

SHEDDING LIGHT

ON THE LUMINEERS

Neyla Pekarek, cellist and vocalist of American folk rock band The Lumineers, chats to Eugene Yiga about making music and touring the world.





✕ Growing up, Neyla Pekarek listened to an eclectic selection of music. She was into the great vocalists – Etta James, Ella Fitzgerald, Otis Redding, and Aretha Franklin – and always loved going to the theatre. Indeed, she still describes herself as “a big musical theatre dork”.

“My parents grew up in the 60s and always had the great folk singers of that time playing on vinyls in our house,” she says. “Bob Dylan, Carole King and Emmylou Harris were singers I admired early on.”

With such a varied taste in music, perhaps it’s not surprising that The Lumineers draws inspiration from many genres, from folk and alternative rock to Americana, indie, and more. She describes it as primarily an acoustic sound (using guitar, cello, piano, bass, and drums) with gang vocals and shouting that seems to make people want to clap their hands and stomp their feet.

“We live in a world that is so technology-driven, and I think people are looking for a break from that in many aspects,” she says. “I think the music industry was ready for this folksy acoustic sound and young people are often impressed that we write our own songs and play our own instruments. There isn’t some big machine behind what we do, and I think that’s refreshing to people.”

Just as refreshing is the band’s decision to keep reinventing its sound. Even though they’ve played the same songs all over the world, Pekarek wants each performance to be just as special for the first-timers as it is for people in the audience who heard them before, be it two weeks ago or two years ago.

“I think, at the end of the day, Wesley [Schultz, lead vocalist and guitarist] is a great storyteller,” she says. “All of our songs have that in common. They each paint this little story that entices the listener. I would say there are a lot of messages of hope in our music – that things do get better and pushing through with that in mind can make a situation better.”

The Lumineers are currently touring the world to promote *Cleopatra*, their second studio album, which was released in April last year. “It’s been amazing to see so many parts of the world that I never imagined I would see,” Pekarek says. “I love trying the local cuisine and seeing the local sights. It’s a lucky part of our profession.”

Touring the world does have its perks and strange backstage rituals. Pekarek has a child’s play tent in her greenroom. “It started as more of a joke, but I like to relax in there before or after a show,” she laughs. “Often while wearing a fancy wig!”

Still, as much fun as it can be, she admits that she does miss her friends a lot, as well as the consistence of sleeping in the same bed every night. But being able to get away and explore the world makes her love her home so much more.

“I love playing the big cities – such as New York, London, or Paris – because there’s always that added excitement of just being in a big, exciting place,” she says. “But all of the places we have visited have been special in their own way. It still blows my mind that we’re able to fly all the way across the world and people know the words to our songs. It’s amazing.”

She’s excited to be performing in South Africa again, “absolutely stunned” that they’ve sold so many tickets, and couldn’t be more excited for the shows. They plan to play the songs that people know, but will sprinkle in a few new ones too.

“Music invokes a certain kind of joy that little else can capture,” she says. “I make music because it not only satisfies me in a way that nothing else can, but because it brings people together that otherwise may not have anything to share.”

The Lumineers will perform in Cape Town on 26th April at Green Point Park, and in Johannesburg at The Dome on 28th April. Tickets are available from www.bigconcerts.com and Computicket. ✕