

Child stardom, delinquent mom: JENNY LEWIS's life-story already read like a Hollywood noir. Then came the bitter break-up, a mystery head trauma, and, finally, a storming comeback with a Beatle cameo. "I just keep fighting, no matter what," she tells BOB MEHR.

Photography by **AUTUMN DE WILDE**

ELEVEN-TIME WORLD CHAMPION MANNY Pacquiao has entered the building. It's a sunny January afternoon, and a crowd has gathered at a rundown strip mall on Vine Street in the unsavoury end of Hollywood. This is home to the Wild Card Boxing Club, the facility run by Pacquiao's longtime trainer Freddie Roach.

Pacquiao has arrived for a press day and public training session ahead of a welterweight title fight against challenger Adrien Broner in Las Vegas. As the pocket-sized Filipino southpaw makes his way past a mob of reporters and cameramen, he finds his path to ring cut off by an even smaller red-haired figure clad in black leather, denim and snakeskin boots.

It's the day after Jenny Lewis's 43rd birthday – which she shares with Elvis Presley and David Bowie – and she's a little hungover from the previous night's revelry. As the champ's entourage passes, she suddenly finds herself face to face with the Pac Man. For a moment, the two singers – Pacquiao is also a prolific easy listening artist in his native country – regard one another, before Lewis steps aside, beaming.

Lewis came to boxing – in some ways, was saved by it – several years ago, when late-night sessions watching the sport on TV helped her deal with a sustained and debilitating attack of insomnia ("I had never been suicidal in my life until I could not sleep for a year," she says). Now she's a devotee, attending bouts, reeling off stats.

"My grandfather was an amateur boxer," she explains, making playful lunges at a speed bag in the corner of the Wild Card. "Could be in my blood."

From the outside, Lewis's life looks gilded. A successful child actor, an indie pin-up in alt-rockers Rilo Kiley, and now a solo star

with a fourth album – *On The Line* – featuring rock aristocracy including Beck, Don Was and Ringo Starr. But the reality – a junkie mom, a jailbird dad, her fight to assert her creative autonomy – is far grittier, sometimes shocking. Lewis has more in common with the fighters training at the Wild Card than you'd think. "Maybe that's why I relate," she tells MOJO. "Maybe that's why I'm here."

IN LEWIS'S FAMILY, BOXING MIXED WITH SHOWBIZ, and something darker. Hailing from Philadelphia, the pugilist grandfather became a vaudeville performer and then a low-level gangster, while her grandmother was a Busby Berkeley dancer. Lewis's father, Eddie Gordon, was a harmonica prodigy who spent his life playing the lounge circuit but also spent time in prison for fraud. Her mother, Linda Lewis, was a blue collar Los Angeles girl, a waitress with showbiz aspirations. As the story goes, she was paying for singing lessons, and got ripped off by her teacher. She went to the local musicians union to lodge a complaint but ended up with a gig singing in Las Vegas with a band called Love's Way, where she met and married Gordon.

Lewis and her older sister were raised in Sin City, until Love's Way broke up and, along with it, her parents' marriage. Her father would essentially disappear from her life after that. "I don't have any memories of him before I was 10 or 12," Lewis says. "Later, he would crop up with his new wife or kids, and then he and mom would have a big fight and we wouldn't see him again for years."

