

# Man in MOTION

**LUCAS  
FRITZ  
AND HIS  
MUSIC  
MACHINE**

By  
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In this bright Friday morning in October, a sheen of frost covers the grass of Brown's Island. The Federal Reserve tower shines like a new silver dollar against the brilliant blue sky. Desultory joggers puff around the pebbled oval, while birds call merrily from water-side trees. At the island's eastern end, workers wearing black hoodies are rigging the stage for the evening's music bill: The Brook & The Bluff will open for the headliner, Mt. Joy, in a concert presented by the Broadberry Entertainment Group.

A young-looking man in a stocking cap directs the team. He is Lucas Fritz, the owner of Broadberry Entertainment Group and producer of a summer concert series on the island. A jazz trumpeter and punk rock guitarist, Fritz also leads one of the region's newest and most versatile booking agencies. He is a few days away from his 34th birthday.

Amid the rhythm of preparation, Fritz is seldom still, although he sometimes pauses, hands on hips, to watch the activity. A list maker, he's following along and checking items off. He and the team operate like a hard-touring band, wielding schedules, walkie-talkies and club carts instead of instruments, displaying a mixture of hard-won experience and improvisation.

"Everybody in whatever they do can get stressed," Fritz says. "But I'm working in music, and any day you get to work in music is a good day." >

MONICA ESCAMILLA





## JAZZ/PUNK

Born in Texas but raised in Chesterfield County, Fritz is the third of four children. His father worked for DuPont, which meant frequent transfers for the family. “When my sister was born in Richmond, they said, ‘We’re not moving anymore.’ Four kids and eight states, and that was enough.”

His parents weren’t especially musical — “My mom sings in the church choir, and my dad listens to the radio,” Fritz quips — but they encouraged their children toward school chorus and band, which is how he fell in love with making music.

At Clover Hill High School — the old one, on Hull Street Road — Fritz was fascinated by jazz trumpet, but youthful exuberance led him to teach himself guitar and perform in hardcore punk bands. He took an Advanced Placement music-theory class from Melissa Gordon, the school’s orchestra director, which developed into a senior year independent study. He played in the show band and took private trumpet lessons with Mark Ingraham of Beast Wellington and several music outfits. “He was a great early mentor of mine,” Fritz recalls.

Ingraham invited Fritz to sit in with DJ Williams at Café Diem, where Williams hosted an open mic on Sunday nights. On Fridays, Fritz participated in a jazz jam at Emilio’s with Doc and the Keynotes. He was playing in clubs where he wasn’t old enough to drink. “Interesting,” he says with a chuckle, “being 18, if you have a horn, a lot of times they don’t check your ID.” He lowers his voice. “I mean, you have to be 21 to buy a trumpet at the trumpet store, right?”

Thanks in part to Ingraham’s connections in the community and at Virginia

Commonwealth University, Fritz joined VCU’s jazz program, where his instructors included composer and pianist Doug Richards and respected trumpeters Rex Richardson and Taylor Barnett. He originally pursued double majors in music and business management, but, Fritz says, “I took a step back after my first year. Look, I’m practicing four, five hours a day, working on music and skirting by on my business classes.” He majored in jazz performance and minored in business.

## UNDER A BRIDGE BY THE RIVER

On Brown’s Island there comes a sense of the-circus-is-in-town excitement as large vehicles bearing equipment churn up poofs of chalky dust. Mt. Joy’s sleek tour buses arrive, earlier than expected, lumbering into an ad hoc camp beneath the concrete buttresses of the Manchester Bridge. The musicians inside are probably asleep and unaware.

The stage is built on the chassis of a flatbed truck, and anchoring it in place requires vigorous drilling. Due to its manufacturing history, the island is studded with chunks of iron slag beneath the grass and gravel. Breton Pezzelle, the wiry and bearded stage manager, shakes his head and holds out an iron ingot to demonstrate the challenge. Two industrial pulleys and a massive mortise gear stand nearby, reminiscent of the power plants and paper mills that worked on the island. Today, different technology will produce entertainment and memories.

