



**I'M  
THAT  
BITCH**

Two years after its release, Lizzo's "Truth Hurts" is topping the Hot 100 and generating Grammy buzz — but it took much more than a series of happy accidents to get her there.

"Here Comes the Bride" is echoing down West 49th Street in Manhattan, and Lizzo is sitting in a white Pontiac convertible, her face covered in a lace veil. A sudden 8 a.m. rain shower is threatening her big entrance and, if that's not enough, everything she's about to do is going to air live on NBC's Today. But Lizzo has been the bride before — at June's BET Awards, at concerts and in her best-known music video — and preshow moments of nervy

electricity are nothing new to her. She has been doing this for a decade, and she's not easily fazed.

Lizzo settles into the car just as one of the members of her Instagram-famous dance crew, the Big Grrrls, lurches it into drive. Suddenly, her longtime DJ, Sophia Eris, warps the melody into the seesawing chords of "Truth Hurts," which became the No. 1 song in America this September. Lizzo exits the

vehicle in impossibly high fuchsia boots and a sparkling gold bodysuit, then struts toward the stage at Rockefeller Plaza, where a group of young women has been waiting for her since 2 a.m. As she launches into the brash breakup anthem that has been ubiquitous these past few months, a few chefs

from a bakery across the street abandon their pastries to take photos from their kitchen window.

"She's not the type of artist who sits in the green room and comes up a flight of stairs," says her creative director, Quinn Wilson. "She arrives with her girls driving her, already in a mood

It's who she is.

She's a bad bitch."

Maybe you heard "Truth Hurts" for the first time in April while watching Someone Great, the Netflix rom-com that features the song in a pivotal scene and in its trailer. Maybe you caught it on TikTok, where the song's now-iconic line — "I just took a DNA test, turns out I'm 100% that bitch" — inspired a viral meme called the #DNATest challenge, in which users sub in their own

identities and nationalities to poke fun at stereotypes. Or maybe you're one of the longtime Lizzo fans who has been singing "Truth Hurts" since it first came out in late 2017 and watched how the track built momentum before erupting in the mainstream — not unlike Lizzo's career itself.

"I've always had to turn haters into congratulators," Lizzo, 31, tells me later. "That's the thing with my songs and my live shows: I've never lost that mentality of 'I have to win you over,' and I'm never going to, because I didn't learn that way. I have muscle memory in this."

Lizzo, whose real name is



Melissa Jefferson, recorded "Truth Hurts" with close collaborator and producer Ricky Reed, who signed her to his Nice Life Recording Company under Atlantic Records in 2016. The video, in which Lizzo appears as a bride who marries herself, felt like a gleaming jewel of the internet. But they were both disappointed when neither the single nor the video got the initial reception they were expecting; Lizzo has called the premiere one of her darkest days.

The fact that the song is now getting its due two years later thanks to a happy viral coincidence makes for a good story. But that version of events omits the groundwork Lizzo has been laying not only since the song's release, but also since the beginning of her career, rapping and singing and twerking her way from early indie projects like 2013's Lizzobangers and 2015's Big Grrrl Small World to a major-label deal. At a time when streaming sensations seem to appear in the mainstream practically overnight, Lizzo is a case study in harnessing every tool — a magnetic and meme-able personality, innovative live performances, a deeply personal message and a

meticulously thought-out sound — to cut through the noise and build a rock-solid career foundation, even if it's on a schedule no one anticipated.

"You can cheat your sound to find an entry point, to get nice placements on Spotify or Apple Music or on the radio. You say, '[What's popular] sounds like this,' and you can get some success sooner," explains Reed. "But with Lizzo, it was about patience. The process was slow, but the payoff when you don't compromise your art is that you sound like no one else."

That's bound to be reflected in the Grammy nominations later this year. Lizzo could likely receive nods in all of the Big Four categories — with especially high chances for best new artist and record of the year — and may show up in various others thanks to her debut album, Cuz I Love You, and its mix of glossy pop ("Like a Girl"), rock-tinged soul (the title track) and undeniable hip-hop bangers



("Tempo," a team-up with her hero Missy Elliott).

"So glad I never settled for a genre," she tweeted in July, just as "Truth Hurts" was circling the Billboard Hot 100's top 10. "Genre is dead." The tweet included a GIF of a grinning Lizzo, turning to the camera and shrugging, looking just like the emoji.

Of all the places where you might expect to find Lizzo, Pennsylvania's Lancaster County is among the least likely. The region is known for sprawling cornfields and Amish communities, and it's not uncommon to see farmers in straw hats and suspenders milling around the train station. Imagining any glossy pop star here is difficult, let alone a pop star who just made headlines for giving a rousing speech in front of a giant butt-shaped balloon, as she did days before at the MTV Video Music Awards.

Yet here Lizzo is, sitting serenely by the window of an empty hotel restaurant in the small town of Lititz. It has been only six days since her set on Today drew the largest crowd of the broadcast's summer series, meaning that Lizzo brought in more fans than Jennifer Lopez and the Jonas Brothers. In the short time that has elapsed, President Barack Obama also listed "Juice" as one of his favorite songs of the summer. But Lizzo is already onto the next challenge. She took an Uber here from New York the day before; the hotel has a massive space where she can rehearse for her upcoming tour and her set at Philadelphia's Made in America Festival. She seems relaxed though, and within minutes her thunderous laugh is echoing across the lobby.

