

Tales Of The Road

Lhasa de Sela has made just two albums in seven years, but the result is that her new one is close to perfect. Christine Charter hears about the unusual life which shaped Lhasa's original music.

Lhasa de Sela is certainly a name to conjure with, especially when you learn that it's not been chosen as a stage disguise, but is the real name of a 31-year-old, half-Mexican, half-American Montreal-based singer, whose first album made her into a cult figure in North America and France. Recorded in 1997, called *La Llorona* and sung mostly in Spanish, Lhasa's debut album was described as a "bold blissful blend of original and traditional Mexican folk tales". Note the word 'tales', for they are magical story-songs rooted in Lhasa's own life. Such is their power that by word of mouth, rather than mass advertising or radio promotion, *La Llorona* sold over 120,000 copies in Canada and 330,000 in France; winning a Juno for Best Global Album, and a Felix in Quebec for the same category.

You only have to hear the songs and Lhasa's compelling voice to know why: her seductive tones have the irresistible pull of a siren. One critic described her voice as 'feral', a word that for me evokes slinky, vagabond, prowling cats. Reaching for the dictionary, I found its meanings include 'fatal' and 'untamed', which while they certainly pinpoint some of its attributes, they obscure its warmth and teasing undertow of (serious) playfulness (just hear the wit of *Small Song*). Chameleon-like, Lhasa's voice takes on the myriad shades of the moods and atmospheres of her songs. On her newly released second album, *The Living Road* (see *fR249*), it takes you into a vibrant inner world where music and lyrics enchant and encircle you. And she's got to be the first person I've ever heard who convinces whether singing in Spanish, French or English.

After hearing Lhasa's songs and reading the intriguing CD booklet, illustrated with collages of pen drawings which she created herself, I knew I wanted to meet her, to find out where her mysterious songs came from, to hear her story. And such are the occasional perks of being a music writer [thanks ed], I get to spend time with Lhasa on a blustery bright January day in London, her last stop on a whistle-stop promotional tour of interviews for the album and her forthcoming March tour of France. And what a story she tells me: a story of a close family, a nomadic childhood, of the circus, of songs written about real dreams, of creative courage.

We meet in the Tsar bar of a central London hotel, not in her tiny Montreal flat where I've read the walls are lined with

chaperoned by her grey cat. Lhasa is elfin-like, *gamine* as the French would say, with fine, tiny bones that make her a photographer's dream. She has an extraordinary face with a slightly pointed nose and chin; when she smiles her whole face curls upwards. We speak in English, occasionally in Spanish, with a bit of French thrown in. While she seems to glide easily between all three, she tells me she grew up speaking mostly English at home and confesses that at present – speaking mostly French and hardly any Spanish – she sometimes gets confused and starts speaking in the wrong language, so that people look at her in a funny way. "With my sisters who live in France, we now speak complete Frenglish, always switching back and forth!"

The bar is one of those places that never sees the light of day and where, after a few vodkas, you'd be unsurprised if Russians in Cossack coats emerged from the woodwork. As it is, it's mid-morning, we're both very sober and it's perfect as it's not open yet and totally empty save for us. We sit facing each other across a small, shiny mahogany table and I enjoy a gripping interview which becomes more like a conversation. Lhasa loves talking and is frank about her life. Nearer the end of our day together, when we are about to leave Dave Peabody's photo studio in south London, I ask about her name and her reply is typically disarming: "My mother says I didn't actually have a name for five months. She simply couldn't come up with the right one. Then she was reading this book on Tibetan religion and came across the word 'Lhasa' and it just grabbed her and she gave it to me. And she thinks it is more than ever suited to me now, as it's a place at a high altitude, a rarefied, philosophical place; and I can be slightly detached and philosophical!"





Fotografías: Fernando Aceves

While her London stay is brief, Lhasa is delighted to be back. She's been once before and instantly loved the city. "I was invited by

Stuart [Staples] of Tindersticks to sing on their last record and that was my first visit and I just loved the energy." Tindersticks' guitarist Neil Fraser has just accompanied Lhasa for Lucy Duran's BBC Radio 3 World Routes programme. "We did *La Frontera*, *Small Song* and *Abro la Ventana*," she tells me. "I was so honoured Neil did it, as he's never ever played for anyone but the Tindersticks."

