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Singer Shoots for the Moon

Rising R&B star Laura Mvula Plays (Le) Poisson Rouge

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA

During her first trip to New York, years before her debut album, "Sing to the Moon," made her a rising R&B star, Laura Mvula had two formative experiences: her first public singing performance and a cosmetic mishap that, however disastrous, helped define her look.

Both took place in 2006, when Ms. Mvula traveled from her home in Birmingham, England, to attend a six-month music-composition program at SUNY Potsdam. As a farewell performance for her classmates, she decided to bolster her sound on keyboard with her untested voice.

"I got the confidence because I expected I would never come back to New York state," she said. "There were no major disasters, which was a surprise. I actually enjoyed it, and it was received well. I thought, OK, this is something new here."



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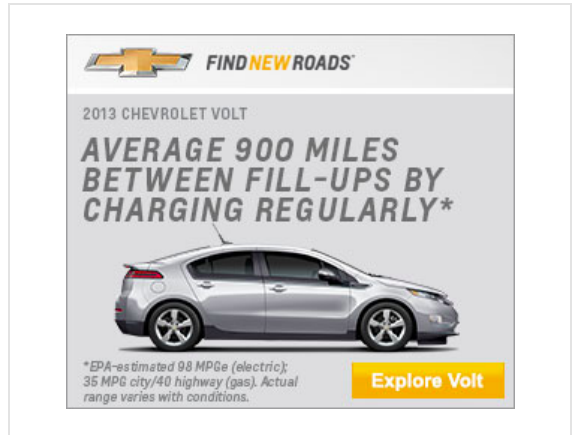
Josh Shinner

Laura Mvula, who will perform Thursday at (Le) Poisson Rouge

The second incident was less of a success. Attempting to straighten her hair on a student's budget, Ms. Mvula let her roommate use a home-relaxer kit. "My mom had discouraged me from letting anybody else do it, but I rebelled," she said. "I lost quite a bit of hair, quite dramatically, because it burnt my scalp. I was wearing a wig the day I returned to the U.K."

Though her hair grew back, she sheared most of it off years later to adopt what is now her signature style, to be exhibited on stage Thursday at (Le) Poisson Rouge. "Sing to the Moon," which released in the spring, mixes moody aspects of old soul music with the adventurousness of contemporary pop. The songs, which she wrote, incorporate instruments rarely heard outside the classical realm, such as the celeste, but most distinctive is her voice, which has drawn comparisons with Nina Simone and Erykah Badu.

"I get funny when people call me a singer because I grew up with what I would call real singers—soul and jazz and gospel singers," she said. "It's difficult to think of



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myself like that. My voice is just a tool. It's a means to an end."

That end has evolved since it began, with an album that Ms. Mvula made in part in New York, at the storied Electric Lady Studios in Greenwich Village. "I remember whispering reverently because it felt like the right way to be in that space," she said. "There's a piano that Stevie Wonder played."

Otherwise, when not on a performing circuit that will take her to other points in the U.S. and then back to England, she stays at home in Birmingham, with a husband who sings opera ("One time he asked me to sing one of the soprano lines—I butchered it," she said) and a sustained sense of wonder about her burgeoning career.

"I had no real ambition with these songs initially, other than to make sure that I felt good about them and that I was moved by what I was hearing," she said. "I didn't expect people, other than people who knew me, to connect. That's been a good surprise."

A version of this article appeared September 5, 2013, on page A22 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Singer Shoots For the Moon.

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