Weather is always a factor in outdoor shows. Half of the Brown’s Island concerts last summer were delayed or evacuated due to rain or lightning. The Avail show went on after a lightning delay, the marvelous dusk sun in the clouds creat-

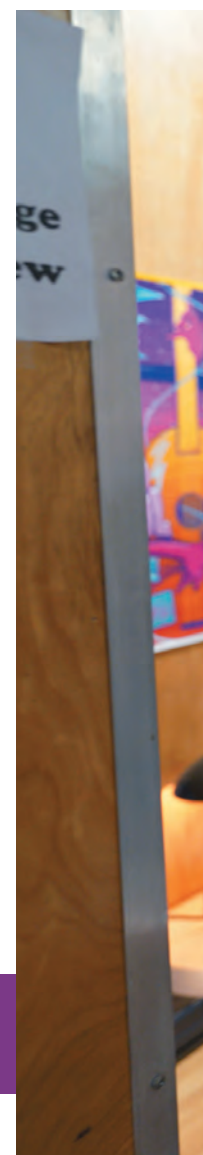
ing an extra layer of drama. Like Norman Rockwell’s painting of huddled umpires trying to determine whether to call the game on account of rain, Fritz keeps a metaphorical finger in the air — which means consulting weather radar.

There’s no need today — nothing but blue skies — but the temperature will sharply drop during the evening. Tent walls and a space heater are coming, “A last-minute request at 4 o’clock yesterday, so we aim to please,” says the production manager, Patrick Ball. Some requests are for comfort, others for aesthetics, such as Lucy Dacus’ desire for a bubble machine some weeks prior. She got one. “We’re solving problems across the land,” Ball says.

Then there are the trains. When Wilco played, Jeff Tweedy gave the CSX freight its due (train songs are, after all, an indelible part of America’s musical DNA), and the crowd cheered — but then came a second and a third, causing Tweedy to exclaim, “OK, train, you’ve had your time. This is my time now!”

Walkie-talkies squawk, and the crew begins raillery borne of camaraderie. “You’re doing a great job, buddy,” Fritz remarks to Ball as he hauls a platform. “You’re doing a great job, buddy,” Ball replies with an apparent in-joke.

Production costs range from \$25,000 to \$85,000 per concert, varying according to each band’s needs and the circumstances of the show. An



JAY PAUL

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Lucas Fritz, Broadberry Entertainment Group

event like today's uses a crew of about 60 people to staff the box office, the bar and merchandise tents; maintain security; and take care of the trash. Their production office is in a Richmond Folk Festival trailer, the exterior of which features paintings by Mikael Broth, a local artist known as The Night Owl, as a precaution against tagging; so far, the art defense seems to have worked.

At the trailer's entrance, a sign proclaims, "Welcome to Richmond!" and in red, "If you need anything at all, just ask.

Have A Great Show!" There's a Nap Map that guides visitors to hammocks strung among the canal-side boughs. Another poster presents "just a few" of the bands that have played Brown's Island, the rolling tumble of names resembling a Marvel movie's production credits scroll. It starts with Zac Brown, Alabama Shakes, and The Head and the Heart; wends through Cracker, Carbon Leaf, Neko Case, and J. Roddy Walston and The Business; continues to Lucy Dacus, Widespread Panic, Sonic Youth, Greensky Bluegrass,

Yo La Tengo, LL Cool J and Chuck Brown; and concludes with "The Black Crowes, Sleater-Kinney & NOW YOU!"

Venture Richmond's Stephen Lecky arrives in a pickup truck to deliver loaner furniture from LaDIFF. The pieces will provide mid-modernist comfort for the green room. He and Fritz go back 15 years. The collaboration between Venture Richmond and Broadberry Entertainment sprung out of pandemic restrictions; Venture Richmond rents the island for events like these. >





The organization's goal is to bring people downtown, and these occasions, Lecky says, are a great assistance for that cause. "Lucas brings a positive attitude, open mind and youthful energy to what he does," Lecky says. "He is willing to take risks. The Richmond music scene is a better place because of his and his team's work."

A phalanx of joggers puffs through the production activity. Pezzelle nods. "This'll happen all day," he says. "I mean, it's a public park." Some people stop and ask what's going on. They may return and bring friends.

The sound engineer brings up some selections from Daft Punk to test the deeper range of bass. The electronic gyrations stir the air with the sense of something to come.

