THE POP LIFE

Given Up, a Dream Returns to Life

By NEIL STRAUSS

LOS ANGELES, May 7 — Lauren Christy clearly recalls the day she decided to give up her dream of being a pop star. The year was 1999, and she was flying back to Los Angeles from London, where she had met a talent scout who was interested in signing her. Afterward the scout called her manager, Sandy Roberton, and said he wasn't interested. "But," he asked Mr. Roberton, "can I have a song of hers to use for Natalie Imbruglia's next single?"

Peeved over the insult and disappointed by being dropped by Mercury Records after releasing two albums, Ms. Christy decided on that plane ride that she was tired of trying to make it as a singer.

Her husband, Graham Edwards, who was in a band called Dollshead, had reached a similar conclusion for himself. Dollshead, which also included a new keyboardist named Scott Spock, had just been dropped by Refuge/MCA Records. All three were in their 30's, and it was time to give up the fantasies of stardom that they had held onto for years. Mr. Roberton suggested instead that they team up and write songs for other artists.

"We thought we'd be behind the scenes for the rest of our lives," Ms. Christy said. Mr. Spock felt the same way. "We made the decision that we were over it," he said. "Then, as soon as we were over it — boom — everything started happening."
That boom was Avril Lavigne. Adapting the name the Matrix, the three wrote and produced 10 songs with Ms. Lavigne, a complete unknown who was about to be dropped from her label. Three of those songs became No. 1 radio hits. Since then the Matrix has become the hottest pop-rock production team of the moment, the go-to people for record executives who think that an artist's CD-in-progress needs a sure hit.

This month the Matrix is working with Britney Spears, Ricky Martin and David Bowie. This month three new records with its productions are coming out: by the college-rock singer-songwriter Liz Phair, the female pop-rock act Lillix, and the sister-led group the Troys.

But the real Hollywood twist is that four years after shelving their dreams of pop stardom, these three are about to get another chance. Though the Matrix exists only as a songwriting and production team, a major label, Sony, called its members recently and offered to sign them as a band. Mr. Roberton said they were negotiating a deal with Sony; they are already auditioning female singers to front the band, which they plan to take on tour.

"Our manager kept saying, 'You're going to be huge,' " Ms. Christy said, referring to the first years of the Matrix. "But things wouldn't happen for us. There used to be times where the three of us were sleeping on the floor."

Ms. Christy was speaking in the control room of the group's home and studio in the San Fernando Valley, where the three were sprawled out in black swivel chairs

Because of Ms. Lavigne's success, the Matrix has been associated with female artists making radio-ready pop with a slightly alternative edge. But the team's breadth is larger. Mr. Edwards has roots in 1980's British new wave, having played bass with Go West, Haircut 100, and Adam and the Ants. Mr. Spock was originally a jazz trumpeter from St. Louis, and Ms. Christy started as a ballet dancer in London but became a contemporary pop singer-songwriter.

As the Matrix, the group received its first break from Christina Aguilera, who recorded their song "This Year" for her Christmas album. Shortly afterward, Arista Records sent the producers a 16-year-old who record executives wanted to mold into a country-pop star like Faith Hill. That 16-year-old was Ms. Lavigne.

Mr. Roberton, the Matrix's manager, told Arista that if the label sent Ms. Lavigne to Los Angeles the producers would not commit to anything, but they would try working with her. When she arrived,
Ms. Lavigne balked at the pop songs the Matrix presented at their first meeting. "She wasn't happy," Mr. Roberton said. "She didn't want to be Faith Hill; she wanted to be a rock singer. So they sent her to her hotel, and overnight they wrote 'Complicated.' " Ms. Lavigne's other future hits, "Sk8er Boi" and "I'm With You," soon followed as they worked together in the studio.

"Somebody in the industry sat us down and said, 'I'd bet my house that this song is going to go to No. 1,' " Ms. Christy said of "Complicated." "We just couldn't believe it. But he was right. Then the next two singles went to No. 1 as well. And our lives changed."

Mr. Roberton, whose company World's End manages some 60 other producers, said: "I call them my little Tamla Motown. They can just sit down and write a pop hit."

The group starts working this week with the Vancouver hip-hop act Swollen Members; next week it begins work with Mr. Bowie. It is scheduled to record with the British girl group Sugababes; it has recently written and produced six songs in Miami with Mr. Martin and has completed one of several songs that it is working on with Ms. Spears. A single it recorded with the folk-pop singer Jason Mraz is climbing the charts.

"Britney was great," Ms. Christy recalled. "She said, 'I really loved that 'I'm With You' song you did with Avril.' She knows she's not going to do a song like that, but she wanted something really melodic."

Melody is the forte of the Matrix, which took its name not from the movie but from the dictionary definition of the matrix as a womb. Its songs are meticulously conceived and arranged. Instead of reserving its hooks and melodies for the chorus, the Matrix sticks them everywhere, so that nearly every sung and instrumental section of a song is catchy. In many of its songs the melodies increase in presence and intensity until the song reaches such a powerful crescendo that it just breaks open, and a short, ambient, more studio-effect-driven passage follows before the hooks start building again. At the same time, as is the trend in Top 40 radio right now, its songs tend to rest on a head-bobbing pop-funk groove that is topped, when possible, by a touch of crisp guitar.

Though the Matrix is being talked about in the music business as if it were the pop-rock equivalent of the hip-hop hit-making producers the Neptunes, there has also been a backlash, with some music fans vilifying the Matrix as perpetuators of overproduced generic pop. Ms. Lavigne has tried to distance herself from the Matrix, possibly in an attempt to deflect criticism that she is a studio creation unable to write her own hit songs. "You can find people praising us, or
calling us soulless drones," Mr. Spock said, referring to a barb from an online music magazine. "But we laugh at that because we pride ourselves on capturing emotion and aggression."

One of the Matrix's more unlikely recent collaborators was Liz Phair, one of the most important female singer-songwriters to emerge from the indie-rock underground in the 90's. "I definitely have taken some arrows, but it's not any that stick," Ms. Phair said of her fans' reaction to the news that she was recording with the Matrix. "I'm very confident about the record and why I worked with them."

Ms. Phair recorded four songs with the Matrix and, like many of the artists who work with them, she decided to use all of those tracks on her album. Also like others, she was originally attracted to the Matrix because of their work with Ms. Lavigne. "I remember hearing 'Complicated' and being almost jealous," Mr. Phair recalled. "I thought, `Aw, that's what I want to sound like.' "

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