

# Lucy Dacus on a layered love life and the ‘horny poetry’ of her new album

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Lucy Dacus sits at a picnic table in Elysian Park blinking against the sun on a windy afternoon in early March. Last night, the 29-year-old singer and songwriter went to Elton John’s annual Oscar viewing party to watch Chappell Roan - “a new friend,” she says - perform “Pink Pony Club” with Sir Elton; tonight she has plans to catch Heart’s show at Crypto.com Arena with a group of pals that includes Roan and Katie Gavin of the band Muna. (Heart’s Nancy Wilson will later post backstage photos of the crew on Instagram.)

Between those amusements, Dacus is here to talk about her new album, “Forever Is a Feeling” - her fourth solo record but the first she’s made since she became something of a pop star as a member of Boygenius, the indie-rock supergroup she shares with Phoebe Bridgers and Julien Baker. Closely observed and exquisitely arranged, the LP is largely about falling in love - and lust - with Baker, with whom she’s now in a committed romantic relationship; “Best Guess” dreams of “tracing your tan lines” and “zipping your dress,” while “Ankles” asks a lover to “bite me on the shoulder” and “pull my hair” then “help me with the crossword in the mornings.”

“Lucy has a way of way of writing about these very real, very up-close relationships where you don’t lose any of the magic that’s there in the realm of yearning and fantasy,” says Gavin, who’ll open for Dacus on the road this year (including two dates in May at L.A.’s Greek Theatre). “She actually makes real intimacy very enticing.”

Yet “Forever,” due March 28 from Geffen Records, also feels shaped by the many high-flying experiences Dacus had with Boygenius, which won three Grammy Awards, appeared on the cover of Rolling Stone dressed as Nirvana and opened an Eras Tour date for Taylor Swift, who went on to mention Dacus by name in the title track of “The Tortured Poets Department.” Boygenius’ 2023 “The Record” is full of sharp thoughts about art and culture, not least the song “Leonard Cohen,” which ponders the “horny poetry” Cohen wrote while undergoing “an existential crisis at a Buddhist monastery.” Dacus does some more thinking about fame’s absurdities on “Forever Is a Feeling” - “I missed your call because I was in a boardroom full of old men guessing what the kids are getting into,” she sings in “Come Out” - even as she herself seems at low risk of getting lost in the sauce.

Says Gavin: “Basically, the babe’s got a good head on her shoulders.”

Dacus, who grew up in a devoutly religious family in Virginia, recorded “Forever” in Los Angeles and Nashville, Tennessee, with collaborators including Bridgers and Baker as well as Hozier, Blake Mills, Barteas Strange and Madison Cunningham. We spoke a week after she played some of the new songs in a gig at the Huntington, where her fans listened so intently that applauding almost felt rude.

**Q: You live in L.A. now, yeah?**

A: -Ish. Been traveling a lot. I really didn’t like it here when I first was visiting. I think I just went to the wrong neighborhoods and didn’t love enough people personally. Then once I made more friends - the people that love a city show you how to love it. I’m hooked now.

**Q: Last time we talked, you were living with a bunch of roommates in Philadelphia.**

A: I still spend a lot of time in



KEVIN WINTER / TNS

Lucy Dacus attends the Los Angeles premiere of “Road Diary: Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band” at Academy Museum of Motion Pictures on Oct. 21, 2024, in Los Angeles.

Philly, and my friends still live in that house. I miss the East Coast a lot - I miss shade and creeks. This is the first place I’ve lived where I can’t hear the train.

**Q: I assume Boygenius is what drew you west.**

A: We were here so much - recorded the record, did all the press and the music videos - that I was like, “Dang, I’m spending so much on hotels, I should just get a place,” Julien and I both. Phoebe is a big reason that I love this city - she said, “Skip this stuff. Eat here. See these people.”

**Q: What did you think when you heard Sabrina Carpenter’s song “Dumb & Poetic,” where she talks about a guy getting off to Leonard Cohen? Leonard caught a few strays over the last couple years.**

A: I don’t think of mine as a stray - it was meant with love. But what I said is true: He was having an identity crisis at a monastery and still managed to be horny. That is so admirable. I wish upon everyone the vitality to maintain horniness for that long in a life. As for the Sabrina song - I mean, if her project is based around horniness and cleverness, then of course she’s into Leonard Cohen. Who is more horny and clever?