### FROM THE CAMEL TO CHURCH

While he was at VCU, Fritz realized that students in the jazz department tended to play in sterile practice rooms or concert halls, not at clubs with people drinking and chatting. Through its foundation, the department offered grants for project proposals, so Fritz applied to cover production fees at The Camel for a biweekly jazz concert series for student performers at the club, which was then about 2 years old. The concept wasn't funded, but Rand Burgess, then The Camel's owner, told Fritz, "Well, if you still want to do this, I'll waive the fees, and you can still have the nights." For about six months, Fritz coordinated and curated VCU Jazz at The Camel.

The next semester, in 2008, Antonio García's music business class required a lengthy research project. Fritz wrote a paper about owning and operating a music venue. He asked Burgess if he'd ever had interns. "He said, 'I dunno, what would they do?'" And I said, "Thank you very much for asking — I'd do this, this,



this and this." He laughs and finishes the story, explaining that Burgess decided that the list of responsibilities was worth paying him for.

On his first day, Fritz cleaned The Camel's considerable — and considerably grungy — basement. "And then I was doing everything from barback to working the door," he recalls with relish. "So that was the beginning of my education about how to run a small entertainment venue. I worked at The Camel for the rest of my time at VCU and graduated in 2011."

Fritz gradually advanced into booking the venue with local, regional and, occasionally, national acts seven nights a week, with two shows on Friday and sometimes two or three shows on

*Clockwise from top left: Performing with Compass Rose Orchestra in 2010; VCU senior recital; Clover Hill High School quartet in 2007*

Sunday. It took a lot of bands to consistently fill the space, and Fritz quickly learned that it doesn't matter how good a band is, or how good you think

they are, if no one comes to see them. Booking only bands he liked worked for a time, but that qualification became untenable when putting up 600 shows a year. "And so I learned that my taste in music isn't really important," he says. "It's everybody else's taste. That's part of the joy for me, is seeing people having the time of their life."

Fritz continued to play music himself, too. He joined Fredericksburg's Elby Brass, which performed stylized covers of pop and Afro-beat tunes, as well as some originals, while kitted out



Fritz during his internship at The Camel, 2009

in purple band jackets inherited from the Lake Braddock High School marching band. Fritz describes it as the junior varsity version of No BS Brass. He also sat in with the Blue Tips, a soul wedding band, and his labor of love, Compass Rose, an eight-piece modern avant garde jazz group (“Again, Fight the Big Bull, but JV,” Fritz says). And then, in 2011 or ’12, Fritz met Liz Goodwin, an organist and the music director for St. Edward the Confessor Catholic Church off Huguenot Road, who hired him to play for weddings and other church functions. He advanced to become the assistant director and office administrator.

Altogether, Fritz might work the door and run sound at The Camel on a Friday night, then go to a Saturday gig in Washington, D.C., get to bed at 2 a.m., and be up for the church at 7 a.m. Sunday. He maintained this schedule for about three years. “For me, if I’m doing all these things, presumably all different, it’s still all music,” he says. “It’s all going to the same angle. I just want to work or be around music.”

Then, in 2013, The Camel started having issues with permits and zoning because a neighbor wasn’t happy living next door to a music venue. In February 2014, while looking for a new space, Burgess came across a place on Broad Street near Mulberry that was already part of Richmond’s music history. Called Much More during the early 1980s, it had hosted Stevie Ray Vaughn and Double Trouble, R.E.M., The Replacements and Santana. Later, as an all-ages venue called The Cellar Door, the space presented Stryper, Johnny Winter, The Ramones and Sheila E.

Invited to join the new enterprise, Fritz agonized over the decision. He held a full-time job at the church with health benefits and paid time off. He’d bought a house in Jackson Ward. “I felt like I was in a pretty good place,” he recalls. “So then I get asked to turn my whole world upside down.”

#### “THE SUN IS A DEADLY LASER”

On Brown’s Island, the morning chill has burned off, and the temperature is

heading into the 70s; it’s perfect concert weather. The crew has pulled off their caps and jackets, revealing tattooed forearms and muscles. Fritz hauls coils of orange extension cords while speaking into his shoulder walkie. He helps install blow-through barriers alongside the stage that allow for the passage of sound. They rattle and clang as they are transported into place.

The club carts roll out, kicking up puffs of dust. They started with one car but now have three for the larger shows. Fritz uses his to ferry skiffs of bottled water, transport signs, and deliver chairs and tables for the ticketing and merchant tents. He pulls green elastic straps across the cargo to keep things from shifting or falling. “Key rule is to always take the key with you,” Fritz says. “Otherwise, somebody’s sure to drive off with it.”