Singing with a guitarist, as a duo, is how Lhasa started out professionally (after a time singing completely on her own). She'd sung since she was a child, had taken singing lessons from a jazz singer in San Francisco when she was 13, and a bit later on had sung in odd cafes there, but it was in Montreal where she began in earnest. "I went there to see my three sisters who were at circus school and I stayed; it was in 1992. And I took up singing: I don't know how I had the nerve, but at first I sang a cappella all alone in cafes. Then I met Yves [Desrosiers], who accompanied me on the guitar for eight years. We started out as a duo, playing in a bar named Les Bobards on St Laurent Boulevard. After two years we were joined by a bassist, Mario Légaré, who is a bit of a legendary musician in the city, and later we were joined by an accordionist, Didier Dumouthier, and the drummer François Lalonde." It's been a close group: Lhasa composed her first album with Desrosiers who produced and arranged it, and now, years later, Lalonde has co-produced *The Living Road*.

"There was a triangle of bars we played at: Les Bobards, L'Barouf and Le Quai des Brumes. Sometimes we'd play every Tuesday for two months, just to have a chance to play; the good nights, Thursdays, came later. I loved playing Thursdays because there were more people than other week nights, but still a calmer more focused feeling than Friday or Saturday, when everyone is getting drunk and cutting loose. My singing was very intense: all these Mexican songs, which worked for the bars because I think people kind of took them for drinking songs; or there's something about that Mexican feeling that worked in bars. Still, often people didn't listen, [they] used me as background music and I had to work hard to be heard, but it worked and as the years passed, people listened more and more. I learned in those years how to reach people, even people who were there for a beer and a conversation."

Compared to many, Lhasa has had an unusual life. She was born in 1972 in upper New York state to a Mexican father, Alejandro Sela, and an American mother, Alexandra Karam. Her parents were hippies and were living in a squat in Woodstock with her two elder sisters until just before she was born, when they had to leave. They went to a place nearby called Big Indian, where Lhasa was born in a little cabin. "The town has a population of about 100 and my birth certificate says registration number one, so I'm the first person ever to be declared born in Big Indian!" Her parents then chose a nomadic lifestyle, bringing up their four daughters in a converted school bus in which they crisscrossed from North America to Mexico. Living that way made them into a close family. "We were home-

imaginations." They had no TV but read lots of books and lots of fairy tales, which have fed into many of the songs and images on *The Living Road* album.

"My father grew up in Mexico City and Guadalajara and San Francisco; we lived for about eight years in Mexico, in Guadalajara, and Bajo California. I think it gave me an incredible fertile foundation, because I think we all end up thinking of our childhood as a very mysterious time. When we were in Mexico we were living in trailer parks most of the time, or people would let us park on their property sometimes. For years we lived right next to the ocean and also in the desert and I remember these really intense experiences: things like getting stung by scorpions and jelly fish, and hurricanes and strange people, and then kind of poverty."

"And then later going to Catholic school in Mexico. The great thing about Mexico is that poverty is so common there it's not embarrassing to people. As long as you keep a respectable demeanour, that extends to other things: you are basically accepted. I think I felt very isolated, but it was easier for people in Mexico to accept me than say later in the US, because of that Mexican thing that everybody had their secrets and their weird stuff. As long as you can keep your uniform clean it means you are doing as well as you can to show a respectable face."

Lhasa asked Lhasa whether she started singing as a child and if her parents also made music. "Yes, there is a recording of me singing at age six putting on long performances for my family, with a cast of thousands: lion kings, fairies, queens, philosophical questions and dialogues and dances and songs. My mother loved it so she recorded it, for which I'm grateful! My mother played the harp, and studied for many years; also she sang a lot, she loved to sing, and could sing harmonies beautifully. Later she studied a Chinese instrument called the *gujong*, and she played in a Chinese orchestra in San Francisco. My father played the flute and loved to sing too. My father's mother, Carmen de Obarrio, was a Panamanian pianist who travelled Latin America doing concerts in the '30s and '40s. And my Lebanese great-grandfather, Basel, sang in six different languages, and I have a recording of him. Also, my other grandmother, Elena Karam, was an actress who played in a lot of films and in theatre, but is mostly known for playing in *America America* by Elia Kazan. My mother also was an actress for a while, and my three younger brothers, the oldest of whom is 20, all play music seriously. Two are guitarists and one is a bassist; they are very good. It's great to be able to talk with them about music, since I grew up being the only one who was so passionate about music."



Photo: Dave Peabody

Lhasa's father, who taught English in Mexico and Spanish in the United States, was deeply into mythology and it was from him she got her passion for *La Llorona*, the Mexican song which gave its name to her first disc. "My parents followed their hearts definitely. It was almost impossible for them to do anything else. They were incapable of being obedient moneymakers. They both come from strange backgrounds and difficult family situations, so they were inventing something different as they went along; they were not going to do it the same way. And I really admire them for that because it is so easy for people to repeat what they experience, but my parents really turned things around that and they did something really different. Then they separated when I was 11, which is why I ended up living in San Francisco with my mother."

