



A few years ago, Hat Fitz was ready to hang up his guitar and return to tiling for a living. He'd witnessed the type of pre-war blues playing he loves – and spent hours learning by slowing down worn out records – technically dissected and perfected by anyone with an internet connection and the patience to sit through an instruction video. He'd seen heroes like his great friend Jeff Lang left in the dust by a new breed of more commercial, more conventional roots players. And with a family and a mortgage, roaming the world on a series of one night stands was no longer palatable.

Then he met Cara Robinson. The Irish singer and multi-instrumentalist happened to be playing the same festival as Fitz in County Mayo. Fitz was beguiled by Cara's set and later asked her for a dance. Three months later Cara was on a plane to Australia. Must have been some dance!

The couple has been inseparable ever since, touring virtually non-stop in Australia and Europe for three years, recording two albums together, and refining their striking amalgamation of Celtic folk and blues. They've also become perfect foils for each other on stage, the between song banter often as entertaining as the music.

Having just returned from another gruelling stint overseas, Fitz and Cara are launching their latest Jeff Lang-produced album, *Wiley Ways*, with another run around Australian venues and festivals.



HIM

Hat Rick Fitzpatrick is an intimidating man to behold. Always in the same blue work shirt, bushranger beard, rarely wearing shoes, he's the epitome of the tough Aussie larrikin. And he was certainly brought up that way; surfing, fishing and playing music and tiling under the instruction of his father. He learned to accompany his old man on banjo at a young age and was touring in a band by the age of 15. But his dad's interests were primarily country and bluegrass music. Fitz discovered the blues for and by himself.

"Well, you know, my first concert was The Fabulous Thunderbirds supporting Johnny Winter, I was about fifteen down at the Hordern Pavillion in Sydney," Fitz recalls. "And I'd never even heard of blues. I went with a mate, my mate's brother had tickets, and I went, 'Holy fuck, what's this?' And then it sort of went from there and I started getting into the Albert Collinses and Albert Kings, more Freddie King than Albert, and then I think it was the mid-'80s when I discovered Bo Carter, I think that was the first record I stumbled across.

"So I got into the old school blues, you know, a bit of Hill Country and a bit of Delta and ragtime and stuff, I sort of learned slowing records down, that's all you could do back then, and learned little bits that you could here and there. And then learning it the way I did, I obviously got it wrong most of

the time and out of that I think you formed your own style a little bit. By doing it like that. And then when the instructional videos came out, it turned me off the fact that you could learn it so easily and quickly and it became popular. And I was doing it when no one was doing it, you know. There was only a handful of us in the country doing it. And we had this really great relationship: 'Wow, you listen to that too?'"

It's interesting to hear Fitz discovering a style of his own more through the things that he was doing wrong rather than the things he was doing right – by trying to replicate things originally played in open tuning in standard tuning; by slowing down the records manually and imagining how the '30s players played what they did. Fitz never deliberately set out to find his own style.

"Oh I just lucked right into it mate. I was just trying to play the old school stuff and I played a lot of banjo in a jug band many years ago and the banjo crept into the style I've got with the finger-picking bit and then I started playing mandolin and it's all crept into my guitar style. Just playing the basic sort of mandolin, Yank Rachell style, who used to play with Sleepy John Estes. And I find playing different instruments it leaks into your guitar playing."

Hat Fitz played his first solo show supporting Charlie Musselwhite at the Woombye Pub in Queensland, and this month the two will share billing at the Sydney Blues Festival. Fitz reckons it's unlikely Musselwhite will remember him. He's sure to this time around if he has the pleasure of catching Fitz and Cara on stage.



HER

Since Hat Fitz and Cara Robinson finished this new record of theirs, *Wiley Ways*, back around Bluesfest time, it's been a staple on the stereo here in the *Rhythms* office.

Its seamless blend of subtle Celtic lines with the bare-bones blues we've come to know from Fitz in particular, make for as beguiling a record as you'll hear all year, a true-blue Australian blues record that could fit in anywhere.

And the sounds which churn from this album, which is only officially being released in Australia this month, have come from far and wide, from times gone by and ones just gone, as both players here have had The Music in their bones since they could barely walk.

Robinson grew up in Ireland initially, in a hippie commune where she was exposed to "pagan music, believe it or not," she tells with a laugh. "All the summer and harvest songs we learned in school. But then at home, there was a different perspective, the psychedelic '60s – Carole King, Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix."

At six years old, Robinson and her mother travelled to Libya to be with her adoptive father, who was working over there as a teacher. After a year, with Robinson's mother pregnant with Cara's little sister, the small family returned to the Emerald Isle, by car, taking a very scenic route (indeed, Robinson's father was offered a dozen camels for her sale at one point during the journey), where the stereo pumped out Hank Williams, Bob Dylan, Blind Willie McTell – the art of storytelling through song would have been firmly imprinted upon her mind.