Fritz periodically ducks into the production office trailer to check emails and follow up on other details. Broadberry Entertainment is the exclusive programmer for six venues in the region and a contributing booker for five to seven more. One of the more recent contracts is with Myth Live, a 3,000-capacity venue outside Minneapolis-St. Paul. There are plenty of matters needing his attention.

Assisting in this effort, and sharing the space with Fritz here, is his colleague Jessica Gordon. She’s been part of the region’s music scene and teaching English at VCU for more than two decades. Parallel lives run in the business. “We complement each other,” Gordon says of Fritz. “He’s more indie, I’m more punk and we get along well.”

When she was 13, Gordon started attending shows at the Atlantic Beach Club, an all-ages, no-alcohol venue in Virginia Beach that was started by her high school band teacher. “No booze, so my parents let me go,” she says. Her first concert there was Richmond’s own shock-rock metal group GWAR. “My first show. I knew nothing about them; they were like five or six years older than me. I wondered if all concerts were like this!” >

OPPOSITE PAGE AND ABOVE: COURTESY LUCAS FRITZ



A few years later, living at Park Avenue and Harrison Street, she and some friends formed a band called The Candy Snatchers and performed a house concert, charging \$3 a person. They ended the night with \$650. “To this day, I don’t know how it happened,” Gordon says. “It was my 18th birthday, and I wanted to go to a concert and get drunk, which I did.” She raises a brow. “But I didn’t intend to make any money in the process. That was basically the first concert I ever booked.”

She eventually ran Twisters, a punk and indie venue on Grace Street by VCU, then worked at Alley Katz — “That had the greatest-sounding room,” Gordon recalls — the Canal Club and The National, and founded her own concert promotion company, The Trigger System. “This is a substantial part of who I am,” she says.

Gordon, Fritz and Ball start Altman-esque crosstalk about venues, confirmations, arrangements, insurance and generators. The Camel’s Sunday show is sold out for the Japanese noise-rock band Melt-Banana. “Richmond is crazy for that scene right now,” Ball explains.

Fritz reminds Ball that the tent over the sound equipment needs to be removed prior to showtime because it hampers the views of both the stage and the projection screen.

“Why do they need the tent anyway?” Gordon asks.

“They can’t see the monitors because of the glare,” Ball replies. “It’ll be OK once the light lowers.”

Fritz and Ball singsong “The sun is a deadly laser” to each other, sounding like a strange Gilbert and Sullivan routine. It’s a line from “history of the entire world, i guess,” an animated YouTube video by Bill Wurtz and yet another in-joke among the close-knit group.

### LIFE-WORK BALANCE

After considerable thinking and seeking a lot of advice, Fritz committed to what became The Broadberry, partnering with Burgess; Gordon, who brought booking

chops; and Matt McDonald of Joe’s Inn, who joined to run the food side. “I was never in that restaurant world,” Fritz says. “So this was, ‘I’ll work on the music side, you work on the bar side.’ A match made in heaven.”

The first time Fritz entered the space — then called Club Nu — it didn’t have a stage, but it did include a steel spiral staircase for clambering into the DJ booth and a dressing room with a catwalk. “The back wall behind the stage is still floor to ceiling mirrors,” Fritz says. “We just put a curtain over it.”

Down the street, local and regional bands regularly packed The Camel. The Broadberry provided a larger room. “We started trying to get more national acts, but that’s all relationships, and we didn’t have many of those.”

But Gordon had that kind of network. She proved pivotal in The Broadberry’s first year by bringing in the English extreme-metal band Carcass; The Termites; another British band, The Troubadours; and a Maryland jam-funk band, Pigeons Playing Ping Pong. “We hit the ground running that first year,” Fritz says. When Burgess bowed out in 2015, Fritz, Gordon and McDonald took over ownership of The Camel in addition to The Broadberry.

Meanwhile, Fritz was forming a different kind of partnership. In spring 2013, his former college roommate, musician Paul Wilson, introduced him to schoolteacher Emily Williams. Due to their schedules, Fritz says, “it was a lot of ships-in-the-night for those first couple of years.” His job can entail days that stretch from 9 a.m. to 3 a.m. After he and Emily were married in 2016, he says, “We’d lay down for a few hours, and then she’d get up and go to school, and I’d later go to work.” He makes a point to be home for dinner, but admits, “It’s difficult. I’d like to say I’ve found a good life-work balance, but that would be a lie.”

