



LIPS

WEST SIDE STORY

Like so many before her, a move to Brooklyn, New York allowed classically trained jazz pianist Stephanie Brown to develop her own unique voice. This summer, she's bringing her newest creation Lips back home, to play all the old hotspots and work on her debut album with friends.

by Sarah Illingworth

photo by Shayna Fontana

Characterised by a giant pair of lips on legs, Lips is the solo persona of Kiwi expat Stephanie Brown. A skilled keys player, Brown performed in New Zealand for years with a number of top local acts, including Che Fu, Opensouls and Anika Moe, before bidding our shores adieu and heading for Brooklyn, New York, where she's now based.

Also a member of soul blues act Fredericks Brown, along with fellow expats Deva Mahal and Michael Taylor, in late 2010 Brown decided to venture into the waters of solo performance and started self-releasing material online as Lips. Response from fans and critics alike has been overwhelmingly positive, with releases like 'Everything To Me' and 'Ghosts And Demons' winning her comparisons to the likes of Oh Land and Little Dragon.

With plans for a full-length album set to actualise, and offers from labels and other industry players already coming her way, it looks like the interest that's been simmering around Lips throughout 2011 is about to hit boiling point.

How did you start out playing music?

I grew up around music, my grandfather played piano. He wasn't too concerned with the technical aspects, like rhythm or timing, but he would accompany himself singing. It was his greatest joy. When I was seven mum sent me to an elderly piano teacher, Mrs A, who lived across the street. When she died Mrs A left mum her piano, the greatest gift. I wrote my first song when I was 11 and it was like a drug, I've been writing ever since.

How did the idea for the Lips persona originate?

Honestly, my roommate had just done a protest where she dressed up in a giant costume and I got

jealous and wanted to make one too for my music! Growing up I didn't get to play with too many other girl musicians, they just weren't around for some reason – it was mostly all boys playing music. So when I started my own thing I wanted to invent a character that paid tribute to that so I chose a giant pair of lips on legs. Kind of girly.

How would you describe your sound, as Lips?

I grew up listening to soul music, so I think my phrasing is influenced by that music. But I would say it's melodic pop music, sometimes quirky. I love wordplay and clever lyric construction – internal rhymes and words that fit into odd phrasing, stuff like that. I like to pick apart songs by the Beatles, Simon & Garfunkel, old jazz tunes, Stevie Wonder, Bob Marley etc and try and learn from the things that make those songs work so well.

What are some of the pros and cons of living in New York as a musician?

NYC is great because there is so much fantastic art being made here, it's really inspiring. And then I think, being one of eight million voices struggling to get heard, it forces you to try and nail down what it is that makes your voice unique, what it is that you have to offer that is different to the other eight million.

Thus far you've been managing and promoting yourself, despite interest from a number of labels and management companies. Why have you chosen to go it alone?

I'm not sure what will happen in the future but for now I'm choosing to go it alone, at least until I finish my album. It's still taking shape and defining its sound and that will dictate which direction I

move in I guess. The music industry is in such a state of flux and so it's interesting to watch what tactics are working for artists and labels as we all try and negotiate the changes in the industry brought on by downloading and the devaluing of

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recorded music. That said, I've been fortunate to have people offer their advice and services, helping me with booking or promotion.

What've you got coming up over the next bit?

I'm playing a few shows in New York this month with my band here – including Daniel Ward on drums, he played for Lawrence Arabia and the Sneaks, he's really great – and I'm finishing my album. I'll be in New Zealand for a month or so over summer too, I'm gonna play some shows and Jeremy Toy from She's So Rad is gonna help me with production on my album. I can't wait, I miss New Zealand!✘

lipssongs.bandcamp.com/