

THE YEAR(S) OF

LIZ

ZO

**The Phenomenally
Successful Cougar
Alum Returns to
Campus and She's
Still 100%
That Cougar.**

BY LAURIE FICKMAN



Houston may be known for its soaring temperatures and mouth-numbing jalapeños, but lately there is nothing hotter from the state of Texas than the career of UH alum and three-time Grammy-winning phenom: Lizzo.

She's on a dizzying fast track — she garnered eight nominations in 2019, a year that music journalists seemingly ran out of ways to describe. “Wild Year” one headline proclaimed, and after she was named Time Magazine’s 2019 Entertainer of the Year, another headline blared, “Of Course, Who Else?”

To describe her as a pop and rhythm and blues singer and classically-trained flautist almost gives short shrift to the artist who is Lizzo. Yes, she is an extraordinary musician, but she is also — in her own words — a “whole damn meal.” Her main dish is music, with an appetizer of attitude, side order of self-love, and dramatic performance for dessert, all served onstage by a scantily-clad, voluptuous artist who is proud to pose nude on a record cover and implores others to be equally confident.

With her exuberant celebration of what makes her unique, Lizzo swiftly became a role model for the body-positive movement, and also for people everywhere who struggle with self-doubt. Though the mantle makes her nervous, she doesn’t want it to seem trendy.



She has said that, “Body positivity only exists because body negativity is the norm.”

She admits it’s a road she has well traveled.

“I would body shame myself every single day, and ask ‘Why can’t I fit that?’ or ‘Why does my body look like this?’ I have to look at every single thing I’m shaming and find love in those things,” said Lizzo of her method for overcoming her own insecurities.

As she found that love, she broke through to become a force of nature, an undeniable piece of American culture and music.

Though one of the Grammy nominations was for “Best New Artist,” Lizzo will be quick to tell you she is no overnight success. At 30, she has been beating the musical drum, playing gigs, forming bands, alternating from electro pop to R&B, to flute, and back and forth again, for well over a decade.

From UH, Where Else?

Born in Detroit, Melissa Viviane Jefferson, who would take on the name Lizzo, moved to Houston with her family when she was nine. Growing up in the Alief area, she credits Houston’s special musical flavor for honing her palate.

“The biggest influence from Houston music for me was freestyling,” Lizzo said. “Here, freestyling is a whole art form. It’s a culture, it’s a way of life, it’s very laid back, it’s very melodic,” she said as she launched into spontaneous freestyle verse offering her homage to Houston.

“I learned how to freestyle here in Houston,” she recalled during a recent visit back to H-Town and the UH campus. “We would bang on the desks in school and bang on the school bus.”

It was another Houstonian, Beyoncé, who served as her primary inspiration Lizzo said, and after seeing a Destiny’s Child concert in 5th grade, her career path was carved in stone. She knew she wanted — no, she had to — become a performing artist.

During college, as a Cougar, Lizzo played flute in the Spirit of Houston Marching Band. On that recent visit back, she surprised current band members by simply walking in and playing an impromptu flute solo.

They surprised her right back, performing her song “Good as Hell.” It was great fun for all involved, but then, band always was for Lizzo.

“I always had so much fun in band. That was my favorite part of school,” Lizzo said. “I was like ‘Can I just go to band school?’ That’s why I became a music flute performance major.”

Lizzo often says the flute chose her when it was offered up by a middle school band teacher in sixth grade. Back then she named her Sasha after Beyoncé’s album, “I Am ... Sasha Fierce,” the name of Beyoncé’s onstage alter ego.

She credits her late father with always telling her the flute would be her path to success, though she argued with him, because she thought the audience would think the instrument was uncool, and then she would be thought uncool, too.

But her connection with the flute was undeniable, and Sasha found her way back into Lizzo’s professional repertoire. She began playing the flute on Instagram videos, which went viral. Then the flute made its way onto her concert stage. Lizzo recalls the exact moment during one performance when she realized she broke through with fans and really connected. At that moment, she had the flute in her hand.

Now, her flute has its own Instagram account with more than 300,000 followers.

“It took me so long,” she said. “When you hide who you are, it makes it harder for people to get to know you and get to love you, but as soon as you are unashamed of who you are — I was so nervous that people would call me a nerd or think I wasn’t cool — but as soon as I showed the world all of me, that’s when they started to fall in love with me.”

Small wonder why she’s a role model.

Her Philosophy

The year 2019 was not Lizzo’s only spectacular success. She’s survived plenty of hard times. She was homeless for a period, living in her car to dedicate herself to music, and she had an admittedly difficult time in college.

“This is the place I was most insecure,” Lizzo revealed, sharing that difficult memory

with members of the UH band on her visit. “This is the place I didn’t know who I was. This was the place I was hardest on myself, where I struggled. But all of those struggles and insecurities made me who I am.” And she shares the benefit of hindsight.

“Not knowing what you’re doing has nothing to do with where you’re going. Cherish your journey,” she advised, “and respect your journey.”

David Bertman, UH band director, has a slightly different memory of Lizzo when she was a student.

“What I remember most is she had this beautiful, huge just gorgeous flute sound,” Bertman said. “Her spirit and energy and kindness matched her beautiful flute sound.”

What Lizzo showed the world was different than what she felt inside, and her ability to understand her own weaknesses fueled her desire to help others with similar pain.

“I think a lot of the times we’re unkind because we’re unkind to ourselves and we really don’t know any better,” she said. “I think if we all treated ourselves better, we would know how to love each other.”

At her concerts, she encourages people to be kinder to themselves first and let that self-love cause a ripple effect of happiness cascade to others.

She doesn’t just talk the talk. She sings it with her approach to self-respect and empowerment on full display in many of her lyrics. One example is in the song “Good as Hell,” when she advises what to do if your man doesn’t love you anymore:

*If he don’t love you anymore
Just walk your fine a** out the door
I do my hair toss
Check my nails
Baby how you feelin’?
Feeling good as hell*

Or on “Truth Hurts,” which boasts an amazing 160-million views on YouTube:

*You’re ‘posed to hold me down,
but you’re holding me back
And that’s the sound
of me not calling you back*

And, perhaps, the coup de grâce on independence:

I put the sing in single.

Those lyrics come straight from Lizzo’s heart, which was shaped, in part, on the UH campus, deep in the heart of Texas. ■



(Top) Lizzo surprised the Spirit of Houston Band by dropping by their rehearsal during a visit to UH.

(Bottom) This year, Lizzo earned three Grammy wins and eight nominations.