my personal favorite. What is yours?

LH: Oh, yeah! That is so great. From that show, I just love and I will be doing "That's Enough For Me" - which he had done at other concerts, and I just love that song - and "Hold My Baby Back" - which is kind of the whole premise for the whole show anyway.

PC: Which brings us to: what a beautiful album design and gorgeous photos of you with your new bundle of joy in it!

LH: Thank you! You can tell that I picked the music when I was so pregnant, so, with all my final choices, you can kind of tell! (Laughs.)

PC: And so many of his songs involve or are about his relationship with his mother - "14 Dwight Ave. Natick, Massachusetts", "Infinite Joy", et cetera.

LH: Yeah, and "Infinite Joy" is just, to me, so, so, so amazing. I have been singing that song for a while. Back when I was in SPELLING BEE, I did a concert and I did that song and everyone was like, "You have to keep singing that song!"

PC: Fellow SPELLING BEE cast-members?

LH: Actually, yes! Dan Fogler; his parents, Sherie and Dr. Richard Fogler, had me sing that song at Dan's wedding - like, they hired me to do it! They were like, "You have to put this on the CD!" So, even if I didn't want to, I had to put it on there for Dan and his parents.

PC: Betty Buckley was telling me about that song and how William Finn presented it to her originally and how moved she was with it. What do you think of the ending? You don't do the "La la la's" and you really make it your own.

LH: No, I don't do the "La la la's". Everyone does it a little differently and I think that's great.

PC: How involved was Bill Finn in the recording process? Did he accompany you at all?

LH: Not at the piano, but Bill was there in the recording studio with me. So, throughout the sessions he would be saying, you know, (Gruff, Loud Voice.) "Why don't you change this? Why don't you do that?" (Laughs.)

PC: Did you feel particularly privileged to premiere the songs from THE ROYAL FAMILY? They are so, so awesome.

LH: Oh, I did - and I do.

PC: How did you make that happen?

LH: I mean, I just asked Bill and he went through his bottom drawer and he specifically suggested some of them. I was looking for up-tempo songs. I know he is an amazing ballad writer, but I was like, "Bill, I know you have to have up-tempo songs, too! Let's figure this out!" And, so, he actually gave me a lot of those songs from that show after that. So, with his blessing, I just took them and ran with them.

PC: You can say that again!

LH: I especially love the opening number of the CD, "Listen To The Beat", which is actually the Finale of Act One [in THE ROYAL FAMILY].

PC: Did you learn the songs by listening to the demos?



LH: No, not in that case. Vadim and I just kind of piecemealed the whole thing together. Obviously, it's such a huge group number and it's also a duet between the mother and daughter characters. But, we changed it around and made it work differently.

PC: It's its own unique thing.

LH: Totally. Exactly.

PC: Have you heard his LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE songs yet? It's just as good as his very best scores, in my opinion.



LH: A couple of years ago now, I actually did a small work session with Bill and James [Lapine], because they just wanted to hear the music sung for the first time, you know? So, I did get to sing a lot of it, but I haven't heard it in a while. So, I don't know what is in the show now and what isn't, but in its first workings of it I sang the mother's role.

PC: What did you think of the material?

LH: I absolutely loved what I heard and what he started with, but I haven't been keeping up with the changes out in California and everything.

PC: There's a whole bunch of up-tempo, upbeat songs in this one!

LH: (Laughs.) Oh, that's true - and that's great! I just loved it when we were first working on it, so I'm excited to see the changes. I know they are going to continue to work on it and, eventually, they will bring it here to New York.

PC: Only William Finn would write a musical that takes place mostly on a bus!

LH: (Big Laugh.) Yes, that's so true - in a bus, right!

PC: With a heroin addict grandpa!

LH: Yes, of course! (Laughs.)

PC: What songs didn't make the album?

LH: Ugh, just tons! Plus, lots of songs that Bill wanted me to do.

PC: Such as?

LH: Bill wanted me to do "All Fall Down".

PC: What did Mary Testa say about that?!

LH: (Laughs.) Uh huh! I know! I was just like, "Bill, I like the song, but I don't know if it's the right fit for me." He's like, (Gruff, Loud Voice.) "Aww, of course you can do it!" But, ultimately, it did not end up on there. (Laughs.)

