

“ I LIKE BEING A POSITIVE INSPIRATION ”

In an industry that can often be vicious, Lyra is a breath of fresh air and says being a mentor is very important to her

REPORT: MAEVE QUIGLEY

Black lace top, Lyra's own. Gloves by Paula Rowan. Earrings by Justine Garner

It's a cold spring day but singer Lyra is busy thinking of summer, looking at emails from new Irish designers and picking outfits that match her eclectic style. The blonde Corkonian is known for making a cutting-edge fashion statement when performing her electropop hits on stage. So it's no

wonder, then, that she's now turned her hand to creating art for the charity Jack and Jill's annual Incognito auction.

Lyra – real name Laura McNamara – is just one of the celebrity names taking part in this year's fundraiser, in which postcard-sized pieces of art are

placed for sale anonymously. All are €65 but the twist is you don't know whose art you are buying.

It could be from a celebrity like Lyra or Ronnie Wood, a leading artist like Robert Ballagh, a talented amateur or someone rising up the ranks.

For Lyra, it was important to

get involved to help the nursing care for children that the charity funds. 'I wasn't very academic in school so I loved art,' she says. 'I wouldn't be fantastic at the drawing side of things so it was really interesting to do Incognito for the Jack and Jill Foundation.'

'I said, I hope they aren't →

expecting a masterpiece but I am going to give it a go. Sure, look, it's for a good cause and I just whacked it down on the page and I thoroughly enjoyed it.'

It's a cause that's close to Lyra's heart as she has seen members of her own family care for children who are ill. 'I have three cousins who have been diagnosed with certain conditions, two of them have muscular dystrophy which is genetically in our family,' she says. 'My other cousin, I am not even sure of the diagnosis but he has sensory issues, he doesn't see or speak and he is in a wheelchair and doesn't move. I can see my aunts going through a lot and I am sure that is what a lot of the mums and dads who use the services of the Jack and Jill Foundation go through.'

'Looking from the outside you see the pain and the struggle but they are so strong,' she says.

'It is awe-inspiring really to see them always with a smile on their face and always trying to be as together as they can. So I will do whatever I can to help, even if it's just putting pen to paper.'

Lyra comes from a close family – so close, in fact, that when she lived in London with her elder sister Sarah, friends nicknamed them Twice as you rarely saw one without the other. It was Sarah who was always singing around the house and Lyra admits she was 'chirping in'.

Her mum ran a restaurant in her home town of Bandon and as soon as she was old enough, Lyra was serving up full Irish breakfasts to hungry punters. Her dad worked in the labs at University Hospital Cork as a biochemist and as part of his job he owned a dictaphone that his daughters would purloin and sing into at the weekends.

'My mum and dad separated but they have a great relationship so it never felt like that was happening,' she says. 'But singing was something from a young age that I was good at. I wasn't very academic but going into music class I could sing and make music and I could write songs. At a young age getting praised by that one teacher made me feel I was doing well so it gave me that great feeling that I was good at something, that I was ok.'

There was always singing in the house with her mother and aunts



Lyra in action on stage on the Isle of Wight last September

and, of course, her sister. Once Lyra got a taste for it, she decided music was the thing that made her happiest. Even so, getting this far has not been a walk in the park.

Despite her talent, there were those in the music industry who wanted to change who Lyra was, telling her she had to change the way she sang, the way she spoke, even the colour of her hair.

Which is why when she became a judge on the Virgin Media talent show *The Big Deal*, alongside Boy George, Deirdre O'Kane, Aston Merrygold from JLS and Jedward, Lyra made sure any criticism she gave was constructive. 'A lot of the contestants came up to me afterwards and said I had been a massive inspiration to their music and be able to help them in a positive way as opposed to maybe

some other talent shows which can be very harsh,' she says.

'I had very much in mind that I wanted to help them to get to the next level without mentally damaging them or being harsh, which I don't think works for anyone. I had it when I was starting off in the music industry – I know they were trying to help me but they were doing it in a very forceful negative way and it ended up ruining my confidence instead of building it.'

'So with *The Big Deal* I liked that I was given an opportunity to be that positive inspiration for them and be able to tell them how hard it really is in the music industry and how I think they should take the next step. It was very interesting for me to be able to be a bit of a mentor. Some of them still slide into my DMs and tell me when they are doing a show or ask

me to listen to a demo of their latest song. I haven't heard if the show is coming back yet but if it was I'd love to do it again.'

At the minute Lyra is flitting regularly between Brighton, Dublin and Cork, and before lockdown stopped her in her tracks there were trips to Los Angeles and Nashville to write and record thrown into the mix. She loves nothing more than spending time in Cork, babysitting Sarah's small children, but also adores her time in Dublin and now Brighton, which is her adopted home and felt like a better place to settle than London.

'I would love to go back to LA now that everything is up and running as I did a lot of writing there and I loved it when I was over,' Lyra says. 'I would love to go back to Nashville as that is where I get to do a lot of writing that is more like for movies and adverts which I really enjoy doing. It is escapism out of the real world into this make believe world where you can just sing anything. I would love to do more of it.'

She's had songs on the likes of *Grey's Anatomy* and *The X Factor* and recently wrote a track *Light Me Up* for the animated version of *Riverdance* as well as *We Are Beautiful* for Disney. But now she's back to work on a new mini album, and is hoping to release the first songs from it in the next few months. Lyra feels it's the best music she's made so far, despite the soaring success of tracks like *Emerald* and *Falling*.