When people talk about Lizzo, they zero in on her charisma. The internet has already flocked to her social media accounts, where she posts fan-made memes about herself and delights followers with her famed "Bye Bitch" videos, bite-sized clips in which she simply shouts the catchphrase and cackles maniacally as she rides away on various vessels, from golf carts to inflatable pool lounges. (Her internet fluency perhaps makes the viral success of "Truth Hurts" unsurprising.) Her personality is the first thing her managers Kevin Beisler and Brandon Creed of Full Stop Management remember about meeting her in 2016. Beisler was captivated by her "star quality, her authenticity, her sense of humor." Creed says he was blown away by how "infectious, inspired and bold" she was.

But those descriptors are hard to fully grasp until Lizzo is sitting in front of you, warning you to "get ready, girl, 'cause I got a lot of anecdotes" and making you wish you hadn't missed the debut performance of her high school singing group, the Cornrow Clique. "We had one show. It was at a black history pep rally in the gym and we did a medley. We had a costume change behind the bleachers and changed into our Jordans," she remembers. "It was very lit. It was like a VMAs-worthy performance. It had drama."

Performance has been central to Lizzo's development. After studying classical flute at the University of Houston (she still plays onstage and on her songs — and her flute, which she calls Sasha Flute, even has a verified Instagram account with 256,000 followers), she became a fixture in the local Minneapolis music scene. An R&B trio she formed with Eris even caught the attention of Prince and led to a collaboration on his 2014 LP Plectrumelectrum. But while she always played in different bands, her trajectory changed as she started experimenting as a hip-hop solo act. Her DIY spirit, rock-star attitude and crashing beats appealed to alternative audiences, and soon she was playing dive bars and rock clubs, eventually opening for Sleater-Kinney in 2015.

"I think my story has been more about refining who I am versus creating it," says Lizzo. "I was always pretty wild, and it was just like, 'OK, this is not a Mars Volta show,'" she continues, referencing the Texas prog-rock band she counts as an influence on her performance style. "[Frontman] Cedric [Bixler-Zavala] would just go crazy, and I wanted to be like him. But at a certain point, it's like, 'Bitch, you not him. You got to find you.'"

Early on, Lizzo realized that what unified her skill set — the throughline in everything she had to offer — was her ability to tell stories about her journey with self-love. "It just vibrated better in the music," she says. "When I wrote songs like 'My Skin' or 'En Love,' that was like, 'Oh, shit, I found it. I'm starting to discover who I am.'"

Julie Greenwald, Atlantic's chairman/COO, says that when Reed introduced them in 2016, Lizzo already had a firm grasp on her identity as an artist. "She was a real one from the moment she walked in that door," recalls Greenwald. As they talked about chameleonic artists like Bruno Mars and Janelle Monáe, Greenwald was struck by Lizzo's confidence: "She was going to make it with or without me."

Lizzo remembers her encounter with Greenwald a little differently. "Did she tell you I touched her art?" she asks, her eyes going wide. She walked into Greenwald's office and spotted a fragile-looking piece of paper on the wall. "I start touching it, and Julie is like, 'Oh, my God.' It was a classic meet-cute where there's the bumbling, lovable oaf running around touching the art, screaming at people," says Lizzo. "But in her mind, she probably loved that I wasn't timid and my balls didn't go up to my stomach."

Lizzo already had a fan base and a healthy touring business, so after joining the Atlantic family in 2016, she worked with Reed to find a sound that melded all of her talents — high-spirited raps, gospel notes, goopy R&B — and further opened her up to pop and urban music audiences. "I was just like, 'Let's see what the fuck happens,'" she says. "I'd never really written a big fucking pop banger before, and Ricky was the guy to do that with."

One of the first songs they came up with was the soulful pep talk "Good as Hell." (The song has also benefited from the momentum of "Truth Hurts," reaching No. 41 on the Hot 100 in September, over three years after its release.) "Once we settled into a groove," recalls Reed, "it was liberating because we were like, 'Lizzo is doing these big-ass shows — let's just keep doing songs that build her

story and her career.' "

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For her visuals and creative concepts, she relied on collaborators from her days as an independent artist, which included old friends like Eris and Wilson. Not only did they intimately understand Lizzo's vision, they were resourceful. Wilson recalls making the artwork for Lizzo's 2017 track "Water Me" by filling up a child's inflatable pool with gallons of milk. The early creative impressed Atlantic and encouraged Lizzo and Wilson to keep taking risks. Lizzo's performance on The Ellen DeGeneres Show in late January, in which she snaked her way from the backstage area into the audience before embellishing "Juice" with a flute solo, was particularly inventive: Word-of-mouth around it led to a significant spike in Google searches for Lizzo in the days after.

"I felt like we had to prove ourselves, of course, because we were so young, and we're young black women in the industry," Lizzo says of her inner circle. "But we believed in ourselves, and we believed in the projects, and fighting for creative integrity wasn't difficult."

After releasing the 2016 EP Coconut Oil, Lizzo spent the next two years unleashing a steady stream of tracks that captured her ebullience and, more crucially, offered multiple entry points for new audiences. She tested out minimalist hip-hop on "Fitness"; she went retro-funk on "Boys," which she released in June 2018 to coincide with Pride celebrations. Lizzo admits that hammering out the right songs to capture all sides of her artistry could feel like a slow process, but it had advantages: As she bided her time for an album, these tracks typically arrived simultaneously with videos spearheaded by Lizzo and Wilson, making each release a mini-statement that deepened her fan base. In 2018, she also toured with Haim and Florence + The Machine, expanding her reach yet again.

"I can do anything, you know?" says Lizzo. "You want a polished, choreographed performance? I can give you that. You want a wild rock'n'roll show? I can give you that. You want to feel like you're in church? I can give you that."