PC: Many of my favorite Finn songs are actually from IN TROUSERS - "Love Me For What I Am", "Set Those Sails", "The Rape Of Miss Goldberg". Did you consider some of those?

LH: Oh, I did, I did. There was one incarnation of the album where I was considering doing "Set Those Sails". Then, there was another song from that that is a whole big group number that I wanted to make solo and bluesy. But, it ended up not happening - you know, ideas come and go and then we scrapped it. I decided there were more things from shows that hadn't even been done or recorded; newer stuff that I felt like, "I'd rather premiere this stuff than re-invent this other stuff." So, lots of things came on and off the list.

PC: This recording is the premiere of so many Finn songs - as many as INFINITE JOY, almost. A true treasure trove.

LH: Thank you so much. It was a true labor of love - pardon the pun. (Laughs.)

PC: That's so funny. Tell me about working on the album layout with Robbie Rozelle - who did a glorious job, as usual - and putting it all together with those great photos.

LH: Dirty Sugar Photography did the photos. I wanted to have pictures of my son with me because he influenced the album so much. I felt like it felt with the title, you know, what we learn from life - Songs of Innocence of Experience. It was a lot of fun having my little guy at the photo shoot - and we got to keep all the outtakes!

PC: What about working with Robbie?

LH: I actually met Robbie through my manager Jen. He had done some work for me prior for a website design and he was just the natural choice to help us do the album. He did such a great job.

PC: Did the design pose any particular challenges?

LH: Oh, it is amazing how difficult it is to choose a font! Oh. Dear. God. We were on the phone for hours! We would spend hours - hours - trying to pick a font. I couldn't believe it. I never knew it was that difficult. I felt like, "See, this is why I am not a graphic designer!"

PC: That's so funny.

LH: Robbie was so great about trying to give us lots of options to choose from, but helping us narrow it all down because otherwise the process would just be endless.

PC: Will you be doing additional Finn songs at your Birdland gig?

LH: There are a couple more songs we will be doing. I mean, I didn't want to just do the album! I will be having some of my SPELLING BEE castmates back so, yes, we will be doing "The I Love You Song"!

PC: Tell me about premiering that song and the Middle Eastern influences of it - it's anomalous in the Finn canon in that way. Was it written in the vocal line the way you do it?

LH: Well, it's all because the character of Olive's mom is in an ashram in India - it's this fantasy number of hers. So, to tie it in with her, they added it in. I'm not sure if it was Vadim or who - it all kinds of blends together from back when we first did the song! (Laughs.)

PC: What did you think the first time you heard it in rehearsal?

LH: I can remember the first time we gathered around the piano and they played that music, and I think there was the (Sings.) "Ohhh, ohm, ohm".

PC: It's so Finn for him to put his own idiosyncratic twist on Middle Eastern music.

LH: Exactly! I think it was his original concept from the get-go.

PC: It's the crown jewel of that score and your performance of it is indelible.

LH: Thank you so much. That is so kind.

PC: Will you be performing more concerts promoting the album?

LH: That is the plan! We are kind of just worrying about Birdland now, but, yes, I am doing a show in my hometown and then we will figure out what audiences are interested in. We are going from there.

PC: You can always add in other things, as well.

LH: Of course. You can make it what you want.

PC: Moving to movies: you are making your feature film debut in one of the most hotly anticipated films of all time, TWILIGHT: BREAKING DAWN, yes?

LH: Yes, yes, I am! (Laughs.) Isn't that crazy!

PC: What an accomplishment! And to work with Bill Condon - he's a real Broadway baby; plus, he directed DREAMGIRLS!

LH: I think that's probably why he even considered hiring me - because I am a Broadway gal and he understands our world, you know?

PC: Precisely.

LH: I think that may have even been the reason I was even considered.

PC: The theatre connection. What was the audition like? How did it come about?

LH: Jen, my manager, got me the audition. Of course, I was a huge TWILIGHT fan and I had read all the books and seen the movies. You know, I was like, "Oh, that sounds fun! Great!" never thinking that I would get it - even though I fit the character description perfectly, and that doesn't happen all the time for a gal like me!

