

Pass it On

The singer-songwriter tradition is at the core of the **DRYADIC** project. Under the stewardship of talented tunesmith Zora McDonald, this Brighton based ensemble produce compositions with intrinsic beauty and a relatable honesty, whether that be a rootsy shuffler or a contemporary folk story song. This broad and eclectic foundation is backed up by Zora's key influences, a list that ranges from the Levellers to Tori Amos and Bellowhead to Florence and the Machine. Indeed, these ingredients add up to an entity that is totally unique in today's musical landscape, as has been captured on quintessential underground offerings such as the *No Time Like the Present* EP. With a new core lineup now in place, featuring Aly Rainey on fiddle and Cula S. Walker on double bass, Zora took some time out to chat with *Aldora Britain Records* about the Dryadic journey so far. We discuss her growth and evolution as an artist, the impact of the COVID pandemic, formative musical memories, and much, much more. That exclusive conversation is published here in full for the very first time.

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Aldora Britain Records: Hello Zora, how are you? I am excited to be talking with the creative mind behind Dryadic. I am a big fan of what you do! Let's start off by travelling back in time. What are some of your earliest musical memories and what was it that first pushed you towards pursuing this passion of yours?

Zora McDonald: Hi Tom, thanks for having me! My uncle playing fiddle in the sun on my gran's porch is a cherished memory and definitely influenced my love of trad folk. I remember getting my first ever pop cassette, 'Bad Boys' by Wham, for Christmas when I was five from my aunty. I'm still a massive Wham fan! I learned to sing to loads of mum's pop vinyls like Joan Armatrading, Dolly Parton, the Bee Gees, Michael Jackson, Donna Summer, Barbra Streisand, and The Police. She took me to my first gig at Wembley for Michael

Jackson's 1988 *Bad* tour when I was nine, which was epic. I remember us going up by tube and hanging around for ages to buy tickets and my mum bartering with the touts. We practiced doing the moonwalk on a sheet of hardboard in the living room for a fortnight after that show!

Mum also used to play classical piano at the bottom of the stairs when she thought I was in bed, but I was actually sitting on the top step, sucking my thumb, and listening to her play. That's a really special memory. I sang relentlessly as a kid, in schools and choirs and apparently, I could be heard singing myself to sleep at night. Although I taught myself piano and played lots of Beatles, I had the *Compendium*, I didn't learn to play guitar until I was in my twenties and quickly got into busking and songwriting. I was involved in protest sites and community squats, so I was writing lots of probably really dodgy protest songs and ballads and playing solo at punk squat gigs and DIY festivals.

I'd always wanted to be a singer-songwriter but didn't have the tools or insight to try putting a band together, or getting my own gigs, until I moved to Brighton in my early thirties. My girlfriend at the time helped show me the ropes and gave me some confidence. She was in a great dance ska band from there, Los Albertos, and went on to play sax in my previous five-piece band The Tatsmiths. I couldn't imagine my life without writing and performing at the centre anymore.

Turn over for more sounds from Dryadic...

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Aldora Britain Records: And now, let’s take a leap forward to the present day and your fantastic Dryadic project. The beginnings and early days of this outlet must have been invigorating times. How did it all come to be? What was the initial spark? Is it an outlet for your solo musings or more of a collaborative kind of feel?

Zora McDonald: The Tatsmiths came to an end in late 2015 and I was a bit lost musically. I needed a bit of a break and refresh though. Dryadic was really a reunion between myself and fiddle player Joanna Dziecelska about a year later. I had started writing again and got the bug back. I was leaning more into the folk side of my sound. I really needed to play with other musicians again and it was awesome. That’s what ‘In My Blood’ is about. The lyrics in the bridge are, ‘I stood back up, I have arrived. I died a while but now I’m alive. It’s me and you, so come back round, I feel the need to make some sound...’. This became the title track for our first Dryadic recording. Dryadic stills play Tatsmiths songs, they are all my own songs after all, I just felt that I needed a new identity to move forward. Joanna was always pivotal in creating violin parts and crafting arrangements. We have a very natural musical connection, and her style is very forthcoming in the Dryadic recordings. She’s a great violinist.

Aldora Britain Records: In 2021, you released a fantastic and memorable EP called *No Time Like the Present*. Five fantastic artistic statements from you. Thank you for the music. What are your memories from writing, recording and releasing it, and is there anything that you would edit or change with the benefit of hindsight?

Zora McDonald: Thanks so much! I am very proud of that recording. There’s a songwriter’s saying that I like, ‘Make the music you want to hear’, and that was the case for me with that EP, which really matters. Would I do anything differently? Not much really. We were blessed with some fantastic musicians to work with, Alfie Weedon, Will Woodfine, and Cosmo. Jake Skinner is just an awesome producer. He is responsible for pulling out everything from under the vocals in the middle of ‘I Like’ to get that epic crash back in that I was looking for. I never tire of hearing that bit to be honest.

The experience was a bit of a dream for me, I could spend a lot of my life in the recording studio given the chance. One change would be to halve the length of the intro to ‘I Like’ to make it radio friendly. I love that song but since then I’ve learned more about commercially accessible arrangements. I would have liked to have had the money to do a whole album but that’s a thought for the not too distant future hopefully. Oh yeah, I would rearrange ‘The Hat’, so the verses are shorter and maybe add an extra chorus.

