

Breaking into the 'biz'

Debut CD is gaining singer Toby Lightman notice

By Tom Moon
KRT CAMPUS

NEW YORK — In between rounds of stripes and solids at a tony Chelsea billiard hall, the diminutive singer and songwriter Toby Lightman is almost giddy as she runs through the shocks she's experienced recently.

Just that morning, Lightman heard herself on the radio for the first time. Her manager called in a frenzy to tell her that contemporary-hits Z100 was spinning "Devils and Angels," the first single from her just-released debut CD, "Little Things."

"I'm like all excited, and I hear it and it was sort of weird," says Lightman, 25, now on the first round of performances to help promote "Little Things" (Lava, 3 stars out of four). "I don't know what I thought I'd feel at that moment, but it wasn't what I felt. Maybe I was in shock."

Then there was the time, a few weeks ago, when she was on the phone with a friend while MTV's "Cribs" played in the background.

"It's not my favorite show, it was just on," she seems compelled to say as she connects on a tricky bank shot. Lightman is something of a pool fiend: She has her own cue, emblazoned with the logo of her alma mater, the University of Wisconsin.

"All of the sudden I hear the star in the beginning of 'Devils and Angels' and I'm like, whoa, screaming into the phone. It was only 10 seconds, but that made it almost more trippy, because it was so random."

In the last few months, the performer's defining musical idea — strummed acoustic guitars and easygoing pop hooks supported by crisply programmed, urban-leaning beats — has begun to enchant music-industry tastemakers. The strident, slyly philosophical relationship song "Devils and Angels" is gaining steam on radio and has been featured on MTV's "You Hear It First" and the all-video M2 channel. In an indication that early interest is spreading to the general public, a few weeks ago the song was one of the top five downloads on Apple's iTunes site. Last week, Billboard magazine declared her a "rising star."

Lightman, who grew up in the New Jersey suburbs of Philadelphia, is trying to keep a

level head. "From living in New York for the last four years, I've learned that everything can change very quickly."

Lightman credits Peter Zizzo, the songwriter and producer who has collaborated with Avril Lavigne and Vanessa Carlton, with helping her nail down what started as an elusive sound.

"I like soulful rock, like the Black Crowes, but I also like classic pop songs," Lightman explains, adding that with the exception of Suzuki violin lessons when she was 6, her parents never pushed her in any particular musical direction. "I had these songs that weren't really pop or urban, and some people I met with had very strong ideas about which way I should go. Peter just got it: He let the elements coexist."

Zizzo says that was easy. "Her guitar is very aggressive and rhythmic, and at the same time she's coming from a very urban place as a vocalist. There's some Lauryn Hill in what she does. It was my job to bring those things out in their purest form."

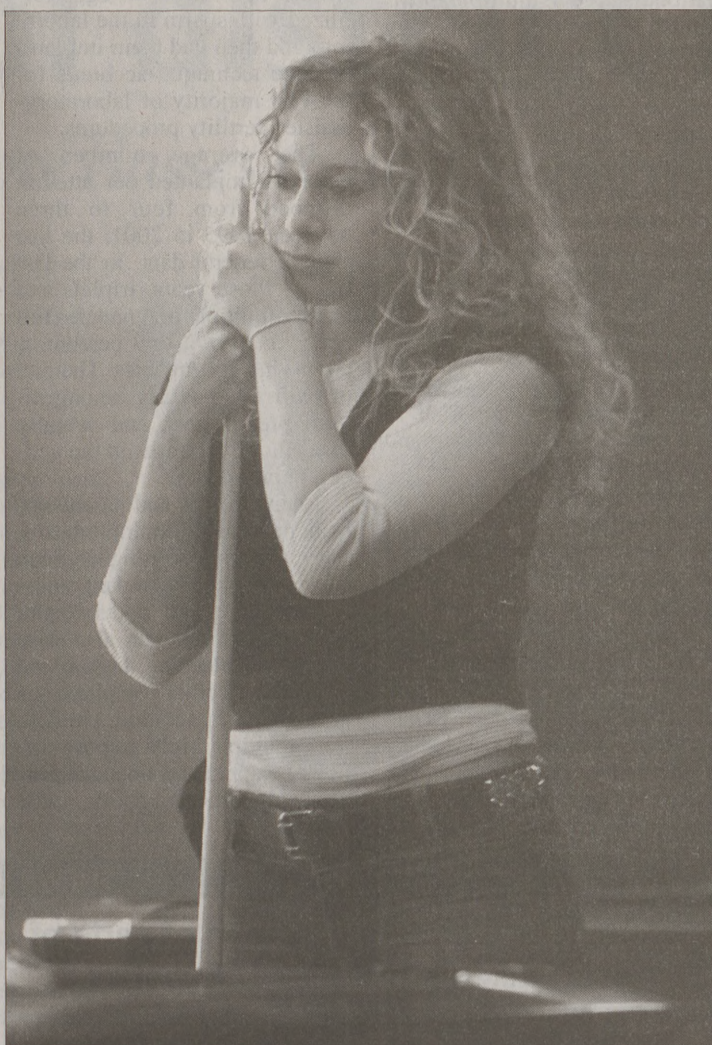
Music wasn't a huge part of Lightman's childhood. She didn't have stage parents: Her father runs an environmental company, and her mother is a regional greeting-card representative. And though everyone recognized that she could sing, it was mostly an after-school activity.

