

Isabel Dumaa

*Childhood Dreams Realized
Requiem for a Childhood Dream*



photo credit: Holly Smokes

When she was 12, Isabel Dumaa’s moms booked her a studio session to record songs she had been filling up her journals with since she was 10. With her guitar in tow, the budding singer-songwriter recorded songs she titled “Keep on Trying,” “Cliche Country Song,” and “Forbidden Love.”

“I don’t even remember why one was called ‘Forbidden Love’ because it wasn’t even forbidden,” Dumaa recalls. “The song was about my aunt getting married. And ‘Keep On

Trying’ was essentially about this boy liking me and me being like, there’s not a chance in hell, baby. I laugh at them now, but they weren’t bad for a 12-year-old.”

Although her musical musings on the trials and tribulations of being a middle schooler in the Bay Area may never be streamed on Spotify, these songs were a springboard for the ones that [you can now listen to](#) on repeat. Dumaa’s debut single “Call My Bluff,” a commentary on imposter syndrome, dropped in July 2022, receiving flattering comparisons to Clairo, Remi

Wolf, and Maggie Rogers. Dumaa's most recent single, "Freshman Year" (distributed by SoundOn), even quickly became a hit [on TikTok](#). It has over 18 million views on the platform plus over 3,300+ videos created using the sound.

Now 19, Dumaa calls Los Angeles home — a six-hour drive away from her family in San Francisco. She moved there right after graduating high school to pursue making music professionally. "I know that there's nothing else I want to do," Dumaa shares. "There's no plan B. I just have to do this."

And no longer is she tinkering with GarageBand to produce her own songs. Dumaa now works with talented professionals, including vocal coaches, producers, and acclaimed songwriters. "The more someone is willing to experiment, the more I love working with them," Dumaa says. "In sessions, I'll try anything, so having someone who is willing to play around with me is amazing."

Best of all, a passionate [TikTok following](#) is cheering Dumaa on along the way. She's racked up millions of likes on her impressive acoustic covers and teasers of her latest songs — all infused with her breathtaking vocals. Soon, you'll be able to add her highly-anticipated song "Quarter Life Crisis" to your

Spotify playlists, as well as Dumaa's first-ever EP come June 2023.

How has your creative process changed from the first songs you made to your upcoming EP?

At the base of it, the process is the same: me having an idea of where I want the song to go. But now, I have better resources and talented people around me helping me bring my songs to life. I also have a cohesive project with a specific sound, which is *finally* coming together.

How do you ideate your songs?

My songs usually stem from a vibe or emotion. One example is nostalgia. That's a very powerful emotion, and I experience it a lot. I like to rope it into my songs with a bit of an '80s twang, '70s guitar riffs, or '50s flair. Sometimes, I'll even bring each of those styles into one song because incorporating something that's familiar is really powerful, and pairing that with contemporary themes and lyrics is what I tend to go for.

How did you get connected to those retro vibes?

I was raised by two moms, and one is a lover of anything doo-wop, Aretha Franklin, Billie Holiday, Lesley Gore, and Patsy Cline. So part

of it was listening to that. My other mom is very into Cat Stevens, James Taylor, and Patty Griffin — kind of folksy stuff.

Neither of them is musical. One is a lawyer, and the other's a therapist. They both could not play an instrument or sing if their life depended on it. They both love, love, love, love music, though, so it was always playing growing up.

These days, I love watching old performances from festivals and shows such as old Stevie Nicks shows, and Aretha concerts. Something about them feels so raw, and so real, in the ways that they are able to emote and connect with the audience. When watching those concert clips, I'm like, "Oh, that's how I want to put on a show."

How did you get into playing piano and guitar?

I started piano when I was about 11. I wanted to play other instruments, but my moms believe piano is the basis of all instruments. They insisted I learned piano first, so I did.

I also grew up — and still am — obsessed with Taylor Swift. She plays guitar, so I wanted to play guitar too. So I made a deal with myself: once I could accompany myself on piano and sing, then I could start guitar. When I was about 12, I

started taking guitar lessons and immediately gravitated towards that more. Around that time, I realized I could bring a song to life. I could sit down, put the songs I had been writing to music, and play them for people, which was incredible.

What does it feel like when you're writing these songs? What is the actual lyric writing process like?

There's kind of two different paths for me. One is I'll sit down with a guitar and play around with things until something sticks — whether that's going through songs that I like and finding a chord progression or trying to pull from something and turning that into a song. The other path is I have a lyric or concept in mind and go with it.

The songs I am the proudest of have been ones that have come from difficult times when I needed a space to process my emotions. Putting all my thoughts and feelings on paper and playing through them helped me realize what I was really going through. Writing is funny, though, because once you put out the song, it belongs to anyone who hears it. I really try to write songs from a personal place, and if people relate to them, that's great.