PC: Where did you audition?

LH: We went in and I put myself on tape and we sent it in. The next week, I got the call that I got the job.

PC: Wow.

LH: I know! It was kind of surreal. I was like, "What. Is. Happening?!" I was so excited.

PC: What was your audition piece?

LH: It's actually just a scene that's really not in the movie, but they obviously just wanted to see what I could do with it. It's a scene between me and Edward. Do you know the story?

PC: I do, but why don't you fill everyone in.

LH: Well, it's when Bella's having that baby and she's half-vampire/half-whatever...

PC: Renesme.

LH: Yeah, Renesme. So, they are showing it to their friends, saying that, you know, "Hey, you can hear her heartbeat! We didn't create an immortal child! We didn't, like, bite a baby!"



PC: Which is a big crime for vampires.

LH: Right. They call their other vampire friends from around the world to help them give witness that they didn't commit this vampire crime. (Pause.) Gosh, it sounds so funny when you actually talk about it out loud. (Laughs.)

PC: And the baby is actually "imprinted" on Jacob, the werewolf, and they are destined to be together, ultimately. He isn't in love with Bella, he's in love with the baby inside of her.

LH: Yes. Right. Exactly. That's the story. That's also why he's always hanging around being tortured. (Laughs.)

PC: With his shirt off.

LH: (Laughs.) With his shirt off; exactly! Of course.

PC: What happens to your character in the scene you auditioned with?

LH: It was a scene between Edward and my character, Siobhan, who is the head of the Irish clan - the cousin clan - of vampires.

PC: What was it like working with Robert Pattinson? You are a Broadway baby, so you can spot it: does he have the goods?

LH: Yeah, he does. He's great. And, he's really nice and he's professional and easy to work with. He's just great.

PC: It filmed in Baton Rouge, correct?

LH: Yes, I was there two weeks in December and then January through mid-February.

PC: You are in quite a number of scenes, correct?

LH: Uh huh! Yeah, I am.

PC: They're splitting it into two films, so are you in both or just Part 2?

LH: Right. The movie is going to be TWILIGHT: BREAKING DAWN PART 1 and TWILIGHT: BREAKING DAWN PART 2. I am in Part 2.

PC: So, we don't even get to see you for a year and a half!

LH: For another year, yeah! I think I'll only be in Part 2.

PC: But, it's all good stuff, since I'm assuming it follows the book closely?

LH: Yes, it does. We have the big scene where we all come to the house and we meet them. Then, we have the scenes where we are in the woods waiting for the Volturi to come. Then, of course, there is the big scene at the end - the big stand-off.

PC: And you have a lot of material with Michael Sheen, yes?

LH: Yes, tons! Tons! That whole scene in the field we spent weeks - weeks - doing that one scene. It's a huge scene.

PC: The special effects are supposed to be really impressive.

LH: Oh, yeah, totally! We were standing in a field, completely surrounded, 360 degrees, by green screen.

PC: What challenges did that pose?

LH: It was crazy! They would have these fake wolves behind us that were like these cardboard cut-outs, and then they would do a shot with the fake ones and then take them out and do it again so that they knew where to reference to put in the wolves in post[-production]. So, it will be cool to see myself standing with these giant wolves behind me, you know? That will be pretty neat. (Laughs.)

PC: Your son is going to have one famous mom really soon! What does it feel like to become a part of the TWILIGHT phenomenon?

LH: (Big Laugh.) It's kind of crazy! It's kind of crazy that my feature film debut is in this amazing series - this huge, worldwide phenomenon.

PC: And Bill Condon delivers?

LH: Oh, yes. The fans will be very pleased - I think everyone will.

PC: What's he like on set?

LH: He's just fantastic! He's just so kind. You know, some directors can not be - in whatever field you are working in - but, he's nice and comes out and talks to the actors. If you're not getting it, he says, "OK. Well, why don't you try it this way?" He's calm. You never saw him explode on set. He just gets done what needs to be done. And, he's a wonderful presence to work with - there's no drama.

PC: So, it was a great experience to work with him on BREAKING DAWN?

LH: Oh, yes, totally - at least that I saw and was involved in! He was very kind and made everyone feel important and special to the scene - because, everyone is. (Pause.) He was just a doll to work with.

