





**A**S you read this, Ballyhaise singer songwriter Lisa O'Neill is probably humming White Ladder songs while she packs and organises herself for her trip to America where she'll do support act and backing vocals for David Gray on his tour from the east to the west coast of the US, with a couple of stops in Canada.

The 28-year-old, who worked in Bewley's on Grafton Street until recently while getting her music career off the ground, may well be hitting the bigtime - though she's too grounded to get swept away with such a notion. Nonetheless, Lisa's coup would undeniably be described by many in the music industry as one of those coveted and elusive things known as 'a break'.

The tour is with the Welsh singer songwriter who shot to fame with the album, *White Ladder*, in 1998 (worldwide sales of the album stand at seven million), and includes 13 dates in venues with a capacity of 2,000 to 4,000.

"I'm very aware that in the music business this is a break but, as yet, I don't know how it's going to turn out for me," says Lisa when we meet in a hotel in Dublin on a Saturday afternoon.

"I can't imagine what it'll be like. I'm excited but nervous as well. I'm going a long way away from home with people I don't know," she says, explaining that there'll be eight musicians including David and herself on one sleeper bus and eight roadies on another.

She's been a fan of Gray's since she was introduced to his music at the age of about 17. Her musical influences are singer songwriters of all descriptions: English folk singer Annie Briggs, Karen Dalton, Leonard Cohen ("magic"), Planxty ("I'm getting closer to the folk music"), Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan ("obviously" as one of the songs on her album, *Bobby D*, is a sort of love letter to him), and Woodie Guthrie.

Emotional honesty is the common strand, and it's Lisa's goal.

"I find if I'm performing a song I've written and I'm getting to a bit I know I'm not happy about and can't wait for that part of the song to be over - when you're really honest with yourself, it was a gap-filler. At the moment I'm trying to focus on that, looking back and making sure that everything I say I mean. It has to be a better song when you mean it,

really mean it."

She takes inspiration from everyday stuff, like painting her nails and making lattes in Bewleys, and gives it her own quirky, insightful and humourous take. Her next album (which will follow her debut, *Lisa O'Neill Has An Album*) will be influenced by her growing interest in poetry.

"I'm reading a lot of Dermot Healy and Patrick Kavanagh. I'm enjoying it and it's showing me different angles I can take on writing as well."

Lisa comes from a creative family, Her dad, Bud, is a drummer; he formerly played with Ian Corrigan And Country



Style and The Annalees and is now in a band called Smithie, and his enthusiasm for music was infectious.

"Dad always spoke very highly of music and impressed how important and fulfilling it could be. He never pushed us to play but when he saw us taking an interest he encouraged it. A lot of kids dream of becoming a singer or a member of a band, but when it's at home and someone in your real life is telling you about it, it's very possible. It's easier to chase a dream that's closer to home than one that you see on TV."

Lisa's mum, Carmel, was involved in theatre when she was younger and is "very expressive". Their other four offspring are each creative, most notably Lisa's sister, Jackie, who's a hugely talented visual artist based in London.

In this habitat, Lisa took to her guitar

lessons in a natural and playful way that still pervades her music.

Asked about the first time she performed a self-penned song, she struggles to remember much about it, except that it was at the age of about 16 in a concert in Killoughter Hall between Ballyhaise and Redhills. "I didn't take it that seriously. It was a sport to me," she says.

She spent the past few years gigging while also working in the Dublin café, but lately things have taken off to the extent that she's able to turn fulltime to music. She recorded her own CD, toured the country with Mick Flannery, recorded for the respected RTE music series *Other Voices Songs From A Room* and now the David Gray tour, which he initiated after Today FM DJ and fan of Lisa's, Donal Dineen, passed on her CD for Gray to have a listen.

To say Lisa's 'living the dream' might be true, but her approach is more of being true to herself. It's not lucrative working as a fulltime musician on that level, but she's getting by, and it's about priorities and quality of life rather than quantity of possessions.

"It's hard but it depends on what you want and what you need in your life and if you're living a simple life it's ok," says Lisa of the life of an up-and-coming singer songwriter.

"I think it would be harder to keep a fulltime job and do this, because at the end of the day, at the end of the week, you're too tired and you're not into it. You need a free head all the time."

As for the future? While she packs her suitcases and hums *Sail Away* (aptly, her current favourite Gray song), her sights are set on her next album. On her return from the whistle-stop run around America, she plans to take a break from gigging to put down some of her new songs on CD. "Then when that comes out, off we go again..."

• **Lisa and band will featured on *Other Voices Songs From A Room* on RTE Two on Wednesday, February 23, at 11.25pm. On Saturday, March 26, Lisa will do a homecoming gig in Gonzo Theatre.**

