



HOW THE SQUEAKY-

CLEAN SWEDEN **TOVELO** BECAME THE WILDEST, DARKEST, FREAKIEST NEW FORCE IN POP MUSIC.

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Tove Lo performing in Sunrise, Fla., in December

**TOVE LO IS ABOUT TO BE IN A LOT OF PAIN.**

On a recent afternoon in Manhattan, she's bracing herself for a new tattoo: a lynx's face on the back of her right hand. The solitary wildcat has been her favorite animal since she was a kid, and it's actually part of her stage name—*Lo* is Swedish for *lynx*. Today's session will be her fourth time going under the needle, but the singer born Ebba Tove Elsa Nilsson is a little nervous about this one. After all, the hand is one of the most sensitive places on your body to get inked. "The [tattoo artist] is like, 'It's going to hurt like hell, get some good painkillers!'" she says. If anyone knows about overcoming agony—and walking away with great art—it's Tove Lo. Two years ago, she broke out with "Habits (Stay High)," a worldwide smash that saw her coping with a brutal breakup by getting wasted and checking out "freaky people" at sex clubs. Since then, she's made a career out of spinning stories of

debauchery and relationship damage into hits for both herself (her new *Gone Girl*-inspired single "Cool Girl") and others (she co-wrote Ellie Goulding's "Love Me Like You Do"). "We're always trying to portray toned-down versions of ourselves," Lo says. "It's so liberating to be this emotional and free in my music with everything—with sex, with drugs, with relationships." Now, on her second album, *Lady Wood*, the 29-year-old is exposing herself even further. Sometimes literally: In addition to more shadowy club bangers about, as Lo puts it, "the things that terrify me and turn me on," she's showing off her acting skills in an unsettling and deeply sexual *Lemonade*-style mini-movie that pits her against her self-destructive alter ego (played by actress Lina Esco). "She'll go where other people won't go," says David Massey, president and CEO of Island Records, Lo's label. "She has the ability to be really honest in a way that resonates with people in the modern world." That unfiltered honesty is also refreshing in today's pop landscape. Along with artists like hitmaking lothario the Weeknd, whom Lo cites as an inspiration, she's bringing a thrilling darkness to the Top 40. And where stars like Lady Gaga, Kesha, and Katy Perry have recently dominated with rosy it-gets-better anthems, Lo stands out like that

dangerous girl who proudly sports tear-streaked mascara and stays out till dawn. It's a persona that may resonate with fans feeling the pressure to curate their best selves in today's always-on culture. "To me, empowerment is not about being the strongest person who holds it together through everything," she says. "It's being a f---ing wreck and then somehow pulling yourself back up. Maybe you have a little less dignity. Maybe you add 10 years to your face. But you got through it." Growing up in an affluent suburb of Stockholm in the 1990s, Lo was always good at talking about her feelings. Her mom worked as a therapist and counselor to teens with drug problems—"I'm not sure if she's excited about my liberal view of [drug use]," Lo admits—and she says she's seen therapists

her whole life. But where Sweden may have a more open culture than the U.S.—nudity and profanity aren't censored on TV—Lo struggled with the mores of her hometown. "I didn't enjoy being a kid," she says. "[Everything] had to be really shiny. We don't share each other's issues, we don't talk about it." As a preteen, she found an outlet in grunge music and says Nirvana showed her that "it was okay to feel the pain." After attending music school, she sang in a "hard to listen to" math-rock band called Tremblebee—you can still find their MySpace page—but she started writing pop songs after the group split, having been inspired by fellow Swedes Robyn and Lykke Li. Before long, she was working behind the scenes with an impressive roster of collaborators. In 2012, on her first writing trip to Los Angeles after landing a publishing deal, a songwriter friend put her up in the home of legendary Swedish hitmaker Max Martin. Lo played him some of her early songs, and a year later, after she scored writing credits for the British quintet Girls Aloud and her close friends Icona Pop, Martin signed her to his songwriter-producer collective, Wolf Cousins. The nine-person group—which counts Lo as its lone female member—may not have any household names, but its members have dominated the Top 40 in recent years, collaborating with Taylor Swift, the Weeknd, Ariana Grande, and others. Initially, Lo planned to work as a songwriter and release solo music on the side, but shortly after she joined Wolf Cousins, "Habits" took off. Success, and the accompanying scrutiny, made her reconsider the vulnerability of her music. "It's a little scary," she says, "because you sit at this Top 40 station and they're like, 'So you cheated on your ex, how does that feel?!'" Yet the months

that followed her 2014 debut, *Queen of the Clouds*, were tumultuous. She was traveling the world and playing to the biggest crowds she'd ever seen, but she also endured a tough breakup and developed a vocal-cord cyst that required surgery and months of recovery. (Those career highs and lows inspired *Lady Wood*'s loose story line about chasing rushes through drugs, performing, or love. The record's first half, titled "Fairy Dust," explores the initial hit of adrenaline; the second half, "Fire Fade," is about when those sparks cool.) "Singing is the one thing that's always made me feel leveled," she says. "I had so much to get off my chest." So much, in fact, that she's already recorded her *next* album. The *Lady Wood* sequel, expected in 2017, continues the story with two additional chapters about climaxes and comedowns: "Light Beams" and "Pitch Black." The upcoming mini-movie focuses on songs from "Fairy Dust," but she's hoping to make films for the other chapters, too. Lo is also hoping the projects lead to acting work, citing roles in *Monster* and *Girl, Interrupted* as the kind of flawed characters she'd like to play. "I feel very calm in the sense that I really know what I want to do, and I'm not going to compromise in any way," she says of her vision. "It feels like a new start in my life—like 2.0, really." And the lynx tattoo is an emblem for that fresh start. The following day, at an industry listening party for *Lady Wood*, Lo shows off the finished ink. The session "hurt like f---," she says, but she declined any breaks. She isn't taking painkillers, either. Usually when she gets a new tattoo, she'll say it's her last, yet she's already got her next one in mind: lyrics from *Lady Wood* spiraling up her right forearm. It might hurt a lot, but it doesn't matter—she knows she can take the pain. ♦

Scenes from Tove Lo's Tim Erem-directed mini-movie, *Fairy*



*Dust*, which features songs from *Lady Wood*



(PREVIOUS SPREAD) MATT JONES; (THIS PAGE) LO: FAVOR HILL/IFLIMAGE.COM



**LADY WOOD**

LABEL ISLAND RECORDS

GENRE POP

REVIEW BY MADISON VAIN @TWEETSINVAIN

**SINCE SCORING IN 2014** with "Habits (Stay High)," a brash anthem about self-medicating your way through a breakup, Swedish singer-songwriter Tove Lo has become a fearless outsider in pop music—the Janis Ian in a cafeteria full of Regina Georges. It's a role she embellishes further on her excellent second studio album. With a title that refers to female arousal, Lo sounds as if she's in the throes of a quarter-life crisis. And what a beautiful and messy one it is. Over a dozen tunes, she grapples with the complex emotions of a young woman who's always falling for the wrong guy—and always seeking solace in an after-hours club. As she confesses on the woozy, hip-swiveling "WTF Love Is": "I know I'm a handful." While Lo's lyrics are stark and intensely personal, the music sounds engineered for the masses. Lo, who's written for Ellie Goulding and apprenticed with Max Martin, gets assists from Swedish songwriting pros the Struts. And together they mine pop gold, from the lead single, "Cool Girl," to the futuristic R&B-tinged "Don't Talk About It," where she boasts, "Know it's hazy/But it's amazing." You'll say the same about *Lady Wood*. **A-**