"I still saw my father in the summers. He got his doctorate in literature of the conquest and he talked to me a lot about it. He is the one who spoke to me about the legend of *La Llorona* and what she represents on lots of lots of levels to Mexicans. There are a lot of different versions of the story, but one of the fundamental ones is that she comes from Aztec mythology from *Quetzalcoatl*, the plumed serpent, and the union of the sky and the earth. He is the sky and his wife is the wind that goes between the two. Supposedly she warned the Aztec people of the conquest by crying for her children. That became the popular legend of the mother who lost her children when they were killed by the Spanish and seeks revenge. It's a metaphor for the betrayal of the original people of Mexico."

The runaway success of *La Llorona* resulted in an invitation to join the Lilit Fair tour, alongside other women musicians like Natalie Merchant and the Indigo Girls. In another interview Lhasa confessed that it was not the greatest of experiences: "It was very clear that there were biggies ... the less biggies ... the little ones and ... the real underlings. Some people were really friendly, like the Indigo Girls and I really liked them a lot ... but because I was uncomfortable, I was shy and I kept to myself, and I probably missed out because of that".

After two years touring, Lhasa went to join her sisters in France. It was 1998 and they had created their own circus, touring and living in trailers with their families. "The circus was called *Pocheros*. It's a play on words: *peau* which is French for skin; *chair*: flesh; and *os* which means

bone. We mostly did street theatre and circus festivals and I was in it for exactly a year." I wondered whether the music for *The Living Road* began in the circus? "Yes. *Con Todo Palabra*: I wrote it in France when I was in the circus. This wonderful man, a friend of my sisters', has a small chateau in Burgundy with a *pigeonnier*, a pigeon tower. And we would go in there and sing; and I started writing that song there as the echo is so beautiful. It's a love song about feeling so much for someone, yet at the same time feeling afraid as you kind of entrust yourself to this person, as if you were entrusting them with your life. That is a very scary thing to do, so it's kind of a prayer; at the same time it's a hope that throwing myself into love won't kill me," she laughs. "That was 1999."

Ask her about *La Marée Haute* (The High Tide), with its flowing French chanson sound, and whether that was written there too. "It was with my sister Sky; she did this clown act about a magical boat. She had this imaginary boat, a kind of impossible little boat with one wheel, just big enough for one person. We wanted the song to be like huge waves on the ocean and it seemed like an old French song. And while I was singing it, she would do this act trying to get the boat to fly off the ground and not succeeding. My sister loves Remedios Baro and wanted a boat from that world. She's a surrealist Spanish painter who fled the civil war and ended up living in Mexico; she was part of a group of surrealists who came to Mexico at that time and were incredibly creative. She did these beautiful surrealist paintings which are very feminine and beautiful." So what did the act look like? "Sky's husband is a juggler and a guitarist, so he played guitar and the trapeze artist played accordion. I wore a long velvet, sleeveless old black dress coming right down to my feet, which were bare. Sky had this white costume and at one point she uses herself as a sail for the boat, pulling ropes and pulleys and her arms get all caught up."

And the other songs on *The Living Road*? "I wrote most of them afterwards, when I was living in Marseille. I lived there two-and-a-half years. The songs were written when I was learning some really important things that will help me for the rest of my life. The songs are personal, but I think they are things that everybody goes through. I'm 31 and I think in your late 20s you start to learn that there is a choice that you have to make: either you go your own way, or you go other people's way. And if you go your own way, you have to start lis-



Photo: Dave Peabody



tening to yourself and trusting yourself, and there are a lot of reasons not to do that. And there are people who would rather you did not do that; and there are a lot of situations which intimidate you from doing so, and they intimidated me and squashed me. So the whole album was written in a period when I was starting to push back, so even though it's rather dark and there's a lot of sadness in this music for me, ultimately it is very hopeful and exciting. It has the feeling of reaching a turning point, where I am going to make choices from now on, I am not going to betray myself. That's why in *Anywhere On This Road* it says, "If I can stand up to angels and men I'll never get swallowed in darkness again".

I ask if she means people or men. "I mean men!" she laughs. I tell her that for me, *Anywhere On This Road* is an extraordinary song about living in another country, speaking another language, of one's name sounding different, about being far from one's past, about breaking hearts, and the need to keep on keeping on. The lines that stopped me short were, "I love a man who is afraid of me/ He believes if he doesn't stand guard with a knife/ I'll make him my slave/ for the rest of his life". So would she say love and relationships are the wellspring of much of the inner struggles expressed in these songs? "I guess the answer would be yes."

