

# ABILITY



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artists



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humor author



**ILSE**  
singer, song-writer

# chris wood

building mental health awareness

Issue 04-16

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Gillian Friedman, MD

**MANAGING HEALTHS EDITOR**

E. Thomas Chappel, MD

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Ashley Fiolek  
Geri Jewell  
Regina Hall  
Myles Mellor (Crossword Puzzle)  
Paul Pelland (Long Haul Paul)  
Betsy Valnes  
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Melissa Murphy (Medical Illustration)

**PHOTOGRAPHY**

Nancy Villere (CrushPhotoStudios.com)  
Jon Risinger (Zach Excerpt)  
Toto Cullen (ILSE Images)

**TRANSCRIPTIONIST**

Sandy Grabowski

**MARKETING/PROMOTIONS  
SOCIAL MEDIA**

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Ana Fernandez  
Elizabeth Hagale  
Sophie Parker  
Marge Plasmier  
Lia Limón Martirosyan

**ABILITYJOBS.COM**

Marge Plasmier  
Casey Mims

**EDITORIAL**

[editorial@abilitymagazine.com](mailto:editorial@abilitymagazine.com)

**PUBLISHER / EDITOR-IN-CHIEF:**

Chet Cooper

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# ILSE GEVAERT

## I A M H U M A N

It's always fun not knowing who will greet us on the other side of an interview. This time it is a beautiful Belgian-born beauty with contagious energy. ILSE (pronounced like the Disney princess) Gevaert exudes positivity and is open to sharing how happy she is with her musical journey. This independent artist brings a raw and unique flavor to her creativity as seen in her *I Am Human* music video. These days, ILSE rarely has down time from recording and performing but enjoys spending it with friends and co-writing songs with young aspiring songwriters. We spoke with her about music, New York City rats dragging pizza, and the synergy she found with her artistic team.

*Lia Martirosyan: Where are you from originally?*

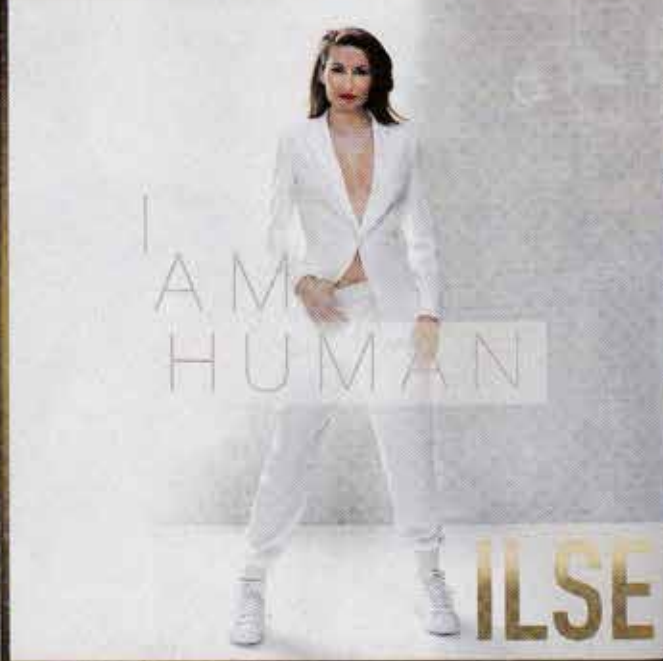
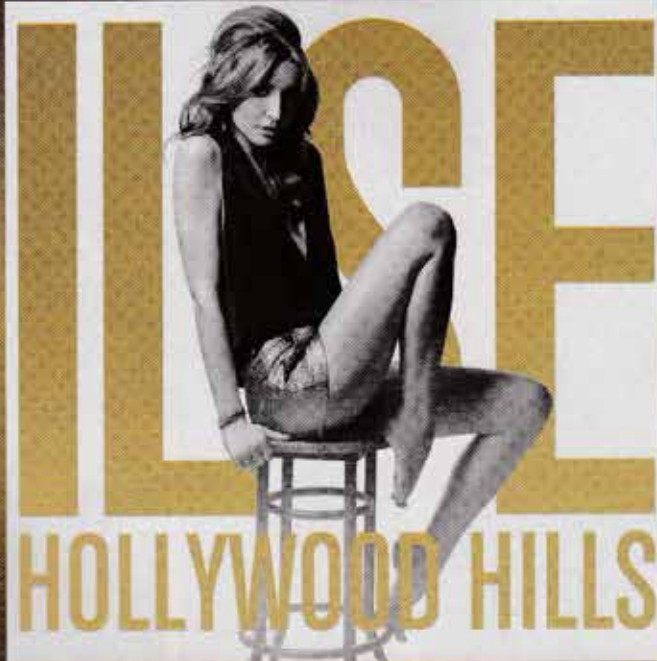
ILSE Gevaert: A small city in Belgium. It's very cute. It even has a castle. It's a beautiful, charming college town that's a lot of fun. Great food. Horrible weather.