**Q: I remembered the Boygenius lyric while I was listening to “Forever Is a Feeling,” which feels long on horny poetry.**

A: Thank you so much.

**Q: Is that fair?**

A: Oh, for sure. I think there’s maybe a little bit more looming loss and dread in it. But I tried to have a few solely lusty things going on.

**Q: Did writing that kind of music feel like a new undertaking for you?**

A: Frankly, it was just a new undertaking in my life - the music is an offshoot of that. I write from a very heady place, or an academic place, so to write basically from the body was really cool and embarrassing. I think embarrassment is a very important feeling - it shows that you care, that you’re risking something, that you’re actually pushing.

**Q: I think fans probably hear “Ankles” as a song about queer desire. I wondered whether you felt liberated to talk about rough sex because the song exists outside of a sort of heteronormative framework.**

A: I haven’t actually thought about that, though I’ve been noticing that people are talking to me about queerness way more after Boygenius. I’ve never specified pronouns in my

music, because although I love connecting with what I feel like is my community, what I would really want my community to be is lovers, which everyone can be. So “Ankles” wasn’t connected to queerness - it was more connected to lacking shame, which for me equates to more queerness in my actual life.

**Q: Leonard and Sabrina aside, who are your bards of desire?**

A: James Baldwin. Garth Greenwell. Jeanette Winterson. I’ve been reading the Brontë sisters one by one.

**Q: Why?**

A: Boygenius went to the Brontë museum [in England], and I was in the middle of “Jane Eyre” during that. Then I read “Wuthering Heights” recently, and I’m gonna read “Agnes Grey” next. They were repressed and wanting romance, and even though it’s a much different world now, I think a lot of people are feeling repressed and wanting romance. Wanting a mystical, cosmic love to come your way, or the idea that you love someone so undeniably and inexplicably that they could be the villain of the story and you still have to love them - that interests me.

**Q: What about musicians who sing or write well about desire?**

A: I listen to a bunch of old stuff. Labi Siffre I’ve been obsessed with forever. I love Billie Holiday and Julie London. Barbra Streisand, depending on the song. She can do anything, but if it’s a heartaching love song, you feel it in her voice.

**Q: Are you a Streisand head?**

A: I’m not a Streisand head - I haven’t read her book. But I grew up listening to musical theater because of my mom, and I think some of those really great singers influenced me more than I thought. They put a lot of the storytelling in the actual tone of their voice.

Oh, SZA - just to add to the bards.

**Q: I saw a video on TikTok of you in a dressing room at Joni Mitchell’s show last year at the Hollywood Bowl. You’re in there with Joni and Elton John and Brandi Carlile.**

A: And Annie Lennox. It was so weird. I just got film back from that night - I bring my little film camera around, especially when it’s a situation that I would never have expected my life to go. I’m like, “I should get a picture to prove to myself later that it was real.” But yeah - Brandi invited me, and I brought Chappell. They were like, “Come back and say hi,”

and then we just walked into the middle of this circle of legends.

**Q: What’d you think of Joni’s show that night?**

A: It was one of the most profound shows I’ve ever seen.

**Q: Lot of deep cuts.**

A: She’s in it for her heads. She wants to satisfy the people who’ve really been paying attention, and there’s something really honorable about that.

**Q: Sometimes I dread hearing the album an artist makes right after they achieve a certain level of celebrity, just because the disillusionment can feel really familiar. But in some of your new songs, you approach that experience in a way that feels fresh.**

A: When I meet famous people, within 10 minutes we’re talking about our stalkers. Everyone’s a little bit scarred, I think. So yeah - you end up writing from a more protected place, whereas in your early music, you’re not as protected and you’re writing whatever. I feel like I’m still writing whatever, which is nice. But the cost of still writing as I would talk to a friend is that I feel way more vulnerable putting it out. I think it’s worth it, and I’m proud of this record. But I get why people close off.