The pictures Lhasa has created to illustrate the disc are integral to its mood. They're very *Alice Through The Looking Glass*: a small girl, big animals, strange objects. I tell her I find the images fabulous but also disconcerting. Is that intended? "The disconcerting bit was having all these elements and trying different things out together and then suddenly it would all work. Andrew Lang's fairy-tale books were inspirational, as were Max Ernst's surrealist collages. The girl who is wearing a wooden dress is Kerry Wooden Gown from a book of fairy tales I read when I was little. It's about a girl who goes through all kinds of trials and ends up getting everything she dreams of; so that was fitting for this album too. The cat came from a book about animals, and the magical lantern things are ocean plants from a book of drawings by a 19th-century scientist who studied microscopic organisms. I loved the coming together of the plant, animal, human and the mysterious, as I guess that kind of sums up my idea of life. I think disconcerting is a good word as it is may be true also of the music. What's funny

is quite dark and others say it is relaxing and comforting, which is funny, because to me it is both. The images are childlike and nostalgic and they are disquieting too because they are real dream images."

The song *Soon This Space Will Be Too Small* seems to be powered by dream and that size thing, like Alice when she takes the potion that makes her small. It's the final song and seems to draw it all together. Is that right? "Definitely. That song in particular is very influenced by fairy-tale images and it's the last song I wrote for the album. When I wrote it I was very happy, as it felt like my whole life was right there in that song. It's what I've felt from the time I was very small: the feeling that I was on a quest and having to be transformed through difficult experiences. In fairy tales there are always things happening in threes, and you have to make mistakes and do the wrong things. And the hero is the one everybody thinks is not going to succeed and makes lots of mistakes, but ends up with what they dream of and being transformed in ways they could never imagine. And putting that song at the end seemed like a door out, because this album is like a very intense inner voyage, through a lot of difficult things but always moving onwards."

"I wanted there to be a suspenseful feel to the album, a feeling of mounting movement, of something coming. And then it opens up at the end into the idea of new born. It's the idea that when you are in your mother's womb, in the beginning you feel like the space is infinite and you are infinitely small, but as you become larger the space starts to feel uncomfortable. And I think that's a metaphor for life. The things that in the beginning seem to give us all the space we need, at some point we feel as if they are constricting us and we can't breathe anymore. And the push is to go out and find a new way to grow further, in a new space that has room for new growth. So that song is about that; and the whole album is about the voyage towards that moment of rebirth."

I ask her about the origins of the image captured in the line: "I'll go outside to the huge hillside where the wild winds blow and the cold". "It comes from a dream I had that changed my life; it was in 1992, ten years before I wrote the song. In the dream I was in the middle of downtown Montreal and everyone was looking up at this huge rock sticking up in the sky. And the rock fell out and shook the ground and everybody went running. And then I looked up and

it this other world of moving stars and things. Then the whole city disappeared like scenery in a theatre and I was there on that hillside and I knew I was going to me this being. And then a thought came into my mind, 'only if I have the faith', and immediately the city came back and I woke up; it was like a dream about dying. So it was so wonderful to be able to put that energy into a song. For me it's like a secret language, like the language of alchemy, or the language of true faith, which is something people do not talk about much anymore. It's the most exciting thing I can think of to write songs like that; for me there could not be anything more exciting in life than finding out that other people understand what I am talking about."

The album was produced in Montreal by Francois Lalonde and Jean Massicotte, who both played various instruments on it. It sequences together brilliantly as a total piece, each song different in mood, yet each a move on from the next. Some are bluesy, some with a tinge of cabaret, some hinting at Americana; each very individual and taken at a special pace. They are like cameo pictures from an adventure comprised of emotional experiences on life's living road. The arrangements, quasi-Americana in places, are textured but minimal: occasional slide guitar, cell bells and touches of sound evoke atmospheres that release the songs' moods. Lhasa tells me musicians were chosen song by song depending on each song's needs, and in the end four different guitarists, four bassists, trumpet, clarinet, violin and cello were involved.

"*The Living Road* is not just a highway: it's not a freeway which is like a dead road just a way of getting from one place to another. This is a living road, a road that constantly changing, and by being on it you are changed also. All the time when we were making this album there was that word that was used so much that it became like a joke. I said I wanted to make an album that was 'inexorable', like unstoppable, with that feeling that life is a wheel that keeps turning and you can't stop it, and you know, and there is nowhere to stop anywhere on this road. That's the idea that comes up again and again."