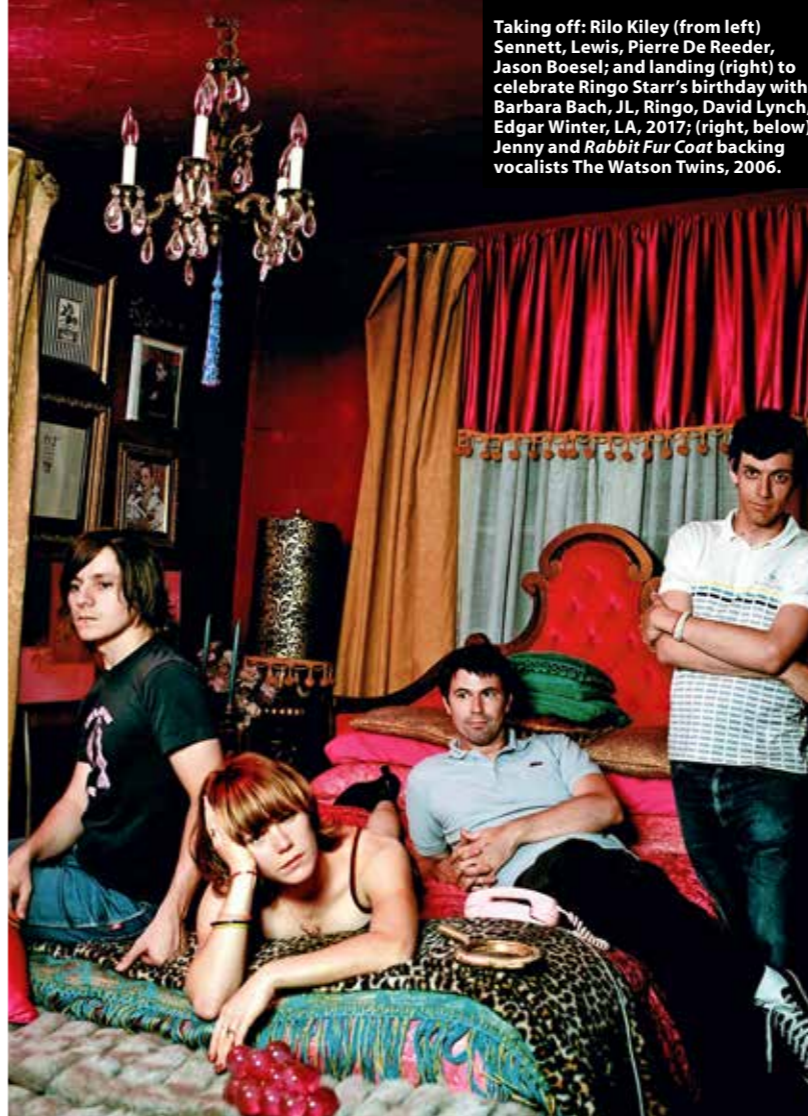
After the couple split, Lewis's mother moved the family home to LA – to the San Fernando Valley suburb of Van Nuys – and went back to waitressing. Her younger daughter turned out to be outgoing, precocious. "I was one of those annoying little kids in a restaurant that would go and greet people at other tables," says >

On the line: survivor supreme Jenny Lewis. "It's all pretty great considering where I come from."





Champions league: Lewis and boxing legend Manny Pacquiao; the rising screen star (above right) at *The Wizard* premiere with Fred Savage, California, 1989; (right) with Blake Sennett in *Rilo Kiley*, Roseland Ballroom, New York, 2007.



Taking off: Rilo Kiley (from left) Sennett, Lewis, Pierre De Reeder, Jason Boesel; and landing (right) to celebrate Ringo Starr's birthday with Barbara Bach, JL, Ringo, David Lynch, Edgar Winter, LA, 2017; (right, below) Jenny and Rabbit Fur Coat backing vocalists The Watson Twins, 2006.



“TO ME, MANNY PACQUIAO IS REALLY INSPIRING. TO BE A CHAMP IN YOUR FORTIES – IT COMES DOWN TO DISCIPLINE.”

Jenny Lewis

◀ Lewis. “Just sit down with them: ‘Hi! How are you!?’ It turned out that an agent happened to be at one of those tables.”

Lewis was three years old when she landed her first commercial, for Jell-O. Over the next 16 years she would build an impressive CV, with ad slots, TV parts and top roles in big budget Hollywood films. For a generation of American kids who grew up in the ‘80s, Lewis is a fondly remembered talisman of their youth, the star of kitschy adolescent fare like *Troop Beverly Hills* and *The Wizard*.

But as Lewis’s career blossomed, her mother was exhibiting signs of severe psychological issues, and began self-medicating with hard drugs. “She had good intentions, but she needed to numb out because she didn’t want to deal with her own trauma,” says Lewis. As her career rose – in 1986 she landed a starring role on Lucille Ball’s prime time comeback *Life With Lucy* – her mother got deep into heroin. “Once the acting money started rolling in – and it was a lot of fucking money – it meant more drugs for her. And then she was selling drugs. All this shit was going on that I knew was totally off, but I had to get up in the morning and go to work.”

Lewis’s mother had a younger boyfriend who taught Jenny to play piano and guitar: “He was the rock for us for a while,” she says, “but then he got lost into drugs and ended up in jail too.” Later, fellow child actor Corey Haim gave her a Beastie Boys/*Run-D.M.C.* mixtape, turning her on to hip-hop. She wrote rap-like poems that soon morphed into songs – odd, disquieting narratives informed by her mother’s misadventures. “I was writing about my mom’s experiences,” she says: “all the crazy people she would meet, all these stories she would tell me.”