Aldora Britain Records: As you well know, I love the Dryadic sound and your approach to making music. It is such an eclectic and far-reaching melting pot. How would you say this style of yours came about, what goes into it for you, and who are some of your biggest influences and inspirations as an artist?

Zora McDonald: Such a lovely thing to say! I’m not sure how the style has come about. Like most things in my life, it grows and changes over time. I can never really be sure where my music is headed to be honest. I’m not the kind of artist with a super strong future vision or anything. I think that I’ve very much ‘learned on the job’, cherry picking ideas and inspiration from the musicians that I’ve worked with along the way. I like that because



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it feels like quite a human journey that's natural and meaningful. God, I hope that doesn't sound yucky and pretentious! Some of my biggest influences over the years have got to be the Levellers, Tracy Chapman, Florence and the Machine, Bellowhead, Dolly Parton, Tori Amos, Cat Empire, Kate Rusby, Ani DiFranco, First Aid Kit.

Aldora Britain Records: I would like to pick out two personal favourites from your back-catalogue now. Let's go for 'Pass it On' and 'I Like'. For each, what is the story behind the song, and can you remember the moment it came to be? Did anything in particular inspire them and what do they mean to you as the writer?

Zora McDonald: 'Pass it On' was mostly written while driving, a lot of my songs are, after a phone call with my sister. She had just skilfully sorted my head out, as she does, and then I spoke to my daughter and did the same thing for her. The phone call with my sweet and wise sis gave me the strength to support my daughter at the time. I remember feeling relieved, elated, and grateful at the time of writing it. It always makes me feel safe and loved when I sing it, it's a good memory!

'I Like' was written over a longer period. I think I started it in Poland on our street tour where I wrote 'The Hat', and then finished it after coming home. I'm pretty sure the guitar progression was written separately to the lyrics. The chorus is just me musing my summer adventures. Some of it is about Poland because I remember sending it to a friend who I met there when it was finished. When I play it, I get lots of lovely memories and sensations from many adventures, which makes me feel free and happy and like I can do anything!

Aldora Britain Records: Previously, if we travel back to 2017, you released an EP called *In My Blood*. This was my introduction to your music, so I look back on it very fondly. How do you reflect on these tunes on the whole now, and how would you say you have grown and evolved since its initial release?

Zora McDonald: I still play all these tunes live and they have all developed over the years. These days I play 'Gongoozling for Two' on the piano, which I love. 'In My Blood' is still a big number of any set and I would love the opportunity to produce these songs with a full band. 'Colours of the Hedgerow' doesn't get performed as much, but if it does, the first verse plays out with just fiddle and vocals, which is kind of ethereal sounding and pretty cool. I think my ability to craft a song's instrumental layers has become more nuanced and I've always liked a build-up, so I feel more solid in this approach now. My partner likes to remind me that I'm into really epic music and I think that's true. If I listen to *No Time Like the Present*, I can hear that in my style. That said, when I listen back to this EP, I'm usually pleasantly surprised at what I hear!

Aldora Britain Records: A broad question to finish. We have been through such a unique time in history over the last few years. Both politically and within society, and that is before you throw in the pandemic. How have the last several years impacted on you personally and as an artist? How do you think this time has changed the music industry, both for the good and the bad?

Zora McDonald: Ha! Well, regarding the music industry, I honestly feel so on the fringes that I don't know if I have much insight to offer you! The last few years have been difficult for artists, myself included, and at times it's been hard to keep going. I've often felt like I've fallen backwards rather than progressed. An upshot of this is that it's forced me to revisit why I do this, what I gain from it, and go back to basics philosophically. The musical isolation

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from the pandemic was a big factor in this and I’m still in a long process of getting some of my priorities a bit straighter than they may have been at times. This is good for my soul. I really struggle with the demand on me as a DIY musician to be competent at such a multitude of skills, like IT, marketing, and social media, etcetera. These things are not in my skill set and I can get overwhelmed and disheartened by it. But it’s great to see artists being able to gain traction independently with streaming and social media opening things up.

Quickfire Round

AB Records: Favourite artist? **Zora:** Impossible! Currently enjoying Acoustic Ladyland, Sonic Boom Six, Florence and the Machine, Adele. Fuck’s sake, way too many!

AB Records: Favourite album? **Zora:** Possibly Bellowhead’s *Burlesque* or Florence and the Machine’s *Ceremonials*. But no! As soon as I start to answer that, a whole library of albums floods my mind, ha!

AB Records: Last album you listened to from start to finish? **Zora:** Maybe Grace Petrie’s *Queer as Folk* or The People’s String Foundation’s *Making Waves*. One of them!

AB Records: First gig as an audience member? **Zora:** Big gig... M. Jackson, *Bad* tour, ’88. Grassroots... I suspect my uncle’s folk outfit Innominata.

AB Records: Loudest gig as an audience member? **Zora:** Got to be a numbers down and dirty South London squat gig from the 80s, quite likely with Inner Terrestrials playing!

AB Records: Style icon? **Zora:** Erm... possibly some lesbian crusties from the 80s! **AB Records:** Favourite film? **Zora:** *Pride*.

AB Records: Favourite TV show? **Zora:** Recently enjoyed *Beef*. I don’t watch much. **AB Records:** Favourite up and coming artist? **Zora:** Split Dogs, a Southwest queer punk outfit. Check them out!

