

THE INDEPENDENT

Jodie Marie - The shy singer who became a folk-pop sensation

But for a chance encounter in a B&B in west Wales, Jodie Marie might never have got a record deal. She still can't quite believe it's all happening, she tells Elisa Bray

Elisa Bray

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Jodie Marie's launch into the music industry sounds so like a fairytale it could have been concocted by a publicity-hungry record label (it wasn't). One day the landlady of a B&B in a tiny village in west Wales, where 16-year-old Marie's father worked as a plumber, overheard a guest discuss his son's work in the music business. She recommended he listen to the plumber's daughter, and played a CD to the man over breakfast the next morning. Shortly after, Marie found herself with a manager, and now, four years down the line, a debut album of folk-pop that has been championed by critics across the board.

"I didn't think too much about it", Marie says, recalling the moment her father asked her to dig out a CD of her songs. "No one comes down to Narberth in Pembrokeshire. It was just a CD of covers I'd put together when I was 14, so it wasn't anything special."

Marie then found herself in London, writing songs with Ed Harcourt and Bernard Butler. Although, at just 16, she had no idea who Butler was. "Looking back I'm really thankful that I didn't know who he was because I was nervous enough as it was. I remember sitting opposite him and he obviously could see this nervous 16-year-old. 'Hi, I'm Jodie,'" she mimics her tiny, petrified voice. "I remember singing a Bonnie Raitt cover of 'Guilty', a blues song, then he said, 'OK, how about your own stuff?' I brought out 'Single Blank Canvas'. That was the first time I'd played my music to anyone."

Before being thrust into a songwriting collaboration with Butler, Marie had only written songs in her bedroom. The code for her parents so they knew not to disturb her was a tie-dye scarf that the embarrassed school girl would tie to the door. While studying for her A-levels, she made trips back and forth from Wales to London for sessions with Butler, but so cautious was the young singer-songwriter that she kept it all a secret from everyone but her family and one friend.

"I remember itching to tell them, but it was just too good to be true at this point. I wanted to perform, I wanted to be a singer-songwriter, but in my head I didn't know if it would take off."

Of course, it did, and the songs she penned alongside Butler led to a deal with Verve. The first time she met Simon Gavin, who signed Duffy (although the singers' similarities are limited to being female and Welsh), he had travelled hours to her home, proof to the still doubtful singer that it was really happening.

"How often do you get somebody from a label in London come four-and-a-half hours in the car down to west Wales to meet you? All the music I listened to was on Verve. I thought, 'How is this happening? This is amazing.' My mum cooked him chilli because

they'd been travelling all day." The second time she met Gavin in 2010, she was signing on the dotted line.

When her friends did eventually find out, it wouldn't have been too much of a surprise. Everyone in the neighbourhood knew that Marie could sing. She had been singing since she was tiny: ever since her teacher spotted her talent aged six she'd taken classical singing lessons, honing her smooth, lilting voice, and she performed her first out-of-school gig at seven. "I was wearing a little velvet brown dress and I was ruffling it, creasing the bottom, because I was so nervous."

In her mid-teens she was holding down three jobs – shifts at the local rugby club bar, cleaning and working at a petrol station – in addition to singing regular solos alongside adult choirs, gigs in restaurants and her most nerve-wracking commission, singing the first dance at a wedding.

How did she celebrate her record deal? "The day that Simon came down we were so excited we celebrated that night. I was home with my boyfriend, dad and mum and I love dark rum so we had Sailor Jerry and put on a load of old Decca records. When I was signed my family threw a surprise party. I'd had a really long day at the rugby club and all of my friends were sitting up the stairs dressed in 1950s outfits. On my bed was a 1950s rockabilly dress they'd bought me with a note on it: 'Wear me.'"

That her album *Mountain Echo* sounds rooted in the music of the past, its light-blues and jazz-folk-edge recalling late-1960s singer-songwriters such as Carole King, is explained by the music that she grew up surrounded by. The family home was full of old vinyl by blues artists Albert King, Elmore James and Stevie Ray Vaughan. "My dad was always playing guitar in the back room singing all these old blues songs when I was in bed. I could hear him so I'd go in and sing along and learn them while he was playing and creep back to bed. I just loved the music."

She came across her biggest influence, Bonnie Raitt, aged 10 via a Stevie Ray Vaughan tribute video on her parents' shelf. "I remember watching it and seeing this slide guitar player – this girl. All the rest I'd grown up listening to were guys so it was the first time I'd seen a female just rocking out on this guitar. I loved that sound, I loved the rawness. They're baring their souls. That's what I was drawn to; it's a truth in their lyrics and music, and that's what I try to put across in my music."

If that is her goal, Marie has succeeded: the album drips with emotion, partly from the homesickness that plagued her as she spent so much time in London away from family and the familiar lush mountains of Wales, not least on the album's final song "Mountain Echo". It was written just after the Sparklehorse singer Mark Linkous, a close friend of Ed Harcourt, had died. Marie went to the songwriting session to find Harcourt quiet and upset. "Obviously his way of coping, as with any musician, is to write through the pain – he was adamant he wanted to write. And I was missing home at this time, so it was a very emotional day in that studio. I always have this image of the mountains at home and I'm looking across at them. All the songs are things I want to tell people, so hopefully now everyone will hear what I've been trying to say all along."

The single "Numb" is out on Monday. Jodie Marie is on tour 14-18 May