Eventually, at age 16, Lewis was forced to leave home. “We owned three properties, all of which were foreclosed on,” she says. “Two of them were turned into sober living houses. My mom somehow had this hustle going, where she was using, yet running a sober living house. There like were drug addicts, meth addicts, hanging out in my childhood bedroom. The shit was crazy.”

In the mid-’90s, Lewis was introduced to an aspiring musician and fellow actor named Blake Sennett, who’d starred on a pair of popular teen shows, *Salute Your Shorts* and *Boy Meets World*. The two began dating and working up songs together, playing concerts for her roommates or on film sets for members of the crew. “The reaction to what we were doing was really good,” recalls Lewis. “Being a child actor felt like a very uncool thing. Playing music made me feel cool for the first time.”

At 19, Lewis retired from acting for good. “I realised I was a writer and I wanted to tell a story,” she says. “I wasn’t interested in reciting someone else’s words any more.”

AS THE PRESS THROG CONTINUES TO PEPPER Manny Pacquiao with questions, Jenny Lewis’s hangover is lingering. So she escapes the overheated gym for a little hair of the dog and nips into a corner liquor store to buy a Mexican beer. Sipping it outside the Wild Card, Lewis points to a bar next door called The Three Clubs. “Oh man – we used to play there,” she says wistfully, “back when the band was starting out.”

Rilo Kiley launched in 1998, taking their cues from the moody indie rock Lewis was obsessed with at the time (*Modest Mouse*,

Bright Eyes, *Death Cab For Cutie*). Twenty years later, she admits to being overeager to impress her then-beau. “Truth is, I’d never had a boyfriend before Blake. This was the dream for me. You’re in love with music and your partner, and you get to do it together. I didn’t question anything.” Still, Lewis and Sennett’s backgrounds as child actors made them easy targets. “We’d be playing to like eight people, and someone would yell, ‘Salute Your Shorts!’ or ‘The Wizard!’ That’s not really what you want to hear when you’re playing your serious indie rock songs.”

In 2001, the band signed to Seattle indie Barsuk, who released their debut full-length album, *Take Offs And Landings*. On tour with Superchunk they came to the attention of *Bright Eyes*’ leader Conor Oberst, who became the band’s champion, while *Bright Eyes*’ Mike Mogis produced their 2002 long-player, *The Execution Of All Things*, released on Saddle Creek. “We found a community and some credibility because of Conor and the label,” she says. That year, Lewis would collaborate with *Death Cab For Cutie*’s Ben Gibbard on the electro-pop project *The Postal Service*, whose album *Give Up* became a surprise platinum seller. Suddenly, Lewis was the ‘it’ girl of the indie rock set.

But even as their career seemed to be taking off, Rilo Kiley were coming apart. They hooked up with Warner Bros for third album, 2004’s *More Adventurous*, but Sennett and Lewis had broken up, and their musical partnership quickly soured. Sennett started another band, *The Elected*, releasing an album on Sub Pop titled, pointedly, *Me First*, and filled with poison pen letters like *My Baby’s A Dick*.

“I was heartbroken when that happened,” says Lewis. “I think he somehow hoped it was gonna surpass the Kiley and it didn’t go down like that.”

Lewis made her own solo album – the rootsy *Rabbit Fur Coat*, recorded with *The Watson Twins*, was met with acclaim and sales that outstripped Rilo Kiley’s efforts – and when Rilo Kiley reconvened for their final album, 2007’s *Under The Blacklight*, Lewis admits she was holding back some of her best material, and increas-

ingly butting heads with Sennett over the direction of the group. “He saw the band as this mega thing – and I never did. Maybe I was afraid, maybe that was sabotage on my part. But it freaked me out.”

In addition, Lewis felt an old publishing deal – where Sennett and Lewis went 40-40 on songwriting, irrespective of who had written what, with 20 per cent going to the rest of the group – no longer reflected her input. Still, the decision to end Rilo Kiley after a decade, and at the peak of their popularity, was an agonising one. The group’s final concert came in 2008, a packed hometown triumph at the Greek Theatre. “That was the biggest show we’d ever played – what a fucking idiot I am!” says Lewis, laughing. “All the work to get to that point... but when I walked off stage that night, I was like, I’m free. I. Am. Free.”

