



INDEPENDENT WOMAN

After a life-changing couple of years, Louise is rebooting her pop career with a heart-on-the-sleeve new album, **Heavy Love**. Think you know the former Eternal star? Then think again. “I’m sick and tired of being the safe player,” she tells Steve Harnell.

“Let’s be honest, I had two ways I could go on this album. I could come back with mediocre, mid-tempo, safe songs and put on a nice dress, smile sweetly and be the perfect mum who bakes and sings. Or I could come out and say, ‘Fuck that shit, I’ve got attitude. I’ve got self-belief. You know what? I’m still really sexy and I still wanna be desirable. And if anyone’s got a problem with that... they can DO ONE!’”

After more than a decade-and-a-half away from pop’s frontline, Louise Redknapp has no intentions of quietly sidling back into the spotlight – this is an all-guns-blazing return. New studio album *Heavy Love*, she hopes, will be the first of many. The record comes loaded with significance, both for herself and her fans. A much-publicised divorce from ex-Liverpool and England footballer Jamie Redknapp has seen Louise making tabloid headlines for uncomfortable reasons, but she’s bided her time before getting back in the ring.

“I didn’t want it to come out on the back of a circus, which was going on in my life a couple of years ago,” the star tells *Classic Pop* as we hunker down in the cosy lounge of a plush Marylebone hotel. “That would have

been a simple and easy thing to do where everything’s red-hot and people want to know what’s behind the record and what the lyrics are about. That wasn’t the reason why I was making an album, or why I make music at all for that matter. When you come from pop, especially as I know it, people are very quick to make a judgment about how ‘real’ it is. All I can say to those critics is, ‘This is VERY real!’”

The tabloids have already devoted countless column inches to Louise’s career *volte-face*. When *Heavy Love*’s first track *Stretch* saw the light of day last March, it had been 16 years since she’d last released a single with Pandora’s *Kiss/Don’t Give Up*. Across three solo albums, Louise sold 15 million records first time out. It’s a tough act to follow. The new model Louise 2.0 coincides with a new chapter in her life; a fresh start where’s she following her passions rather than subsuming them in family life.

“There’s always been talk of [a return to pop] and I always wanted to go back into music, but when you have a really long gap, especially as a woman and you go into ‘mum mode’ and do other things, your head is in such a different place.”

Heavy Love is Louise’s first studio album since *Elbow Beach* in 2000





“Jamie and I would have carried on keeping the divorce private if we could, but it was impossible. Part of the whole media blow-up was that we weren’t saying anything.”

“When I came out of *Strictly* and got divorced, I signed a publishing deal and spent the next six months after that writing before I even thought about making an album. It was my publisher who said: ‘OK, you’ve got some really good songs here, you’ve got your mojo back.’ I wanted to get it all down and write some positive, some not so positive, songs. When I played my first gig I wasn’t thinking that I’d be doing an album, it was just a small step back into the industry. You never know if people are going to be interested. There’s just so much out there...”

Heavy Love comes weighted with a back story, and Louise is under no illusions that listeners will be scanning the lyrics for references to her ex-husband. It’s a Footballers Wives’ *Blood On The Tracks*, if you will. Can she deal with the fact that, in some instances, lyrics will be misinterpreted?

“I’m sure that will happen. But to be honest with you, my life has been so

picked apart over the last couple of years, I don’t think it can be picked apart any more. Some of the things that have been written were true, but some absolutely weren’t.”

Whereas most celebrity couples now grant the tabloid press an access-all-areas pass to their family lives, Louise and Jamie’s reticence at playing the media game was a challenge for the Fleet Street hacks; a tough nut to crack, they mercilessly picked apart the couple when news leaked out that their marriage was in trouble.

“Jamie and I would have carried on keeping [the divorce] private if we could but it was impossible,” shrugs Louise. “Part of the whole media blow-up was that we weren’t saying anything.”

A DIGNIFIED SILENCE

As we talk, Louise is candid about the emotional toll the media intrusion took on her in the face of what was already a hugely traumatic period for her family. While there’s a sense that the pot-shots against her and Jamie unfortunately come with the territory, it’s when journalists dragged her children into the story that they truly overstepped the mark.

“I get asked in every interview I do, ‘How do you cope being on tour? How do you cope doing *9 To 5*?’ Even to the point where I get comments on my Instagram saying, ‘Are you never with your children?’ I made a conscious decision at the beginning of all of this that I was not going to put my kids on Instagram to prove to other people that I was a good mum. I don’t need to.