PC: How was it working with the Director of Photography, Guillermo Navarro (JACKIE BROWN, PAN'S LABYRINTH)? He's so gifted.

LH: He kept the ship running, that's for sure! He did a great job, from what I could see on the monitors!

PC: Neither film is in 3D, correct?

LH: I think they are both in standard, not 3D, as far as I know.

PC: Have there been any re-shoots?

LH: No. I mean, that's still a possibility - but, no, I haven't had to.

PC: It's still a year and a half before it comes out!

LH: Right! Right. They have time.

PC: What was your camaraderie like with the rest of the cast? It's a huge cast!

LH: Yeah, there were so many new cast members - it was a lot of fun! We all stayed at the same place and got to hang out. Dakota Fanning and the Volturi and all the Cullens that were in the other movies were there, so it was really nice to get to know them and then to get to know all the new vampires.

PC: Did you get Robert Pattinson to sing with you at all on set? He supposedly has a wonderful voice.

LH: I didn't get him to sing! But, we did chat about it. In one scene he has to play the piano, and he was like, (British Accent.), "But, I don't know how to play the piano!" (Laughs.) But, he did learn a little part and he actually plays it - the song he writes for Renesmee, from the book. We briefly talked about that - but, no singing on set.

PC: What are the Top Songs on your iPod right now?

LH: Hmm, these days, between rehearsing for the new album and being a full-time mom and taking care of my little guy, I don't get a lot of time to just listen to music. It's terrible.

PC: What have you seen recently that you really enjoyed?

LH: HOW TO SUCCEED.

PC: I just interviewed Christopher J. Hanke for this column. He's a nice guy.

LH: He was amazing in that show! He is so hilarious! I thought it was a lot of fun. I also thought Daniel Radcliffe did a great job. Seeing him up there, especially doing the "Brotherhood of Man" song - I thought it was just great. It's not necessarily my favorite score as far as musical theatre classics go, but it was fun. I loved Tammy and John



Larroquette and I know some of the people in the ensemble. I even loved the costumes and the sets. Yeah, it's a hit.

PC: What about other Loesser roles for you? Adelaide?

LH: Oh, I'd love to do Adelaide! I love his music.

PC: What was your favorite cast album growing up?

LH: Well, LES MIZ is the reason I chose to go into the profession. When I was little, I would listen to THE SOUND OF MUSIC and [ANNIE](#) just over and over and over again. But, really, once I got into high school and I heard LES MIZ and MISS SAIGON, I was like, "This is what I have to do!"

PC: You made your dream come true, of course!

LH: Yes, I did the national tour for two years. I was in the ensemble and I understudied Madame Thenardier.

PC: What was your favorite movie musical growing up?

LH: Movie musical? That's a tough one. I loved SINGING IN THE RAIN. Also, maybe, [ANNIE](#) - but, only because I wanted to be [Annie](#). Of course, I also loved GREASE.

PC: Do you consider yourself a soprano or a belter?

LH: Yeah, I do consider myself a soprano. Well, a soprano who belts, maybe! (Laughs.)

PC: Define collaboration.

LH: Most definitely, it's a give-and-take. I could not have done this album without the musical guidance of Vadim Feichtner. I had my own ideas about songs, he had his own ideas - we'd try this, we'd try that. I'd say, "Yes, it's comfortable. No, it's not." I mean, I could not have done this without him. Especially, like "Sailing" and all those changes - that's all him. We'd go through and sing each song and he'd say, "Ah, no, don't sing that one."

PC: So, it was a casual, comfortable collaboration?

LH: Yeah, yeah. Very casual. Just me and him singing songs in his living room and feeling what feels good and what doesn't.

PC: What's next? Birdland, SOUND OF MUSIC, LEGALLY BLONDE, TWILIGHT: BREAKING DAWN 1 & 2. Is that it?

LH: (Laughs.) Yep, that's it! I have a busy summer coming up, I guess!

PC: This has been wonderful, Lisa. Thank you so much - especially for all the Finn and TWILIGHT scoop!

LH: Aww, you are so sweet, Pat. Thank you so much. This was a true pleasure. Bye bye.