LEWIS BEGAN THE NEW EMANCIPATED PHASE OF her life in 2010, releasing a duo album with new boyfriend Johnathan Rice, as Jenny & Johnny, for Warner Bros. It was a few months later, at a New Year’s Eve party at Conor Oberst’s Echo Park digs, when Lewis says a combination of “wine, weed, and a really tight belt” caused her to faint in the bathroom, where she struck her head on ground. She spent the night watching the ball drop in the emergency room with a concussion, as doctors closed her head wound with nine staples.

Initially, Lewis seemed fine, and she and Rice headed out on the road together. Six weeks later she was at a hotel in New York City, fast asleep, when she sat bolt upright in bed. “Something had shifted in my body,” she says. “Like someone had flipped a switch.” Lewis didn’t sleep for the next three nights. On the fourth, she walked herself into an emergency room in Manhattan. “I thought either I am having a total nervous breakdown, or something is terribly wrong. That was the beginning of this two-and-a-half-year battle with insomnia.”

She underwent MRIs, CAT scans, various tests, but nothing fully explained her condition – yet the insomnia persisted. She ➤



Lewis holds the reins; (opposite, clockwise from top left) with Johnathan Rice in *Jenny & Johnny*, San Francisco, 2010; *Rabbit Fur Coat* era, Shepherd's Bush Empire, London, 2006; with Erika Forster (left) and Tennessee Thomas (right) in *Nice As Fuck*, 2016; with *On The Line* producer Ryan Adams, 2015.

“THERE WERE DRUG ADDICTS, METH ADDICTS, HANGING OUT IN MY CHILDHOOD BEDROOM. THE SHIT WAS CRAZY.”

Jenny Lewis

◀ tried a panoply of cures – prescription medications, natural remedies, hypnosis, acupuncture, neurofeedback and new age healers – with little effect. At night she found comfort in 24/7, an HBO documentary series on boxers. The stories of these fighters – talented, hardscrabble kids, often from broken families – resonated: “It was all about where the fighters came from, how they struggled to triumph over adversity, and beat back their demons.”

Lewis also became fixed on the head trauma that fighters endure, in part, because “no one believed that my insomnia was from the head injury I suffered. Everyone thought I was just going crazy. I felt like Frances Farmer, man.” Even Rice suggested Lewis’s problem was more emotional than physical.

“He’d say, ‘This is [about] your past – you better deal with your mother issues or you’re never going to sleep.’ Maybe that was partly true – but some physiological thing had shifted in my body. He didn’t believe me. I feel like that set the stage for our break-up later.”

Meanwhile, she’d been struggling to complete a solo album. In need of a spark, she reached out to Ryan Adams – the two shared management – who’d opened a new analogue studio in Hollywood, to produce a track for her. Instead, Adams helped her re-cut the whole record, galvanising Lewis in the process. “Ryan intuitively

understood what I was going through,” she says of Adams, who’s battled his own health issues, dealing with Menière’s disease, an inner ear problem that affects hearing and balance. Released in 2014, Lewis’s *The Voyager* – which was rounded out with several Beck-produced tracks – proved another milestone, the album debuting in the Top 10 of the Billboard chart.

IN THE NEARLY FIVE-YEAR GAP SINCE HER LAST SOLO record, Lewis spent time in New York and Nashville, wrote songs and tried to process the dissolution of her 12-year relationship with Rice. Then producer pal Blake Mills asked her to write for a John Legend project he was working on. Her submission – a father-son narrative called Julien – didn’t get used, but she spent an evening at Electric Lady studios in New York, writing the song on the studio’s stately grand piano. “And that song sort of called all these other piano songs into existence,” she says.

With Ryan Adams co-producing, she took the songs to Capitol Studios, inviting Benmont Tench (keyboards), Don Was (bass) and Jim Keltner (drums) to join them. On the third day of tracking, Keltner and Was invited their pal Ringo Starr along and he ended up playing on the Fleetwood Mac-like Red Bull & Hennessy. “The idea was that Ringo and Keltner would play double drums like they did on The Concert For Bangladesh. It’s the coolest thing I’ve ever seen go down in a studio. Just the power and joy of those two – they were smiling ear to ear playing with each other.”

Starr was sufficiently enthused by Lewis’s songs that he drummed on another track, the album opener, Heads Gonna Roll. A boxing



ballad of sorts (“I’m gonna keep on dancing ‘til I hear that ringing bell”) it sets the sweeping cinematic tone for the album. “There was a moment as we were cutting that, where I was in the isolation booth, sitting at the *Tapestry* piano and looking out at Ringo Starr, thinking, Please do not fuck this up,” says Lewis, laughing. “My mouth was dry because I was so nervous.”