“When I was first going through my separation, I felt like my kids were used against me by the media as a really low blow. For the first time in my life, I really experienced the sexual divide. I took a bullet every day for six months. This is not Jamie’s fault – he was hurt inside, too – but I never read anything bad about him, that he was a bad dad. He’d take our kids on holiday and people would comment about how amazing he was. I’d be going, ‘For the last 15 years I holidayed with my kids when he was working.’ Because I was in *Cabaret* and it was the summer, Jamie took the kids away. That’s what happens. He’s an amazing dad. I’m so lucky to have an ex-husband who does equal halves with me when it comes to looking after our children. Without him, I couldn’t do what I do.”

Louise kept a dignified silence throughout the media brickbats, but there must have been a time on social media where, mobile in hand, her finger hovered over the ‘Send’ button with a savage response to the haters?

“I just wanted to go on social media and say, ‘Come on guys. Is this really where we’re at?’” she reasons. “I am working and taking a step into the big wide world and have an opportunity for three months to be Sally Bowles in *Cabaret*. I went to stage school from the age of 10 to do this. During my time in that show, I’d go home every Saturday and be back on the road on Tuesday. For six of those weeks, I’d go home every night. I’d drive home from Brighton or Milton Keynes, take my kids to school every morning. And when those three months finished, I had four weeks off solid. I have friends who are lawyers and teachers, they don’t get that time



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Louise’s new album includes contributions from Clean Bandit’s Jack Patterson, Eg White, Raye, Karen Poole and Sinéad Harnett; Below right, with ex-husband Jamie Redknapp

THE HEARTBREAK KID

Louise has her own ‘Heartbreak Playlist’ that got her through recent tough times. The singer hands Classic Pop her phone as we scroll through five artists on heavy rotation...

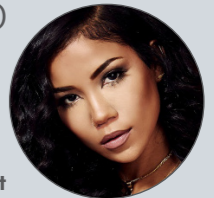
KEHLANI

“One of my favourite artists in the world right now,” says Louise of the 24-year-old Californian R&B star who first found fame as a member of teen group Poplyfe. *Good Thing* makes it onto the playlist.



JHENÉ AIKO

The potty-mouthed *Triggered* – quite possibly a sizeable dig at Big Sean – turns up on the list. Aiko denies it’s about her on-off-on-again partner, though, saying: “It’s not a diss track, it’s a moment of talking shit out of frustration and passion.”



TLC

The iconic 90s R&B of Tionne ‘T-Boz’ Watkins, Lisa ‘Left Eye’ Lopes and Rozonda ‘Chilli’ Thomas is a shoe-in here. And, of course, what else could on the Heartbreak Playlist than their 1999 anthem of defiance, *No Scrubs*. After Left Eye’s tragic passing in 2002, TLC have continued as a duo and will be back in the UK this summer.



ARIANA GRANDE

“There’s a light, airy feeling to Janet Jackson’s stuff, really good cool pop that doesn’t try to fit into a genre of ‘now’. The nearest to that for me currently is Ariana Grande,” says Louise. “I’m a big fan. There’s a pureness to her melodies. Lots of minor chords, that classic-era 70s Stevie Wonder chord-based music that’s so beautiful to the ear.”



NAO

Nottingham-born but raised in East London, the helium-voiced Nao co-wrote *Velvet / Jenny Francis (Interlude)* on Stormzy’s debut album *Gang Signs & Prayer* and has worked with Jarvis Cocker as a backing vocalist. Her playlist appearance here is courtesy of second album *Saturn* standout *Orbit*.



off. They go home at seven o’clock at night. Someone else has bathed their kids and put them to bed. They don’t have any let-up.

“I had two ways to go [on social media] and the way I went was perhaps the worst. I could have stood up and fought back and said, ‘I’m not going to take this’, but instead by keeping silent it took me to a broken place. I was really broken after all those comments. It was hard to lose something that had been my life for the last 20 years, but then to be slammed for being a bad mum and just going to work and following a dream was too much. It was heartbreaking to read that I’d left my children and husband to go and be famous and to tour. Obviously I knew I hadn’t left them [in that way], my kids knew it, my family knew it.

“It’s hard to wake up in the morning knowing that a story was about to break. I’d normally get a call the night before. I try and not even blame the press element because everyone’s got their job to do but it was just a really tough time. I’d love to never have to talk about my personal life but it just comes with the territory.

“I suppose the positive thing that’s come out of being slightly broken is that you make a really good album [laughs] because when you’re in that state of mind you get to a stage where you feel like you have nothing to lose.” There’s been a considered build-up to *Heavy Love*’s release with a handful of well-received taster tracks already emerging blinking into the pop sunlight. First came the slinky *Stretch* (“a bit of a Janet vibe”), the



Above: Louise made just one album with *Eternal* before striking out on her own

Ibiza bounce of *Lead Me On* and *Breaking Back Together* – inspired by some advice that her mum provided during the break-up with Jamie – *Not The Same*, and latterly album standout *Hammer*.