"Yeah, I was always interested in the words and lyrics of songwriters, from an early age," she confirms. "It really seeps

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into your unconscious too, and I guess it comes out in your music [today], your influences, when you start writing yourself." The vivid storytelling contained within *Wiley Ways* harks back to these master songsmiths, both Fitz and Robinson spinning tales tall and true, based on how they listened growing up.

Robinson's musical epiphany came soon afterwards, at school, when she was exposed for the first time to the songs of Lead Belly. "Yeah, that was a teacher, he was an alcoholic – for three months [he'd drink], then for a month he'd go dry, and we got him in his drinking stage," she remembers with a laugh. "He was a really big Lead Belly fan, and he's come in in the morning and instead of us singing about the sun and the moon and the water and all, he taught us the slavery chants by Lead Belly.

"And there was just one morning, there was a song about his mother, and it just hit me, I ended up feeling sick while we were singing it, a real emotional kind of feeling. And then the tears came... I'd never heard something so poignant."

The powerful simplicity of Lead Belly's music is perhaps the biggest legacy Robinson is able to bring to this current union, as the pair's songs are sparse and simple, and all the more powerful for that. *Wiley Ways*, given it's been informed by so much and yet embraces where these two are right now as artists, makes it poignant too.

HE SAID, SHE SAID

People love a love story – were you prepared that this was going to be the angle of every interview feature for the next five years!



Fitz – Oh no, it's still sort of blows me out the way it all come about. Because I was getting ready to chuck my guitar in professionally and get on the tools. And then I met her and it gave me the spice of life. Mate, for years you have these relationships with chicks and they just can't handle you doing what you're doing and to have someone to actually share it with and play with, you dream about that shit, you know? So I actually lucked out on it, once again.

Cara – (laughs) Fitz's story will probably be different to mine! We're both pretty open people and we do like talking about it, not to say we're conceited or anything, I think it's great [to have people interested].

Making a living out of the thing that you love doesn't always work. It can turn what was once pleasure into work. Have you found that at all?

Fitz – Oh definitely mate, because I've got kids and a life back here, mortgages and all that sort of shit, being away is bloody hard. One month is massive, that's hard enough. But when you do three or four months when you go overseas, I'm counting down the hours from 1500 hours onwards, every day. When I was doing it, when I was younger, it was like best thing in your life, you know. You didn't want anything else. But then you miss out on mates, taking the tinny out, going for a surf and a fish and all that sort of shit, no time for any of that.

Cara – Oh look, when it's three o'clock in the morning and



you're driving and you've got a six hour drive to the ferry... the travelling, when it hasn't gone to plan, that's when you think it's really hard. And when you're not prepared for seven gigs back to back, plus all the travelling and *you're* driving as well... so there is a moment of that, but I wouldn't swap it for the world.

You look like you're always having fun on stage, that must be so much better for your morale to have someone to always share it with, as opposed to playing solo.

H - Oh look, you know yourself, you got a missus, when you see something and it spins you out, you just wish you had your partner there to share it with you. Then you can talk about it around the table a year later. Yeah, it's a great experience and all that, but we're just chasing that buzz on stage and you might have that one hour where you're on stage where we're both firing up, the sound's perfect, the crowd's feeling the electricity. And it might only happen one in every ten gigs or so, but when it does happen that's like jumping out of a plane for me. You're on a high for a week after that. That's what you live for, that buzz.

C - Oh definitely. I was a frontwoman for a lot of years, and this is 100% better, definitely.

Tell me about the stage banter you guys have going on...

Do you consciously work on that tough guy larrikin Fitzy vs beautiful maiden Cara, or is it something you just unconsciously fell into?

Fitz - Mate, I'm not joking you here, it dead set just falls out. And if we're blueing before we go on stage, sometimes the crowd is just sitting there going, 'This is the best thing since sliced bread.' Because we really give it to each other. And I think because it's real, couples will relate to it because everyone bickers and carries on in their relationships and we're just up there talking like that normally. It just evolved, it took about a year. We started doing the lovey thing and then after about a year or so we just carry on like we're in the van on stage, and if we're blueing, we try not to swear at each other, but smart arsed things come out and people are like, 'Whoa!'

Cara - (laughs) Oh god, I don't think he could be anybody but himself if he tried! And if I try and be anything else that I'm not, it's like walking into a door. You've just gotta be yourself. And you do act it up a bit on stage, you do the tongue-in-cheek thing, but really we do get on like that anyway.

Bands are notorious for not actually telling each other what they think of each other's writing/playing. Things go unsaid and simmer into resentment. Can you be totally honest with each other musically?

Fitz - Oh totally mate. After a gig, that's the beautiful thing too, after a gig it's, 'Little man, I think you could do this or that.' And I don't like being told what to do and I'll go, 'Why don't you fuckin' sing it then?' That comes out, but then I'll come down and the next morning I'll wake up and go, 'Yeah, sorry about that,' and then listen to what she says. Because she's a musician's musician, you know? She's got a good ear on her, so I listen to what she says. I've been in a lot of bands where what

you just said is true, people don't say what they wanna say and it builds up into a big blue at the end of it.