*Lia: Is it better than New York?*

ILSE: Better than New York right now, yes, absolutely. I'm actually not in New York at the moment either. Yay! I'm so glad to be in Miami—now that I'm not recording. I can be a bit more flexible in my work, so I'm absolutely







taking advantage of it.

*Lia: So you're living in Miami right now?*

ILSE: Well, during the winter, and as soon as spring is back, then I'll be back in Brooklyn. The winters are absolutely harsh there. I've absolutely had enough of those winters. *(laughs)*

*Lia: I can only imagine. Where in Florida are you?*

ILSE: I'm in Miami Beach. It's wonderful. It's not the best weather ever, but I'll take it in exchange for snow. *(laughs)* I'm not too familiar with Florida. I still have to do a lot of traveling.

*Lia: Miami has its charming areas, but I heard that some of it's still kind of overpopulated.*

ILSE: Yeah. It's an interesting place. I definitely miss New York, but of course not the season, other than that, I definitely miss New York. It's so worldly. I actually like the grimy feel sometimes—it fits with being an artist.

*Lia: The smell of rats.*

*(laughter)*

ILSE: I love the garbage!

*Lia: Leaking undiagnosed water from the top of buildings.*

ILSE: Yeah, oh, my God. I once had a rat run into my

feet. Luckily it was winter, and I was wearing boots, but that was very strange. The rat just ran straight into me.

*(laughter)*

*Lia: Did you see that infamous rat recently that was dragging a pizza slice down the stairs?*

ILSE: No. Oh, my God, I've got to see it! Is it on YouTube?

*Lia: It should be. If you type in "rat" and "pizza," it should pop up.*

*(laughter)*

*It went viral for I don't know how long.*

ILSE: *(laughs)* That's amazing! A famous rat—that's awesome! Oh, my goodness!

*Lia: But you have big cockroaches and water bugs, or whatever they call them, in Miami.*

ILSE: Here in Miami? Oh, my goodness, yes, I've seen them, too. I'm definitely a bit scared of those. I know in New York I've seen my fair share too. Ew!

*Lia: We're going to produce a video of a cockroach or a water bug pulling a pizza down the stairs.*

*(laughter)*

ILSE: I know they're supposed to be more afraid of us





than we are of them, but I don't know. There's something about these little insects. And other than that, I'm so animal-friendly; I absolutely love animals. But there's something about those little creatures that I haven't quite figured out yet.

*Lia: That'll be your disclaimer for PETA.*

ILSE: I still have my homework to do with the rodents.

*Lia: Don't worry—there are a lot of people on the same page with you on that one. Let's talk a bit about your music video, I Am Human. How did you get going on it?*

ILSE: It has a lot of different layers. It has my personal story on the one hand—on the one hand!

*(laughter)*

I always run into these funny sentences! There's definitely my own personal story of being different and trying to accept myself. It's not that easy, coming from bullying and people staring at you and children being freaked out by you. But it's really, really learning to love myself just the way I am. And I think that's where everything started to go more smoothly. Once you accept yourself, then all of a sudden you see that the world accepts you too. And I think I was subconsciously trying to hide my arm from the industry, because I wasn't sure if a record label would accept someone who's not perfect. When I see the entertainment business and all the artists, they all seem very, very perfect to me. I wasn't sure if I was fitting in with that.

So "I Am Human," especially the single, started out with me being myself. Also, it was a bit of an answer to the rappers and other pop singers who are always bragging about, "I've got this, I've got that, I've got cars, I've got women," and I was like, "You know what? I don't have any of these things," and I was thinking, "Who can actually link to lyrics like that?" I wanted to make something that was very honest and real, like, "This is how I feel. It hasn't been easy, but this is my truth." That's where "I Am Human" as a single came from. *I Am Human* as the album is like a journey. It really feels like a book, almost; it starts with an intro and it has a poetic intermezzo. It's definitely about whatever comes your way you can always get up and try again. The phoenix never dies. You can kill the phoenix, but it will just come back to life and rise up again. And then I take you through the whole human experience. Also, I say that I do everything for love, because I think love is the most beautiful thing on this planet—other than music, of course. Also, two humans together, what happens then? It's an honest portrait of human relationships and how much we try, but we fail; we try to make it work, we try again, and we fail again. That's, for example, the basis of "We Rise, We Fall." And then it ends with the very abstract song "Oasis," where I'm not quite really finding my place on this

planet, but I keep looking and looking. I find myself in the desert searching for the oasis.