Very much on the front foot in terms of her comeback, Louise is at the heart of the creative process. “I drive a lot of it. I knew what this album needed to be and I know what the next one needs to be like, too. Some people are going to love it, some are going to hate it. Some loved the album’s front cover, others were like, ‘Why are you wearing a bra and a leather jacket?’ To which I’d answer, ‘Well, I wear a lot less on the beach!’”

Even Louise’s two sons, Charley and Beau, balked at the risqué promo for *Heavy Love*’s first single. “For the *Stretch* video, they were

like, ‘Really, mum? Are you really doing this to us?’ I joked to them, ‘Just wait for the next video – I’ve got FOUR male models!’ But I love that relationship with them [the boys] because although they say, ‘Mum, you’re too old to be wearing a leotard and dancing around, I know that secretly they’re really proud. I could have come out and just been mumsy doing mid-tempo heartbreak songs, but that’s not me. I’ve got more guts than that and more to say than that, too.’

“I’m just not prepared to be put in a safe box. I’m gonna take every risk and opportunity I can on this album, and the next one, and even more so on the one after that.”



“Why should I have to play that game to please everyone else? When I look at other women in the industry doing similar things I don’t judge them. Beyoncé is a mum of three. I’d never dream of going, ‘Look at her, swinging her booty round!’ I love the fact that Jennifer Lopez is 50 and looks better than ever. These people are my inspiration.”

“I’m just not prepared to be put in a safe box. I’ve been in that box for 15 years. I’m gonna take every risk and opportunity I can on this album, and the next one, and even more so on the one after that. I’m sick and tired of being the safe player. I was the safe one in *Eternal*, I was the safe one after I left *Eternal*... apart from the *FHM* days.”

Ah yes, those *FHM* days where Louise was almost as famous for her cover shoots as she was for her music. It was, though, very much part of the 90s lad culture era.

“The long and the short of it is, when you’ve got a record out you need to do press to let people know about it,” Louise shrugs.

Left: As well as her career in music, Louise has branched out into TV presenting, musicals, modelling, acting and designing



“The likes of *FHM* and *Maxim* were huge and they shifted a lot of albums. So you know what? That’s what I’ll do. Because the thing I care most about is making the next album. Those photos would come and go and I never did anything that was crass. I used to say to those magazines, ‘If you want me to wear a bikini, then you need to fly me somewhere hot!’ [laughs].”

“I wasn’t a glamour model or an It girl. People knew I was on the front cover of *FHM* because I had a record out. I wasn’t on it because I wanted to look sexy, I couldn’t give a rat’s arse about that. If that was a vehicle that gave me an opportunity to

go out on tour and make more records, then so be it. I used to see Kylie, Madonna, Halle Berry, Gillian Anderson on those magazines. It wasn’t as if they were low rent.”

I KNOW YOU GOT SOUL

Across the course of 18 months, Louise wrote almost 50 tracks for *Heavy Love*. “You can certainly see the mental peaks and troughs of my state of mind [laughs] through those songs. It’s diverse but you can definitely see a journey,” she explains.

Perennial soul influences of Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Anita Baker and Randy Crawford feed into the music. Louise namechecks Arctic Monkeys’ Alex Turner (“A lyrical genius”) and Ariana Grande as just two of the current crop of stars turning her head. “Melody is king for me, there’s a couple of the songs on the new album that have the kind of sweet melodies which make the hairs stand up on the back of your neck.”

“*Hammer* is one of my three favourites on the album, a funky disco track with a bit of a Jamiroquai feel to it. It’s completely where I want to sit musically. If I could make a whole album like *Hammer*, I would. So I’ll open the show with that and I think once people hear that they’ll say, ‘OK, I get where she’s going with this.’ There’s also a song on the deluxe edition of the album called *Villain* that’s my little nod to Janet Jackson – I’m a big Janet fan.”

Multiple producers and a roster of songwriting talent, including Clean Bandit’s Jack Patterson, have collaborated on the album. Louise co-wrote all but three tracks as well as further material that will feature on the album’s deluxe edition.

“I always like working with



WEST END GIRL



Louise’s onstage vocals sound stronger than ever, no doubt helped by recent years treading the boards in West End musicals *Cabaret* and *9 To 5*. “Musical theatre is a completely different style of singing but I do eight shows live a week and there’s no hiding place,” she explains. “I’ve learned how to use my voice better. I’ve got quite a deep,

husky voice when I sing. Back in the day, I had a little girl voice. I’m not scared to take risks any more.”

Before putting her pop career on hold, Louise’s last release was 2003’s double A-side single *Pandora’s Kiss/Don’t Give Up*. In the interim, she’s tried her hand at everything from TV presenting and modelling to fashion and furniture designing. In the end, though, her creativity could only truly be satisfied through music. Returning to her first love had a certain inevitability to it. “Music is where I’m at. If I could just do music I’d never do another thing. I love the West End but I look at that as music, too; I’m still singing. But we’re in an industry now where it’s not always possible just to do music, especially for someone like me who’s just come back from a long break. I need to be multi-talented and be able to do other things.”



