

Music: A Review of “Catch the Moon” and Interview with Liz Mitchell

by Alexis Burling

Catch the Moon is the latest feel-good creation from the talented and multi-faceted Liz Mitchell. Along with Grammy-nominated musician Lisa Loeb, Ida band-mate and husband Daniel Littleton, engineer Warren Defever, and two surprise guests, Mitchell has not only managed to produce a heartwarming collection of children’s folk songs in four different languages, but she has also fashioned a pint-sized board book to tag along with it. *Catch the Moon* (the book), written by Erin Courtney and illustrated by Bonnie Brooke Mitchell, is a snuggle of a story. With a simple yet endearing text, and wispy, whimsical illustrations, this teeny tale is just the right complement to the CD that shares its name.

Catch the Moon thrives in its fusion of traditional folk music and old childhood favorites, including “Oh Susanna,” “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star,” and “Little Red Caboose,” as well as several original songs. Mitchell and Loeb alternate

singing lead vocals and back-up harmony on these tracks, while accompanying Littleton on a variety of instruments, including tambourine, Wurlitzer electric piano, banjo, fiddle, and guitar. “Catch the Moon” with lyrics by Loeb and Mitchell and music by Loeb, Mitchell, and Littleton, is the right choice for the album’s title track. Mitchell’s folky rendition of “New Morning,” an old Bob Dylan song, will be a hit for parents and older listeners, while the spunky “Stop and Go” will have toddlers shakin’ it out in no time. Several tracks are in other languages, including “La Manita,” a traditional Spanish Song, “Donguri,” a Japanese song, and “Fais Dodo,” a French lullaby.

A former nursery school teacher, rocker in the local NYC band *Ida*, and a full-time mother, Liz Mitchell has also produced two other albums for children entitled *You Are My Flower* (1998) and *You Are My Sunshine* (2002). Her web site is www.youaremyflower.org.

ALEXIS *How did you get interested in writing music for children?*

LIZ Years ago I found a copy of Woody Guthrie’s record *Songs to Grow on for Mother and Child* and it really moved me. I was in my 20s and had no children at the time, but I would listen to that album often and it inspired me as a songwriter. At the same time I was listening to a lot of Elizabeth Cotten, and her music floored me. I had never heard anything like it. Her singing and guitar playing were so calm and assured, and so human and deeply engaged. I think I heard something in it that could be brought to children’s music.

ALEXIS *From 1992 to 1995, you were a teacher at Roosevelt Island Day Nursery School in New York City. Do you think your experience working with children on a day-to-day basis helped you create more accessible (and fun!) music for children?*

LIZ I have always felt a strong connection to children, especially little ones, and teaching gave me a very grounded respect for them. I never felt like I had to get too zany to get their attention and connect with them musically. Kids like to be silly and goofy but they also like to be quiet and peaceful, and I think their need for these more reflective moments can be overlooked. Sometimes the best kind of musical fun happens when children are focused, not just wound up and bouncing off the walls. Of course, I love to get free and dance the “Ooby Dooby” with them just as much.

ALEXIS *On Catch the Moon, you share the bill with fellow musician and long-time friend from Brown University Lisa Loeb. Didn’t you two play together while at college? How was working together again?*

LIZ Lisa and I were roommates at Brown and played in a band together. It was terrific to work together again, especially on a children’s album. The whole project came together very quickly. I’m still amazed that it happened at all, on top of our busy schedules, with Lisa living in Los Angeles and Daniel and I living in Rhode Island. She came out here and we made the record in our home studio, our attic.

ALEXIS *How did the birth of your daughter, Storey, influence your work as a musician?*

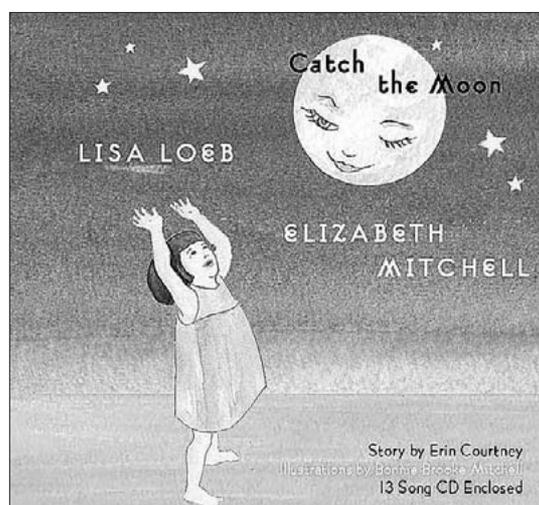
LIZ Like every other aspect of my life, my work as a musician has been transformed by motherhood. I think I have an increased capacity to enjoy it, to relax, to be grateful for the time I get to sing and play guitar, write, work on arrangements. I care less about the results, and more about making sure I’m having fun. I used to be



really hard on myself about performing, about having everything be seamless and “perfect,” and now I feel lucky just to sing and play music at all. I’m definitely more adventurous, more willing to fall on my face and take risks than ever before. We don’t rehearse as much as we used to, and some of that is out of necessity, but it’s also a choice. We’re more interested in discovery, spontaneity, and in making something happen with an audience.

ALEXIS *Catch the Moon also comes with a board book of the same name. What sparked the idea to create a companion read-along?*

LIZ I love the board books that Dan Zanes makes along with his records — the paintings by Donald Saaf tell such incredible stories. My daughter keeps them on her bookshelf and we “read” them together all the time. Directly inspired by these books, I had planned to make a CD accompanied by a board book with two old friends — children’s book author/illustrator Brian Selznick and artist Ida Pearle. Then Lisa called and wanted to record together. The deadlines were very tight, so I had to put the project with



Brian and Ida on the back burner and jump into this new one with Lisa.

ALEXIS *The illustrator of the board book shares your last name. Is that your Mom?*

LIZ Yes! Once I had the inspiration to work with my Mom, everything came together. She is a wonderful painter, and I have always felt that she captures the tenderness and wonder of toddlers in such a lovely way. She is an artist but spends most of her time volunteering in her community, so I was very happy to have the chance to spend a few weeks with her and her watercolors last summer.

ALEXIS *In addition to your work in children’s music, you are also a founding member of the indie rock band Ida, along with your husband. What is that experience like?*

LIZ That experience is an evolving challenge, but I feel as excited about it as I did 10 years ago when we started. It’s tricky now with us living four hours away from most of our collaborators, but we’re making it work. We even toured last year, which was very satisfying. *Ida* is similar to the children’s music I create in many ways — it’s very personal and homemade. The music is different, however, in terms of live performance. When I do a children’s music show, I have to completely come out of myself and engage the audience directly — meet them right where they are. When I perform with *Ida*, it’s a very internal experience. My focus is on myself and my relationship to the other members of the ensemble. I’m always working to find a balance between my sound and energy and everyone else’s in the band. Of course, I hope the people listening can find their way in.

ALEXIS *Do you have any words of wisdom for all the aspiring musicians out there?*

LIZ I have no career advice to offer. That stuff is a complete mystery to me. All I can say is do your work with love and make really great music that you care about and that is personal and meaningful for you. Don’t waste your time trying to be perfect — the world needs more human music. Find a way to release it yourself and don’t wait for someone else to do it for you.

ALEXIS *What are you working on now?*

LIZ We just finished a new *Ida* album, and I’m hoping to begin recording bedtime songs for our next children’s album in May. My (almost) three year old is ready to sing them with me, and we’re hoping to get her and both grandmas on this record singing together. That’s the direction I’m most interested in now, duets between generations.