

# Music with a Message:

## Lilli Lewis uses her talents to educate and entertain

By Daniel Sirna



PHOTO BY LIV PISKADLO-JONES

From an early age, Lilli Lewis has admired the sound of the piano. Starting at the age of three she performed what she called “air piano” concerts for her family. She also listened to what her older sister was learning in her piano lessons, and taught herself how to play those pieces by ear.

Lilli’s story begins in the Athens, Georgia area. Early in her career she focused on classical music, becoming an award-winning classically trained singer and pianist, but eventually she shifted toward a different style. Later on she spent some time in Boston, inspired by many - including popular singer/songwriter Jennifer Kimball.

“What is this magic?” she wondered in awe after seeing Kimball perform in person for the first time.

Eventually, Lilli became a singer/songwriter herself and began recording as well. Settling in North Shore, Louisiana, she formed a folk-rock band named The Shiz. A few years later she moved across Lake Pontchartrain to New Orleans and continued her music career there. Through location changes and changes in musical styles, Lilli’s genuine passion for music never wavered.

As an in-demand speaker and performer on racial equality at virtual panels from Americana Music Association to Folk Alliance International, Lilli emphatically

states “I have an appreciation for Americana music, country, and folk and I’m a very strong advocate for the real origins of these genres to be included in the music narrative.”

“Over time, the origins of these genres have been excluded and staple sounds in these genres, like the banjo, are instruments that emerged from a variety of Black cultures, Lilli further noted. “These genres have been claimed as White spaces but, in reality, the fundamental pillars of these genres emerged from Black cultures. The success of music hubs like Nashville is largely due to the Black cultures that existed there following the Civil War,” she said.

In her own words, Lilli is “a hardcore believer that music belongs to everyone. It is fundamentally corrosive to write the origins out of the script,” she continued. “Especially in a genre like Americana that is a culmination of different sounds and styles. How can some of the diverse origins of it be excluded?”

Lilli explained that she has a variety of inspirations and they translate into her unique style that can't be defined under any one single category. Although her music aligns with a more folk/Americana sound, she has a diverse range of what she produces. She described her music as “Orange Music, a distant, more sober cousin of the blues.”

Over the seven years Lilli has resided in New Orleans she has become acclimated to the local music scene and its concurrent culture. She recognizes the unique origins of New Orleans' indigenous music and is proud to be a beneficiary of its roots and historic traditions. Becoming a part of the music scene in New Orleans did not come easy for her. She worked very hard to become more comfortable performing and assimilating into the city's music community.

“The music in New Orleans is, among other things, a culmination of African cultural music and classical traditions imported by the French,” Lilli explained. “There is no other place in the country that has this unique combination.” She especially loves performing at The Neutral Ground in Uptown New Orleans because of what she describes as “the family-feel in the place.”

Lilli says she enjoys performing at a wide variety of venues from the Old Point Bar in Algiers to the George and Joyce Wein Jazz and Heritage Foundation where this fall she taped a powerful set centered on social justice for The Kennedy Center's “Arts Across America” series. She acknowledges that the audience makes each venue special. Over time she has developed what she calls her “internal venue. No matter where I am performing ... wherever I go, I am playing Carnegie Hall, because it's all ‘internal.’”

In recent months, Lilli has been commissioned – along with two other local composers, Dylan Tran and Desiree Robinson – to create a collection of songs for a group of 35 music and opera students at Loyola University. The inspiration for the composed pieces is coming from the students' own recollections of real-life experiences. World-renowned opera librettist Jerre Dye has been conducting virtual interviews with the students, then writing the lyrics that Lilli and the other two composers are setting to music, which the students will sing as part of their course curriculum.

As Lilli's roots in the community grew deeper and wider, she began involving herself in issues and causes bigger than music. Inspired by people like the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. “I appreciate people like her who are willing to stand up and promote decency so we can all live on the planet together,” she said. “I appreciate the concept of basic goodness, and this means everyone has something they love. If they can harness that passion and project it out to the world

it will make the world a better place.”

For Lilli, music is the passion she harnesses and brings to the world to try to make it a better place. “It's humbling to know how little you can do but I will still



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Lilli Lewis with the Lilli Lewis Project



MASK UP TEAM PHOTOS BY ELIZABETH HOGAN

David Villalta (co-producer), Lilli Lewis, and Corey J The Rapper

do it,” she proudly proclaims. “I believe that music is my path to empower people and share my message with the world. I come from a lineage of preachers and activists,” she said. “I carry that sense of responsibility to be an activist and deliver my message through music.”

Along those lines she has used her platform as an artist and as general manager of Louisiana Red Hot Records to address issues of social injustice and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic.

This past summer Lilli extended her

talents to help promote messages to reduce COVID-19 transmission. The coronavirus pandemic that the world is going through has created hardships for racial and ethnic minorities more so than any other group, statistics are showing. The pandemic has taken a toll on the rest of the New Orleans community as well.

Doing what she sees as her part in the community health education effort, Lilli worked in conjunction with local New Orleans health officials to co-write and co-produce a track called “Mask Up.” The upbeat, brass bounce funk beat which has amassed over 10k views on YouTube, promotes the importance of wearing a mask and maintaining social distancing.

The song features Corey J. the Rapper and Kirk Joseph’s Backyard Groove, with special appearances by label mates Erica Falls, Roland Guerin and lineage bearers like James Andrews and Glen David Andrews. The familiar, upbeat funk and brass sounds are meant to draw in fans

of New Orleans music and promote an important public health message.

Lilli took the lead in searching for ways to use her voice to help with handling the pandemic. “Our lives are in each other’s hands... something as simple as putting on a mask,” she said, stressing the importance of wearing a mask to protect others and yourself. This is just one example of how Lilli uses her platform to initiate change in the world.

Louisiana Red Hot more recently commissioned another song from producer, songwriter and renowned bassist Roland Guerin called “28 Days” released on October 26. It is being used to promote good public health practices and encourage 28 days of universal masking to help end the pandemic. “I’m very proud to be a major part of promoting this worthy initiative,” Lilli said. 🌸



PHOTO BY ERIKA GOLDRING

Lilli in Mask Up Covid Down Mask