“It’s really important to me that this new tour is not nostalgic, I’m not a nostalgic artist. I don’t want to just go out there and sing old songs and make a quick buck.”



With *Eternal* in the 1990s. The group were an international success, selling around 10 million records worldwide

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AN ETERNAL FLAME



At the forefront of the early-90s R&B explosion, Eternal were the UK’s answer to En Vogue and TLC. Their debut album *Always & Forever* sold four million copies – a success that initially took band member Louise by surprise...

“I didn’t appreciate how well we did and how huge it was as I didn’t know anything different back then,” explains Redknapp. “I look at successful artists and bands nowadays that people

say are massive and I realise that we sold five times more records than them [laughs].”

So, 24 years on after Louise flew the coop before second album *Power Of A Woman*, what’s her relationship with the band like now?

“We’re good actually. I saw Kéllé a couple of weeks ago. She came to watch *9 To 5* in Liverpool and I spoke to Vernie about a month ago. It’s OK. Me and Kéllé talk all the time. She’s a real rock girl, we’ve been friends since we were 10. I haven’t spoken to Esther in a bit. They’re all doing their thing.”

Is there a chance of a long-awaited reunion? How about a one-off show at the London Palladium? Something high-profile and worthy of their legacy...

“I’d love to do something with the girls. I think it would work, there’s an appetite for it. We’ve all just said it would have to be at the right time for all of us. It’s not something that we could shoehorn in. We all need to want to do it and be on the same page. If there’s one weak link that doesn’t want to be there then it’s not so good. I’d never say never.”

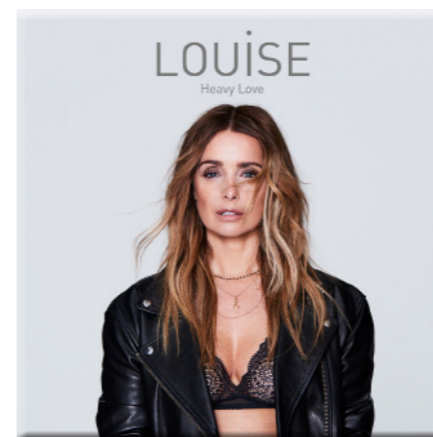


like it’s all planned out anyway – what’s gonna happen, where you’re gonna go, who you’re gonna work with. There was nothing organic about it.”

A live tour is planned for March, following warm-up dates spread across 2019 where Louise dipped her toe back in the water. A small theatre show in Chelsea was followed by a Nordoff Robbins charity gig and five other low-key dates including London’s Scala.

NEW SENSE OF SELF

Your *Classic Pop* writer ended up inadvertently standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Louise’s mum during a private show at



the old BBC TV Centre in White City, London, in September. The 40-minute set saw Louise running through new album tracks, a choice selection of solo hits, and even a rebooted Eternal classic, *Stay*, merged with Anita Baker’s classic soul cut *Sweet Love*. Louise seemed perfectly at ease fronting her own band once again, any jitters remaining well concealed.

“I was nervous but it’s weird, I’m much more confident now than I was in my 20s. That’s not related to how I feel about my appearance or how I look as a woman, though. That part I’m still completely unconfident about! The bit I am confident about, though – and God, I’m not saying I’m Whitney Houston by any stretch, a duff note

can come out or a lyric can be forgotten – but I now have a confidence about being able to deliver what I do.

“I didn’t just want to do a ‘Louise’ rendition of *Stay* in a copycat style of how Esther performed it in *Eternal*. Even though I was in the band, it was her lead vocal. By bringing in Anita Baker’s *Sweet Love*, that was my take on where *Stay* came from and how it generated into what it was.

“It’s really important to me that this new tour is not nostalgic, I’m not a nostalgic artist. I don’t want to just go out there and sing old songs and make a quick buck. Everything I earn from the tour will get ploughed back in. This is about laying the foundations for the next album, then the next one; just growing and getting better. There will be nods to old things, but bringing them in to a current situation. A bit of a trip down memory lane, but in a way where people don’t think they’re getting a show that they could have watched 20 years ago.

“I’ve got a great band. For the first time in my music career, everything goes into the way the songs sound. I want it to be a great show but what I’m wearing or the lighting, for example, are secondary to how it sounds.

“I’m already thinking about the next album. This is just dipping a toe in the water and seeing where we end up.” ■

● **Heavy Love** is released on 17 January 2020 via Warner/ADA. Louise tours the UK in March 2020. For more details, visit her website at louiseofficial.co.uk