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L A S R T S U E N

Stu Larsen has earned an international fan-base since quitting his job and hitting the road ten years ago. With a cracking new album out, Acoustic caught up with the singer-songwriter to chat travels, songwriting and a love for Martin guitars

WORDS: DAN HOBSON

Singer-songwriter Stu Larsen has always done it for the love. The love of performing, writing, travelling, and Martin guitars, has kept Larsen on a never-ending nomadic journey. Typically living out of his suitcase, Larsen is usually somewhere between his native Australia, Spain, Japan, or anywhere else you can name, before setting off for the next destination.

At one point, this sort of wanderlust seemed utterly improbable, however. The shy and quiet child, who grew up on a farm outside the tiny town of Bowenville, Queensland, never thought travelling was his thing. But after his mother dragged him to guitar lessons – in an effort to bring him out of his shell – Larsen got the guitar bug. After heading on the road with Mike Rosenberg [aka Passenger], the traveling bug was also well-and-truly caught.

In 2014, in support of Larsen's appropriately titled debut album *Vagabond*, the shy singer-songwriter brought his music to the masses with numerous global tours, including sold-out shows in North America, Asia, Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

Along the way, Larsen began collating ideas for what would become his 2017 follow up album, *Resolute*. He recorded impromptu voice memos on his phone, architecting a primitive framework for the songs. As he combed through hundreds of files, Larsen holed up in different locales, whether it be a cottage in Scotland, an apartment in Spain, or an army bunker back in Australia.

Despite the minor set-back of a burst appendix in Indonesia, Larsen finally got round to finishing off the album. Released

this summer [reviewed on p82], it really is a fine offering from a humble artist.

How would you describe your sound to people who might not have heard your records before?

I've never been great at describing my sound, but I guess it's some kind of version of acoustic-folk-pop. For the last two records I've had some phenomenal musicians come to add instrumentation to the tracks, to give each song what it needs and deserves. However,

“I was a very shy kid... my mother thought that learning guitar would help solve this”

for the live shows it's just usually a guitar and myself so when I'm touring, it's completely stripped back.

The new record has just been released. What can we expect from it?

You can expect a collection of songs about some of the places I've been and some of

the people I've met over the last few years. It's been ten years now, since I first quit my job and hit the road, so there are many of moments in time that I've drawn inspiration from for this new album.

Are you happy with how it has turned out?

I'm incredibly happy. It was a long process this time, with trying to get away to isolated places to write, then getting some demos done on my own, bringing Luke Thompson over to the UK to get some more solid versions of the songs down and then finally meeting up with Luke and Chris Vallejo in Sydney to record the album at Linear Studios. I am always happy to keep working on a project until we're one hundred per cent happy with it.

What plans do you have for the autumn?

Touring, touring, touring. The first show is this week in Vancouver with another 70 shows to follow in between now and the end of the year, across North America, Europe and Australia.

How did you first get into playing the guitar?

My mother strongly encouraged me to learn guitar when I was 14. I usually use the word “forced”, but she seems to think she wasn't so hard on me. I remember it differently. I was a very shy kid, I wouldn't answer the phone if it rang and I would go and hide in my room if someone came to visit the house, I didn't really want to interact with people very much. My mother thought that learning guitar would help solve this problem. I resisted at first and even well into the first weeks of lessons, but eventually I started to

get the hang of it thanks to a very kind and patient teacher named Bob Cook. I owe a lot to Bob and my mother for having faith in me and pushing me to do something.

Who were your early musical influences?

My parents listened to The Seekers and Johnny Horton, but the first artist I got obsessed with was Elvis Presley. As a ten year old, he just captivated me. I then moved on to legendary artists like John Lee Hooker, B.B. King, Etta James, Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee, Aretha Franklin and Elmore James because the local record store was selling their CDs for two dollars out the front of the shop. I was really into blues and jazz for a good few years before I started to find my own acoustic style in my early twenties.

Who is inspiring you these days?

I am always going back to Neil Young, the earlier work of Damien Rice and Ray LaMontagne, with a bit of Crosby, Stills, and Nash, and also Bob Dylan thrown in there too. There are also a few amazing current artists I'm listening to like Gregory Alan Isakov, Leif Vollebek and The Teskey Brothers. I'm always waiting for the next records from Luke Thompson, Tim Hart and Jed Appleton too.

Tell me about your live set-up. What instruments and equipment are you using?

Just a single guitar and me. I'm currently playing a 2007 Martin OM-28V, which I found at the Acoustic Centre in South Melbourne, she's been very faithful to me.

I also carry a couple of AKG microphones (D7 and D5) with me, I've found they suit my vocal nicely and I try taking my LR Baggs Para Acoustic DI too. The only other addition to my live set up is a handful of Hohner Special 20 Harmonicas. I like to travel light.

Can you tell me a bit more about your songwriting process?

I don't think I've actually worked out a process myself yet. I know that I need to be isolated for a week or so to get into a zone where songs can flow. Normally, I literally just sit with a guitar and start playing whatever chords my fingers land on and then start singing whatever thoughts are in my head and sometimes a song appears. I don't like to complicate it; I enjoy the mystery of songwriting. I don't think I really know how to create a song, but I am learning to have all the ingredients ready before I try to create a song.

If you had some advice for guitarists and performers reading this, what would it be?

Be genuine - I think people can tell when you're real and equally, people can tell when you're trying to fake it. Love what you do - is there any point doing something you don't love? I think you need to feel it and love it. Persevere - things generally don't happen overnight. Be patient and keep chasing the things you desire. ■

Stu Larsen's new album *Resolute* is out now. Info: www.stularsen.com



“Love what you do - is there any point doing something you don't love?”



GEARBOX

Larsen has a very unique naming system for the guitars in his collection, as he explains, naming them after the cities where he discovered them.

With such a level of dedication, we thought it churlish not to ask for the story behind each of them...

HAMBURG 2014 *MARTIN CEO-7*

When my father passed away in February 2014, he left a little bit of money to my mother, sister, brother and me. I wanted to use it in a way that he'd have liked, to be a reminder of him forever. I was on tour in Europe exactly a year later and found this guitar at Just Music in Hamburg, which was underneath the venue we'd played in.

MELBOURNE 2007 *MARTIN OM-28V*

This guitar is actually owned by my fans. I'd been borrowing guitars for a few years when a fan donated \$100 and encouraged others to do the same. Before I knew it there was enough money to buy a decent guitar! I was in Melbourne for a show in 2009 and visited The Acoustic Centre where I saw this on the wall. It was literally love at first sight.

CHICAGO 1973 *MARTIN D-35*

I was on my first headline tour of North America back in 2014, travelling from Montréal to San Diego with Nashville's Adam Burrows, covering 9,000 miles along the way. About halfway through we spent an afternoon at Chicago Music Exchange. I just kept gravitating towards this old 1973 Martin D-35. Beautiful. I started playing some simple chords and singing whatever words might flow from my lips. I had started writing 'Chicago Song' before I even knew it.

SAINT PAUL 1927 *MARTIN 0-18*

It was 2013 when this beautiful guitar came into my life! Mike Passenger and I were doing a two-month tour of North America and visited Willie's American Guitars in Saint Paul, Minnesota. I just couldn't put this one down; playing it quietly in the corner of the store, but knew I couldn't afford it. Then, to my complete surprise, Mike ended up buying it for me as thanks for helping him out over the years. I was overwhelmed and will be forever thankful.