For the song *Anywhere On This Road* there's this incredibly wonderful Arabic trumpet coming from far away, passing close then moving away again. Who is playing? "That's Ibrahim Maalouf. He's a Franco-Lebanese trumpeter I met in Paris. He

valve adds quarter tones. His father started to teach him Lebanese-Oriental trumpet at the age of six and now he's about 23 years old and has just graduated from the Paris Conservatoire. That song is about not going back the way I came, how you have to go forward, and the music has a kind of drone and the trumpet feels as if life is going forward and it's up to me if I can go with it."

In *La Frontera* the trumpet does a Mexican mariachi sound, like a memory of something from afar. And again in lyrics and images, there's this juxtaposition of the hugeness of the world and the smallness of this human being, making its way along with its emotions. "When we worked I would tell stories to the producers and we used a lot of images. That song is very nostalgic: I said I wanted it to be as if you were walking in the middle of the desert and suddenly you come across this gazebo-like bandstand with a group playing this song. I wanted a kind of surreal experience: complete solitude then all of a sudden they are there."

Abro la Ventana captures that weird feeling of the kind of falling in love which gives you vertigo, making you feel physically ill with nausea. "That song is about absence, about the person you love being far away. It's that feeling of your whole being concentrated on somebody, yet they are not there and so what do you do? You have this constant falling feeling, of reaching out to something that is not there. That song is just that state of suspense, like holding your breath, yet it feels luminous and open. I felt the light and the wind in that song and also the solitude. The great thing about writing songs about things like that, is whereas the emotions are just senseless and awful when they are happening, if you

can write a song about it, all of a sudden you see the beauty of that experience. Uncertainty is so hard to live with, but if you can write about it, it turns into this kind of magical parenthesis that has its own beauty. That song always gave me images of that Edward Hopper painting where there is a woman standing naked in front of a window in the sun and there's this feeling of the solitude happening inside her".

There are a couple of songs on both albums which remind me of early Víctor Jara. I've heard Lhasa has mentioned his name as an influence. "Yes, it's true.

From the time I was six years old, I was in love with Víctor Jara and I wanted to marry him. I think he was already dead by then. He was my greatest hero and later I read the book his wife wrote about him and everything. My parents were really political leftists and my father had a very good friend who had gone to Chile and after the 1973 coup, my father never heard from him again. And we grew up listening to the *Chile Vencerá* album, to all those songs like *El Pueblo Unido* and *Violeta Parra's Que Digo el Santo Padre?* I knew all those songs from the time I was little. We understood what they were talking about and that Víctor Jara had been killed and tortured and all those people had died."

Apart from Jacques Brel and Jara, I ask Lhasa about her other influences. "One of the first was Billie Holiday, who really made me think for the first time that I wanted to be a singer, when I was 12. I heard the song *Strange Fruit* and was just hypnotised by the depth of the emotion in it. Then I heard Mexican singer Chavela Vargas when I was about 14, when my

mother played her music for me (my mother knew Chavela in the '60s), but I really plunged into Chavela's music later, when I was in Montreal, around the age of 20. I listened to those intense ballads all day, every day, for years! There are so many amazing songs, but mostly it was her way of singing, her emotional courage, the mixture of power and vulnerability, starkness and tenderness. Then Cuco Sanchez was a big influence for me. He's this Mexican singer from the 1950s with a beautiful voice and I have a very old recording of him. He has this incredible simplicity and emotion and the music is very Mexican – plucked strings, with bass and trumpet and violin. I played his songs to my producers for *La Frontera*, so we did like a feminine version of that ranchera thing. Other singers who have really affected me are Oum Khalsoum, Maria Callas, Fairouz, Amalia Rodrigues and Camaron. But then there are the singer-songwriters: Bob Dylan, Randy Newman and the incredible arrangements of Tom Waits."

On the way back into town from Peabody's studio, we talk about her Paris concert at the end of March. It's at her all-time favourite theatre, The Rex, and the last time she went there was to see Tom Waits give one of his rare concerts; she never thought she'd play there herself. "I'm not sure if I dreamt it, but he seemed to have gold dust in his pocket and he kept throwing out handfuls and stamping on them so it floated around him; such a small gesture yet so effective, so magical." Just like Lhasa: small, darkly, deeply magical person that she is.

Lhasa will perform at the Jazz Cafe in Camden, London on 22nd April, as part of the La Linea festival. □