As Lewis worked to finish the project – she would write several more songs and enlist Beck to produce them – she got the call “that my mom was sick.”

She had been through parental reconciliation and loss before. There had been a rapprochement with her father, Eddie Gordon, before he died in 2010. But matters with her mother were more complicated. “We’d been estranged for 20 years,” says Lewis. “I just made a choice to show up at the hospital every day, despite not wanting to at first, and being really afraid.”

Lewis says sharing her mother’s final months was a life-altering experience. “The opportunity to spend time with her and to forgive – that was important.” As mother and daughter reconnected, it was music that brought them together. “In the hospital we would sing, talk about records, all the songs she loved.” Lewis remembers writing the hook for *On The Line*’s standout Little White Dove in the hallway of the hospice facility, “and singing it to my mom in bed before she passed.”

Linda Joy Lewis died in October 2017. *On The Line* is dedicated

JENNY ON THE BLOCK

The key albums, by Clive Prior.

RILO KILEY
Take Offs And Landings

(Barsuk, 2001)



The grown-up child stars’ full-length debut is a rootsy-pop charm offensive, Lewis’s ingénue vocal delivering sneakily jaundiced (ostensibly co-written) lines about “your insufferable friends” and the like, while Sennett sings four songs, less appealingly. Still, the broad-brush melodies promised that here was a combo with legs.

JENNY LEWIS WITH THE WATSON TWINS
Rabbit Fur Coat

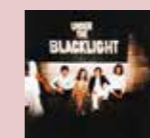
(Team Love, 2006)



Solo, Lewis returns to the country and folk well backed by ace vocal duo. Cue: delicious harmonies lacing transparent songs addressing the chimera of fame, and – a related topic – her mother, while around her a team including M Ward and Greg Kurstin reinvent classic Californian music. All this and no Blake Sennett vocals.

RILO KILEY
Under The Blacklight

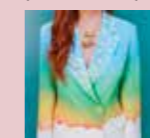
(Warner Bros, 2007)



By now, rock, electronica and big choruses had enriched the RK sound. Lewis and Sennett had also split, as had song credits. No longer girlish, Lewis sounds like she’s seen some things, while a neo-new wave production glosses the bitter themes. RK atomised after this; Sennett cited “deception, disloyalty and greed”.

JENNY LEWIS
The Voyager

(Warner Bros, 2014)



More consistent-sounding than 2008’s *Acid Tongue* (with its cameos from Elvis Costello and Lewis’s dad), this gave thoughtful songs a dreamy-soft mid-’80s patina. Head Underwater alludes to Lewis’s traumatic mystery ailment (see *interview*); She’s Not Me is a tortured post-break-up brown study; Slippery Slopes is 100 per cent awesome.

NICE AS FUCK
Nice As Fuck

(Loves Way, 2016)



Joining Erika Forster from Au Revoir Simone and Tennessee Thomas (daughter of The Attractions’ Pete) from The Like in a bass-guitar-fixated trio, Lewis sounds relaxed on post-punky songs that welcome back the spirit of Luscious Jackson. The hypnotic Door’s fun video co-stars Adam Green and The Strokes’ Albert Hammond Jr.



to her memory. “All the things I wanted to bring up to my mom, I did,” says Lewis, “maybe not in the ways I’d imagined. But it was all addressed and resolved for us, for both of us, at last.”

THE AFTERNOON HAS TURNED to evening as Lewis winds down Vine Street in the Hollywood dusk. In a few days she’ll fly to Vegas to sit ringside and watch Pacquiao’s dazzling performance as he beats his younger opponent. “Manny is really inspiring,” says Lewis. “The idea of being able to be a champ in your forties – it comes down to discipline. Really, what got me out of that dark period in my own life was the discipline to show up every day for myself and not drive my car off Mulholland.”

After hearing Lewis’s story, MOJO notes that she seems surprisingly together given her bumpy path. “Well, I’m not saying I’m not fucked up,” she grins. “But I’m not on heroin, I’m not in jail – which is all pretty great considering where I come from.”

“I’m 43 years old and I’ve been in show-business for 40 years. I think it’s amazing that I survived what I have. I don’t feel great all the time. I don’t always make the best decisions with my life. But I am someone who’s always willing to show up and do the work,” she says, raising her fists and dropping into a boxer’s stance. “I just keep fighting, no matter what.”

On The Line is reviewed on p92.