

"I remember picking up a pen for the first time with the intention of writing lyrics — and being so intimidated," she says. "I had so much reverence for the music and the song writers I really loved."

The list of her favorites, then and now, includes a range of familiar names, from the Joni Mitchell of *Blue* to those irreverent early 20th-century New Yorkers who created what we now call the American Songbook. (Think Cole Porter's "Night and Day," "Begin the Beguine" and "My Heart Belongs to Daddy.")

"Everything that Cole Porter wrote is a master class in clever song writing," Loren says.

And, she adds, Paula Cole. *This Fire* was the first album Loren ever bought with her own money.

(Days after a long interview, she emailed a more-complete list of her influences: Bill Withers, Carole King, Paul Simon, Sarah McLachlan, Brian Wilson, Gordon Lightfoot, Willie Nelson, John Prine, Fiona Apple, Tori Amos, Sam Cooke, Stevie Nicks, Dolly Parton, Woody Guthrie and Paul McCartney/John Lennon. "So many others, too," she wrote. "But that's a start.")

Loren, now 33, started crafting her songs methodically, penning new lyrics to familiar melodies, so she didn't have to solve two problems at once. Soon she was writing songs to original melodies. By the time she was 17, she had written more than 100 songs.

Along the way she began entering — and winning — songwriting competitions from the Austin Songwriters Competition and the Pacific Songwriters Competition (first in both) to the Billboard Songwriting Contest (a song she co-wrote with Larry Wayne Clark took second in jazz in 2004) and the John Lennon Songwriting Competition (runner-up in folk, 2004).

Straight out of high school Loren headed for Nashville, where she spent the next two years working with professional country songwriters, using contacts she had made through those competitions. "I had been writing songs for four years — that seemed a long time to me, and I thought I was an old hand at it already," she says. "But just being in a room hearing them spitballing ideas was an amazing education."

She learned, Loren says, "a much deeper understanding of the many paths to a song."

Then her life took an unexpected turn. It was 2003, the year of the first Iraq war. The Dixie Chicks told a concert crowd in London that they opposed the war, adding, "We're ashamed that the president of the United States is from Texas."

The sky fell in on the Grammy-winning country group, whose lost bookings kept them from touring for years after.

Loren looked around the red-state culture of Nashville. "What if everybody here knew how I felt about the war?" she wondered. She headed back to Eugene, needing to take a long breather from country music. "It wasn't resonating with me anymore," she says.

She enrolled at Lane Community College, starting off an education that would lead to a degree in art, with a minor in business, at the University of Oregon. At Lane she took a digital music class. She started listening to Tori Amos. And she started writing songs while sitting at the piano.

That music, along with a Joni Mitchell cover, would end up on her very first album, *Full Circle*, which she recorded and produced herself. "It's still work I'm super proud of," she says.

In 2008 she brought out her first jazz album, one of a series of nine that have so far defined her career.

The following year, *They Oughta Write a Song* took first place for Vocal Jazz Album in the Just Plain Folks music awards, which bills itself as the largest indie music award in the world. Loren flew to Nashville for the ceremony.

In those days she was selling her albums off her website, HalieLoren.com, and watching the money slowly trickle in. Then she signed with a Portland distributor who started selling her work in Japan. In 2010 *They Oughta Write a Song* became the second-biggest-selling jazz album in Japan. Now she has three albums that have hit the top of the Billboard jazz charts there.

Breaking into the Japanese market, Loren says, has been her most surprising career shift. For one thing, it's been lucra-

"We are all huge nerds," she says. "Nerds are people who are interested in things. It's not being afraid to be yourself, even if that's not what's in vogue at the moment. I love being around nerds. I can say that because I am one."

For the last three or four years Loren has had a nagging thought in the back of her mind — the idea of really delving into her songwriting self. Even though she's known for singing jazz classics, she's always included a few of her own songs in her albums and performances.

But this year she decided she was ready to get back to her artistic roots, to indulge the 14-year-old girl who sat down one day to write a song.

Loren relishes the purity of taking over every aspect of the music. "I want my voice to come through in more ways than just my voice," she says.

At the same time, she realized she was ready to cede some control. Loren has produced or co-produced every album she's made. She designed their covers, marketed them and marketed herself. "There are so many hats to wear," she says. "I have to try to be all things. What would it be like if I could just let go?"

Letting go, in this case, meant turning over production to a world-class pro. Loren sucked up her courage and launched a Kickstarter campaign that raised \$68,000 in short order. She used the money to hire Troy Miller, a British drummer and producer who has, among other things, conducted the London Symphony Orchestra and the BBC Orchestra, and worked with Amy Winehouse, Gregory Porter and Laura Mvula.

Last summer Loren flew to London for five days of studio sessions and then to Brooklyn for six more with Miller. Letting go, she says, was a continuing battle. "I had to be okay with the idea I was asking for help," she says. "But I got to immerse myself in the project and tell the rest of my nature to sit in the back seat."

The studio days were intense, 10 am to midnight. "I didn't get a lot of sleep," she says. "But exhausting is not the right word. I felt so energized!" Loren's inner control tried to complain. "Troy was asking me to stretch my concept of a song in ways I had never realized. I was so confused. This is not the way the song is in my head! But once I started listening..."

The album still isn't quite ready, but Loren let me listen to half a dozen not-quite-completely mixed songs. Hearing them back-to-back offers a deep tour through the incredible range of Loren's voice and her original musical vision.

The condition I agreed to is that I not discuss her songs and their titles in detail. But I can say this: At one moment she's singing a confessional with the quirky intimacy of Joni Mitchell; at another she's not-quite-belting a gospel-influenced anthem, and at the next she's off in a nerdy Stevie Wonderish fantasy.

Loren's new album brings in elements of pop and rock and folk — OK, who doesn't, these days? — as well as world music and that jazzy voice we all know, but she does it in a way that seems easy, honest and all her own.

"It's a series of stories," she says. "It explores the theme of letting go in a sad, nostalgic way, but also freedom from something you want to shed. It takes some pretty big chances. People who are expecting something similar to me might be surprised." ■



Letting go, in this case, meant turning over production to a world-class pro. Loren sucked up her courage and launched a Kickstarter campaign that raised \$68,000 in short order. She used the money to hire Troy Miller, a British drummer and producer who has, among other things, conducted the London Symphony Orchestra and the BBC Orchestra, and worked with Amy Winehouse, Gregory Porter and Laura Mvula.

tive. "It's been huge in terms of how much it's empowered me to make music my full career." She went in a heartbeat from local Oregon performer to international touring star, performing not only in Asia but in Europe and Canada.

Loren has an intense work ethic. She gets it from her parents, she says, who instilled in her the notion of getting things done on time and right. Before they retired, her mother was an administrative assistant; her father, an electrical engineer. She has a sister and brother who are both computer programmers.