And then there's a whole bunch of very fun bonus tracks, with dance remixes and an "I Am Human" world version, produced by my friend who won a Grammy last year in the New Age category. I'm so, so, so happy. I feel like I've worked my entire life for this album. I'm so excited that it's finally finished, and it's just the way I like it.

*Lia: What a wonderful feeling.*

ILSE: *(laughs)* Oh, what a feeling, yes!

*Lia: Have you done all of the writing for your songs?*

ILSE: All of the writing. That's another thing that I find very important. I work with young artists, too. And I really try to help them to write their own songs. Of course, then it's co-written with them. I try to find out what's important to them and bring that out. I'm definitely missing that a lot in music nowadays. Many songs are often written by a group of 30 people, and I'm thinking, "How does that work? 'Hey, I wrote that word?'" *(laughs)* Where's the sincerity? I wrote everything myself. The production and music are where other excellent people jumped in. I feel very blessed to have had everybody on the team. I could not have done it myself.

*Lia: What is your writing process? Do you have a ritual of getting into that zone?*

ILSE: Yeah! It comes by itself. Sometimes it even comes in a dream. Sometimes I'll get lucky like that. For example, the song "We Rise, We Fall" came to me in a dream. But sometimes I feel like I'm a chicken sitting on an egg...

*(laughter)*

...and I have to nurture it. For example, the song "Behind the Scenes" is also one that's very, very precious to me. It involves a very deep issue that I wanted to think about for a long time, because it's about the loneliness of New York City and in our Western culture in general. I wanted to make sure that I used all the right words. And I'm really happy that I did take that time. That song took a couple of months. It's about letting someone go behind the scenes, where you can be yourself with someone, show who you are, and have that intimate connection, in a world where it seems so easy to make connections, yet it actually seems like we're twisting further and further away from each other.

*Lia: Unfortunately.*

ILSE: But we can bring it back. That's definitely the goal with my music, for sure.

*Lia: Are you with a label right now?*





ILSE: We are very, very independent. It's a super-tiny team.

*Lia: You're doing really good at putting yourself out there.*

ILSE: What you want to do and what you feel like is the right thing versus if you're with a major label, they sort of have the ball and they have their vision and you're more like a puppet. So there's definitely an advantage to being a new artist. It's exactly the way I want it to be.

*Lia: I looked you up, and was thinking of how proactive and super-engaging you are.*

ILSE: *(laughs)* I love Twitter. I didn't think I was going to like it that much. I really love it. It's a lot of fun. People just share what they're thinking, and you wake up and you see all these tweets. It definitely makes my day.

*Lia: At what age did you come over from Belgium?*

ILSE: I was 27. But first I studied psychology, and then I came a couple times for short projects, connected with a couple producers here and there, and then when I was 27, I worked for a publishing-production company, Groovy Miles Music, with a producer called Chiba Antoine. He is in a wheelchair. That was a very interesting collaboration: a producer in a wheelchair and a singer-songwriter with a prosthesis. That was great. And then I wanted to write my own music, though, so that definitely took even more time, and I lost my voice at some point because I was doing way too much work—singing, background singing, just any gig that I could get—and unfortunately, I got a

polyp on my vocal chords, and I could not afford the surgery. It was \$20,000, and I didn't have it.

That looked like the end of the journey. Without a voice, what are you going to do? Those were some of my darkest days. But a couple of weeks later, the doctor called me and said, "There is this new test therapy out there. It's a laser therapy. If you want, you could be one of the people we test it on. I have no idea if it will work, but if you want, you can do the trial." I had nothing to lose, so I was like, "I'm going to do this." And guess what? After three treatments, my voice was back. I had to do a lot of healing, though. I couldn't talk after each treatment for a couple of weeks. It was very tough communicating with little pieces of paper. And people were like, "Really? You can't talk?" "No, no."

But then, guess what? That turned out to be the better therapy, because cutting into the vocal chords turned out to be more risky, and that new therapy is the therapy that they used on Adele and Sam Smith. It's funny, because I was the test person. *(laughs)* But I had the fancy surgery.

*Lia: You paved the way.*

*(laughter)*

*I'm really glad that worked out.*

ILSE: Yes, me, too. Wow! I would definitely say to everybody, "Never lose hope, even if things really look like it's the end. Still don't lose hope." I believe that we





have an instinct,—an inner feeling—and we have to listen to it. Life is not the same if you're not being yourself and not living to your full potential.