### ANOTHER STAGE

The business kept growing. With both

The Camel and The Broadberry booked to the hilt, Fritz needed another stage. He informally met Audrey Finney, the manager of the Capital Ale House’s music hall, and asked about booking acts into the space. Finney enthusiastically accepted, and they wrote a simple contract on a bar napkin. Fritz began booking the space, and the venue’s name was changed to Richmond Music Hall. In 2018, on the advice of accountants and lawyers, the Broadberry Entertainment Group was founded and began booking at the newly renovated Ashland Theatre.

In 2019, Broadberry Entertainment put on about 190 shows at Richmond Music Hall. The Broadberry and The Camel partnered with No BS Brass! and the Slack Family Band to create block parties and miniature festivals. “We try to find an artist who is developing, put them at The Camel,” Fritz explains. “Then, if they gain a following, we move them to the Richmond Music Hall, and then they play The Broadberry or maybe go to The National, and then maybe we’ll get them to Brown’s Island. Lucy Dacus is a prime example of that.”

Then the pandemic erased calendars and darkened theaters. On March 16, 2020, Fritz had to lay off Broadberry Entertainment Group’s entire staff, which had the mixed benefit of getting them ahead in the unemployment lines. For the next 18 months came one headache and worry after another. But, as Fritz hustled to keep the business alive, he sowed the seeds of future success. He streamed concerts from The Broadberry, then partnered with local favorites GWAR and Carbon Leaf, among others, to present socially distanced drive-in concerts at City Stadium and the Dia-





Left: Fritz makes announcements from the stage during a drive-in concert at City Stadium in 2020.

Gordon squints an eye and extends her arms to divide the space. “That’s 400 people there,” she says, then starts assess-

ing the space needed for those who will bring chairs and blankets.

“It’s kind of an art form to figure it out,” Fritz says.

Around 2 o’clock, Mt. Joy begins their sound check by jamming on stage. Fritz and Ball slap a somewhat ironic high-five. “You’d think we had a plan or something,” Ball exclaims. But they’ve both done this enough to know that, despite the best organization, something could still go wrong at any point.

Fritz relieves his anxiety by hopping on a bicycle and riding around the island to check the various stations. At 5:30 p.m., half an hour before the gates open, clusters of workers and volunteers gather to receive instructions and parse out assignments. Fritz bikes to the ticketing and ID stations. A massive line wends its way along the canal and over the bridge.

The gates open at 6 o’clock as the recorded Grateful Dead proclaim that they will survive, which seems appropriate given the past few years and a celebratory return to in-person and often crowded shows. Serious concertgoers stream in carrying chairs, determined to find the right spot in the grass.

After a day bathed in sunlight, the island eases into coolness and shadows and music. The sounds of Paul Simon summon them to Graceland. Then, as the crowd settles, the recorded music fades and opens The Brook & The Bluff kick off their set.

Later, Fritz considers his goals for the Broadberry Entertainment Group. “I feel like we’re still so new and developing that the sky is the limit,” he says. “I’d like to strategically partner with as many artists and entities as possible to see what is ultimately possible. I won’t rule any endgame out at this point. With the staff we have and the foundation we’ve built, we have some ways to go.” ■

## “The Richmond music scene is a better place because of his and his team’s work.”

Stephen Lecky, Venture Richmond

mond. The following year, he booked concerts with pod seating at Brown’s Island, which positioned him to present the summer concert series on the island in 2022.

### SHOWTIME

Fritz packs his lunch in a soft lunch pail that he got as a youngster during a DuPont-sponsored Richmond Braves game giveaway — its printed motto proclaims, “Miracles of Science.” He usually packs one sandwich, but for his Brown’s Island days, he brings two. He’s teased about his lunch bag, but on long days

like this, when the staff starts getting hungry, he proclaims, “You should’ve brought your lunch!”

Around midday, Fritz dashes home for a shower and returns refreshed but nervous. Ticket sales indicate that 5,500 people will descend on Brown’s Island this evening. He joins Patrick Ball and Jessica Gordon in measuring the ticket sections and checking to see how the music can be heard and the bands seen. They are like generals sizing up the worthiness of the ground. They want the audience to feel the excitement of being in a crowd without being uncomfortable.

COURTESY LUCAS FRITZ