Are all of your songs based on real-life experiences?

No, you can only squeeze so much out of life. One relationship will give me about 50 songs. But even after that, those 50 start getting really repetitive. I often take inspiration from the people around me and TV shows or movies if I'm ever feeling stuck. I actually just watched *Sex and the City*, and it was so fun to tap into that vibe and write a song.

But mostly, a lot of my writing recently has been questioning what is going on in the world right now. That's kind of all I can think about. So not even stuff that necessarily has to do with me — just whatever's around me and whatever's on my mind can be translated into my music.

What kind of TV shows and movies are the ones that stick with you?

Any kind of jilted romance. I like sad songs, and I definitely haven't had enough experience in my life to write a plethora of love songs. So anything involving romance gone wrong or "right person, wrong time" hits me hard.

Coming of age and anything familial too. Every time I hear one of those songs that's about someone's family or feeling homesick, I'm like, damn, that hit right where I needed it to.

Tell me about The Roxy in LA for the first time. What was it like to be on stage?

I played a fair amount of shows growing up, but that was the first time I got to go into a green room. It wasn't just an open mic or playing for a gala. It was a real show. There's no feeling like being on a stage and getting to sing music for other people. Every time I get on stage, I just want to do it over and over and over and over again.

It was a stripped-back acoustic set — just me and my friend accompanying me on guitar and piano. It was like Christmas morning. I woke up at 5 a.m. because I couldn't sleep. Showing up to the venue, getting a special wristband, having the curtains come up, and running onto stage reminded me I'm where I'm supposed to be. I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing, and I could do this for the rest of my life. I even sang a cover of "Complicated" by Avril Lavigne and having everyone sing along with me was the best feeling in the world.

When was the first time you played for people other than your moms?

At a talent show at a camp when I was 11. I did chorus growing up, but at camp, I sang "You Belong with Me" by Taylor Swift by myself, and I was terrified. I stared at the floor and held the microphone the whole time. But again, I thought to myself, "Wow, that was incredible. I want to do that again and again and again."

From there, I started doing open mics and showcases. Every time I learned so much and figured out what worked best.

Were you the youngest person at open mics?

Yes. Most of the time.

What other songs do you like to cover?

I have an ever-growing list of songs I want to cover. They're all over the place, so I play off of the vibe of the show that I'm playing. "Top of The World" by Patty Griffin is my favorite song in the entire world, so I'd love to be able to play that for people.

I love Amy Winehouse with all my heart and soul, so I've done a few covers of hers at shows. She's got such fun music that just has an oomph to it. Taylor Swift is another person that I love to cover. I just love getting to sing her songs, but it's also really sweet because a lot of my fans and people who like my music also like Taylor Swift.

What era of Taylor Swift, though?

I'm a *Fearless* girl through and through. When that album came out, I fell in love with her music. I love playing on that nostalgia. Songs from the 2000s, in general, elicit so much emotion when you play

them at shows. I love songs that are tied to events or significant times in people's lives. *Fearless* was such a big time in my life, and I know it also was for a lot of other people. The same goes for Amy Winehouse and even old Rihanna songs I've done. Or I'll take it back even further and do some Fleetwood Mac and Creedence Clearwater Revival.

Taking things forward, what does the future look like for you?

My biggest goal is to be able to make a career in music.

I've always been a person that dreams big. There's nothing that I want to do more in life than music. I want to be selling out stadium tours. I want to be playing for everyone, but I just really want to be connecting to people with my music. Music is such a powerful thing. I felt it myself. To be able to do that for other people would be so incredible.

I will say that growing up, I watched the Grammys every year and would do a fake little acceptance speech, so if I ever get to win a Grammy, I'm ready.

I'd love to be able to have a big enough platform to make a difference in the music world but also the world we currently live in. There are

a plethora of problems that need addressing, it's hard not to feel powerless sometimes. I've currently been really affected by the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and want to continue to fight for those rights as well as someday being able to create resources and outlets for those in need.

My last question for you is how does social media play a role in all of this?

I have quite a love-hate relationship with social media. It's such a powerful and wonderful tool at music's disposal, but it can also be quite draining sometimes.

Social media really is an incredible tool that you can use to reach people who have no idea who you are and connect with fans in a way that has never been done before. Social media is crucial to how I promote my music. But I also know, as an artist, it can be exhausting. I find myself spending more time than I would like making content and scrolling when I wish I could just be singing and writing with my guitar. At the end of the day though, I feel really lucky to have grown such a community with it and hope to be able to connect with others.

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