Cara - Yes, very. He's a very honest person, so much that sometimes it can be quite raw, makes you feel a bit raw, his reactions to your writing. I can be very dismissive sometimes... where I'll just shut down the other person's idea, only because I'm trying to hold on to what I've got, you know? I don't want to lose that idea. So we have a lot of honest moments where you think, 'Oh, that hurt,' but you get over them.

Does the musical synergy and communication just keep improving the more you play?

Fitz - Oh look, definitely. Every time we come back from Europe, we mightn't notice it and people go, 'Jesus Christ, you've stepped up a level since you left!' And we don't notice because we're playing all the gigs and we never, ever, ever practise. We might sit down and write a song acoustically, then we'll take it to the gig, and if it sounds like it has potential, then we'll just keep doing it at the gigs that don't matter. Like if there's a pub gig, we'll just do it there. And they just evolve. You become tighter with your repertoire and you know, just playing a couple of hundred gigs a year.

Cara - I listen to him playing the banjo, back in the shed when we're at home, or on tour - literally a day doesn't go by where he doesn't have his axe in his hand, you know? And it's really inspiring, I've never lived with or even *known* such an inspiring musician. With him, it's music, music, music, and I love that.

Obviously things must have reached the point where if you're not writing with each other, you're at least writing with the other in mind. What's the biggest difference to writing for and by yourself?

Fitz - Um, she writes songs and I'll say, 'What do you reckon about this?' And she'll go, 'Yeah that's pretty good' or 'It's not good.' And if I write a song, she comes along and does the same thing. We've only ever sat down with two songs and wrote them together. We're both headstrong and we don't like being told what to do so we've learned to sort of, if I'm writing something she'll go, 'Oh I don't wanna butt in, but what do you think about changing that to that?' And I'll do the old, 'Fuck off and write your own song!' But then I'll think about it and go, 'Well, what do you reckon about this?' And she'll go, 'That's what I told you to do.' And I'll go, 'I KNOW YOU DID.' But she's a great lyricist. I'm not that flash, I write one or two good songs a year, where she can just pull them out of a hat if she hears a good tune. So I sort of do the musical side and she's good with words.

She taught me a lot. Made me a better singer just having her beside me because she is a proper singer. And I've never really classified myself as a singer at all and when she said, 'Man, you've got a great voice, it's a unique voice, and blah blah,' and I went, 'Really?' So you hang around someone who's really good at something and you're doing it, you'll end up being as good. It doesn't matter if it's in the building trade or whatever.

Cara - Writing for yourself, well, you've got complete control. And writing together can be difficult sometimes because you've got to get on a roll, you've got to get on a journey where each of you know where you're going, and you're going there together... it's either there or it's not on the day. I don't think there's a major plan involved with that [sort of thing].

What's your favourite Jeff Langism or Jeff Lang story?

Fitz - Oh mate, honestly I've known him for a lot of years, we've been really good mates. But honestly when he put his hand up and he said, 'Look, you guys should do better on CD than what you have done,' and he said that to me for years, and he offered to do it and I said, 'Well fuck it, we'll go for it.' And mate, he pushed me to another level up in my playing. Like, I'd come out thinking, 'That felt like a take, that was great,' and he's like, 'Man, come on Roy you can do better than that.' And he'd push me back in there and he got that little bit extra out of me. And Cara. And then he added his two bobs' worth about what you can put into a song and whatever and we just let him run the show with his ideas, and it was like, 'Man that sounds great!' It was just a pleasure for the first time to work with someone who actually gave a fuck about you and your music. Rather than going in, paying your money, and sloggin' it out quick as you can just because you're paying fifty bucks an hour or whatever, and the guy just sitting there, recording it and going, 'Right, get out. Next!' To have someone who actually cared, didn't care about time, it was an amazing experience recording. Can't say enough about what he's done for us!

Cara - Oh man (laughs). Vindaloo. This is where he bet Fitzy that he couldn't drink a pint of vindaloo. And he did, and he had to cancel his gigs because he burnt his throat so bad. This is back when they were on tour together for *The Silverbacks* album (laughs).

When was the last time you got sick of each other? You can't say, 'I'm sick of you, I'm going to work' either, because you work together.

H - Oh yeah. She definitely looks forward to girly time with her mates when we're over in Ireland. And when I'm over here, I like catching up with the boys and a good way to do it's at work. You come home with more money than you make playing music, so it's good! I went back on the tools today, back slappin' a few tiles down. It's good mate. One thing about having a missus and living with her, you look forward to a bit of bloke time, you know? Telling shit jokes and all the bullshit you do, you do miss it.

C - If I said once a day, that would be terrible (laughs). No, I get sick of him for a couple of seconds, [that's it]. **B**



JEFF LANG

PHOTO BY LUKE KELLETT

Hat and Cara play the Sydney Blues & Roots Festival and Mullum Music Festival, full tour dates in the Gig Guide on page 36.

Wiley Ways is available now independently and also as a Rhythms Magazine October subscriber offer. See details on page 9.