'With Covid, everything was brought to a standstill,' she says. 'A lot of the songs were being produced in LA and I couldn't go over. I am very hands-on with my music and I like to be in the room when it is being produced and mixed.'

'I was trying to do it via emails and Zoom and some of the mixes were going completely the other way because it was hard to communicate. It's great now that the wheels have been set in motion of putting music out and I am probably going to put out a mini album and let people know what the next stage for me is.'

'Although my music is always going to stay very true to me as an artist I definitely have developed as an artist and so has my sound. When I listen back to the likes of *Emerald* →



Wig & Blue body suit, Ana Ljubinkovic. Gloves by Paula Rowan. Boots, Lyra's own

'I WILL DO WHATEVER I CAN TO HELP, EVEN IF IT'S JUST PUTTING PEN TO PAPER'

White American tennis top, Foam of the Days London

Credits:
Photographer: EVAN DOHERTY
Stylist: LYRA
Make-up: SANDRA GILLEN
Hair: SIAN SHARKEY

'I REALLY FELT FOR THE MUSIC INDUSTRY, I HOPE BETTER THINGS ARE COMING'



I think I have grown up so much since then, my voice has matured, my songwriting has got better. I am really excited for people to hear the new stuff. I think it is me as a true artist about to come out.'

Lyra was on the cusp of greatness when the last two years happened but because she had work, she is loathe to complain about it. 'Now I am just ready for Lyra the artist – she's coming,' she says excitedly.

'I had started to get my name known, I felt it was the year I was going to explode. I'd just done my first sold-out Irish tour and I was set to go. Everything was in motion, the balloon was ready to pop and the confetti was going to come out. But I still managed to do stuff in lockdown which I was very grateful for and other people didn't get that opportunity, I know other people had it tougher in my industry. I really felt for the music industry that's why I was using my voice as much as I could.

'It was just really sad but we are over it now and I hope better things are coming.'

Of course, we all know that some of Lyra's heart-wrenching tracks are about the terrible break-up of her last relationship – one good thing to come from a situation that wounded her. But now, it seems, there's a new man

despite all the rushing around.

'There's always a bit of time for romance,' she says, shyly. 'It does take a certain type of person to accept that you are here for two weeks, you could be gone for two weeks you could be gone for four weeks then come back and it is one of the factors why my last relationship did break down.

'But he was in a very serious high-end job and he didn't really see the music industry as being serious,' she says, saying she was often asked when she would get a proper job and settle down. 'But this is my job – it started as a part-time and it's now my job and I am very lucky I can say that.

'It does take a certain type of person to be able to accept that this is what I want to do for the rest of my life.

'I will be doing this in some shape or form for the rest of my life because it is my passion as a songwriter, as a performer. So it's important to have someone that accepts that side of your life.'

That person, it seems, is a rugby player whom Lyra met on a night out. 'I don't talk about him loads because I get really shy or nervous,' she admits. 'My last relationship ended so badly that with this one I think maybe I might not be so open about it. So yes, I am seeing someone. I am very happy. His

parents have been in the music industry and I feel he understands it.'

Her new boyfriend's mammy is Irish and it was her Cork accent that attracted him. 'He told me, "The minute I heard the Irish accent I was sold."' She won't reveal his name, as, she insists, 'he'd be mortified.' 'Someone asked me when are you doing a Christmas shoot and I said "Who do you think we are, the Beckhams?" There will be nothing like that going on,' says Lyra, in that strong Cork brogue that won a heart, before bursting into peals of laughter.

Whatever happens, this man will have to fit in with the true love that keeps the ethereal singer up until the wee small hours, penning lyrics and singing those notes, albeit into something more sophisticated than her dad's borrowed tape recorder these days. But every hour this Cork beauty spends on her art is worth it. 'It's really worth it when you get to go on stage and sing those songs to the audience who have paid to go and see you,' Lyra says. 'They are so happy, they know the words, they are singing along and everyone is having the craic.

'That is worth its weight in gold. I just love it. It gives me that feeling that you can't get anywhere else.'

'Incognito helps us achieve our simple mission'

Lyra is taking part in the Incognito online art sale on Thursday, 21 April, in aid of the Jack and Jill Children's Foundation, which this year celebrates its 25th



anniversary. Carmel Doyle, CEO of the foundation, says the sale is essential to raise money to fund nursing care for sick children all over Ireland.

'We have to raise over €5million every year so Incognito is probably the most colourful and well known of Jack and Jill's fundraising initiatives.'

The online sale of over 3,200 carefully curated pieces raises both awareness and funds for the children's charity and all monies raised will fund home care for sick children. 'Jack and Jill has a very simple mission: we fund and provide specialist home nursing care hours to over 400 children around the country. Our nurses go into the family home and within 48 hours they put a homecare plan together and we will find and deliver a homecare plan for all of those children,' says Carmel.

'The money raised through Incognito will fund home nursing care hours. Jack and Jill has a big reach around the country and we have more children on our books now than ever. So anything raised by the auction will fund specialist nursing care.'

People are encouraged to register, browse the collection and populate their Incognito Wish List BEFORE sale day if they want to maximise their chances of securing their favourite artworks before the lottery system gets underway at 9.30am on April 21. Featuring over 3,200 original artworks by 1,200 artists, each artwork is priced at €65, with the artist being revealed when the sale is over. To register, visit incognito.ie.