**Q: Hearing Taylor Swift sing your name really painted a picture of your new reality.**

A: You just have to build mental blocks against that maturing too much. And luckily, I’m replete with people that know me deeply and love me and have for a long time. That’s really where my center is.

**Q: You told me in 2021 that you think about your friendships way more than your romantic life - that the variety of friendship was more interesting to you. Now that you’ve moved into a kind of pop space -**

A: Whoa.

**Q: Did you feel obligated in any way to write about love because that’s what we expect from pop stars?**

A: Definitely not. I hate to say it, but last time we talked I wasn’t feeling very inspired romantically. I had these very complex friendships that were so rich, and now I feel like my love life got complicated in such a way that I’m like, “Oh, now I see the layers to this.” And I’ve only ever done friends to lovers. That’s the other thing - the romance is part of a longer history with people that I love and trust. People are like, “You could never pay me to date one of my friends.” But the idea of sitting down for a date and

quizzing each other to see if you’re soulmates is like - what?!

Anyways, I stand by what I said. And I’m hoping that through my life, I can see the ambiguity that comes in romance. I think what’s bothered me about romance is that people have these stratified steps and a playbook and rules. And that’s so antithetical to love. What it sounds like to me is the *consumerism* of love: You pay this behavior in order to get this security. It’s honestly a little manipulative. I have friends who I love, and the way they prepare for dates, I’m like, “Are you trying to trick this person? Do you not want them to know who you are?”

**Q: Your singing connotes a degree of wisdom - it’s the voice of someone who’s thought through a situation and reached a conclusion. But do you ever want to express some crippling uncertainty that you find your voice is not naturally suited to?**

A: There’s times where I feel like I get shaky. I think about the end of “Please Stay” - I started to cry after the take, which I can hear in my voice. But I think part of what works about the music is that the lyrics are almost always about uncertainty. So if I’ve arrived anywhere, it’s knowing I will never know and being at peace with how things are. Maybe that’s what you’re getting.

**Q: What did you want this new record to sound like? It sounds a lot different than “Home Video,” from 2021.**

A: I think it does too. I was thinking about love songs through time - going back to the past, to some of the artists we were talking about before, then even further back for the visual side of things, to the Pre-Raphaelite era. I wanted to connect these songs back to a history of love. So there’s violins, there’s harpsichord, there’s harps - there’s a lot in the arrangements that make it feel older or classic or something.

**Q: To what extent was that sound world shaped by having been on the road, playing big rock shows with Boygenius?**

A: I feel like rock is still the bread and butter of what I know how to do. But I just want to listen to the songs and think about the best way they can be presented. What are they asking for? When you said earlier it was a pop thing, I was like, *interesting*. Because I don’t feel like I’m in one genre.

**Q: I guess I meant pop in a more cultural or industrial sense - the major-label debut of it all.**

A: I’m loving working with Geffen. Matador was great for a starting point. But I did almost everything myself - there was pretty much no money for anything. I didn’t want to pretend for this that I’m still on an indie label. So let’s get the oil painting for the album cover, let’s go to Paris for a music video, let’s commission a Rodarte dress. I wanted to highlight people who are putting so much study and skill into craftsmanship.

**Q: You’re doing some world-building, which to me seems like a requirement of pop stardom in the 2020s.**

A: I’m not so interested in contributing to pop culture, though. I know people who are in conversation with the culture on purpose, but I feel a little more in conversation with myself. What’s gonna prove to me that the album is successful or not isn’t whether it makes a splash or if it’s on-trend of off-trend. I don’t even know how in touch I am with those things. I took a year off social media - I’ve missed a lot.

**Q: Took a year off because you needed creative space, or what?**

A: We were just so overexposed at the end of Boygenius. Before it started, we said one year and it’s over. And we only extended that to do the Grammys. Day after the Grammys, it’s off - Boygenius is done. I was tired, and if I get too tired, I’ll stop. And I don’t want to stop, so I needed to get the energy back somehow.

**Q: Is Boygenius done done?**

A: I would say indefinitely dormant. Sometimes we’ll all hang out and be like, “Oh, my God, we should do this or that.” But there’s no plans.