"People keep wanting me to say I knew I was going to be famous when I grew up ... but that's not true. I wasn't that kind of kid," she says.

Lightman wasn't a sullen journal-scribbling kid, either. Though she had a band with several friends from high school, she didn't start writing songs in earnest until college, where she studied communications. Looking back, she says she didn't have a sense of herself as a performer until after junior year, when she took a job singing in an in-demand band in Bangkok, Thailand.

"My parents weren't exactly thrilled, but that experience gave me confidence. And it was after that when I started to really write songs."

During a summer internship with Electric Factory Concerts in Philadelphia, Lightman began to develop a network of contacts. She met Wyclef Jean's brother, who encouraged her to



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Singer and songwriter Toby Lightman hangs out at a pool hall in New York City on March 17, 2004.

get a demo tape together. She crossed paths with other producers who helped her record her song "Voices."

Eventually, she moved to New York to begin the long process of breaking in. Lightman did everything from bartending to open-mike songwriter things at the Bitter End, and despite initial nervousness, she sent her tape, photo and resume to industry executives. That led to a manager, and then to Zizzo.

Once they had brought a few songs, including "Devils and Angels," "Leave It Inside," and "The River," to a fairly polished state, Zizzo persuaded Karp and Lava president Jason Flom to check Lightman out.

It wasn't exactly a traditional showcase, Zizzo recalls: "It's the middle of the afternoon, and they show up in softball uniforms on the way to a game. She

sings, and they're blown away, talking a deal right away. I really had to convince her that Lava was legit."

"I'd been told to expect bidding wars and stuff, and here were these average guys," Lightman says. "But as we talked I could tell they were totally into what I was trying to do, and that they weren't going to try and make me into another Mary J. Blige or something."

And that, she says, matters more to her than massive sales.

"I'm one of those people who don't think 'pop' is a bad word. But I'm talking about pop on my terms, what's in my head as a singer and a songwriter, not the cardboard-cutout kind of pop that's going on now. I have to do this and really follow it through, because I'll always wonder what could have happened if I want to know (that) at least I followed my instincts."

NEWS IN BRIEF

Stewart's lawyers accuse juror of lying

NEW YORK (AP) — Pressing again for a new trial, Martha Stewart's lawyers said Wednesday they have uncovered more lies and omissions by one of the jurors who convicted her last month.

According to the papers filed in federal court, the former president of a Little League organization claimed juror Chappell Hartridge had told him he embezzled money from the group to support a cocaine habit.

The documents said Hartridge did not disclose the allegations on

his jury questionnaire.

Late last month, Stewart's lawyers said that Hartridge had lied in failing to disclose a 1997 arrest on charges of assaulting a woman he had been living with.

The defense has argued that it would have moved to have Hartridge stricken from the jury had they known about any of these facts from his past.

The papers filed Wednesday asked U.S. District Judge Miriam Goldman Cedarbaum, who oversaw the homemaking authority's trial earlier this year, to grant a second trial or at least a hearing on the Hartridge matter.

Student charged with faking her abduction

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — A college student accused of faking her own kidnapping last month was charged Wednesday with lying to police in what they suggested was a desperate attempt to get her boyfriend's attention.

Audrey Seiler, a 20-year-old sophomore at the University of Wisconsin, was charged with two misdemeanor counts of obstructing officers. Each charge carries up to nine months in jail and a \$10,000 fine.

Seiler disappeared from her off-campus apartment March 27 with

out her coat or purse. She was discovered curled in a fetal position in a marsh four days later, and told police that a man had abducted her at knifepoint.

But police concluded Seiler made up the story after obtaining a store videotape that showed her buying the knife, duct tape, rope and cold medicine she claimed her abductor used to restrain her. Seiler confessed after she was confronted with the tape, according to authorities.

"I set up everything. I'm just so messed up. I'm sorry," they quoted her as saying. But she later recanted the statement, insisting she had been abducted.

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