*Lia: Do you feel like you're living your life to the fullest right now?*

ILSE: Oh, yeah, absolutely. I look back and I'm like, "Wow, it's kind of crazy, all the things I did." I remember I had no money for food. Oh, God, I went years like that. It was absolutely crazy. But I'm really glad I did it.

*Lia: Do you still like eating cheese?*

*(laughter)*

ILSE: Actually, I'm trying to avoid dairy. One, because I love animals and two, because it's bad for a singer. Can you believe this? All this time I was eating bread and cheese, mainly because it was the only thing I could afford and that I liked. And cheese turns out to be bad for singers. They have some voice trouble.

*Lia: Do you know why?*

ILSE: Yes, because dairy puts a slime layer in your intestines, and it creates more mucus and also acid reflux, which burns your throat.

*Lia: Unless there's an allergy, must be from eating great amounts for all that to happen.*

ILSE: Maybe. But singers definitely don't eat it on the day of a performance or even the day before. A singer's diet is very strict. That's also something I learned. Not easy. It takes some sacrifice, for sure.

*Lia: Yes, it does.*

ILSE: I think it's pretty much the same thing for athletes. They also have to be very strict in what they eat and their exercise. I see now that it's very similar.

*Lia: Sure. What do you do on your downtime?*

ILSE: Well, I don't have that much downtime! *(laughs)*

*Lia: So you're doing a lot of writing.*

ILSE: Yes, a lot of writing, for other artists and for myself. And I guess for my downtime, I work out at the gym, and I go outside and get some fresh air. I love seeing my friends for dinner. And sometimes I like to go for a drink, too! Girls just want to have fun, right? *(laughs)*

*Lia: You betchya'. Working on the next album, or are you pushing hard on the current one?*

ILSE: It's so funny, because as an artist, you've already moved on to the next chapter. I have so many new song

ideas already. But the reality is that you really have to focus on promoting this album and setting up a tour. Those are the first steps right now. I'd really like to do some recording in the meantime. I can't stop when it comes to writing. I absolutely love being in the studio. There's something about creating a song: first it wasn't there and then all of a sudden it's there. To me it's very magical, and I love that. But I also can't wait to be on the stage again. There's also a lot of magic in that experience, when you see the audience singing along, and you feel that they also feel the song, but in a way that's personal to them. There's something about that, that is bigger than me. I feel everything in music is always bigger than me.

The song comes from somewhere, and it almost feels like you're just a messenger, a channel. It's a very strange feeling. It really feels like that, because it comes to you. You feel that in the writing process, and then when you're onstage and performing your song, you can feel people respond in a way that's very personal to them, and then you get that feeling again, as if it's bigger than one person, even bigger than the entire audience. It's absolutely magical.

*Lia: So you write songs for other people?*

ILSE: Yes, but mostly for young people. And I try to make sure the songs are really about them. It's interesting, because I studied psychology, and I use it very much in my songwriting. First, I make sure I know who they are and what their core is. I feel like we all have a core or essence, and it's very important that we both know who they are. Sometimes young artists don't know who they are yet. So first we try to figure that out, and then we start writing.

*Lia: When you write, do you hear music in your writing, or just the words?*

ILSE: I hear the melody as if it's already there. That's something I cannot teach the artists because I really don't know how it works. How come that melody's there? It's either there or it's not. But I do describe it as *if you're on a cliff and you're running and then you have to jump and hope that you're flying. That flying is the melody that comes. You just have to jump and sing. And hope that it's a good melody.*

*Lia: How do you translate that? Do you put down notes?*

ILSE: That's another funny thing about me. Because my parents were not happy that I wanted to do music, they did not let me go to any musical school or anything like that. They were very afraid a girl with one arm would not be accepted. They were like, "You have to understand. It's a very tricky business. You cannot be a waitress in the meantime." *(laughs)* "How are you going to do that with one arm? You have to study something that you don't need arms for." I was like,







"All right, then." But I really loved psychology, so that was fine. So no, I have no musical training other than voice training that I've had in New York. With no musical training, I had to work with artists who can hear what they need to hear. For example, I can sing the melody to them, and know how it should go. Sometimes musicians still have several options for chords, and then sometimes it takes longer, because I'm like, "No, not that one, try another one."

But it works out. For example, Joshua Valteau, who's an insane musician—absolutely brilliant and a genius, I would say—he just gets it right away. That's why finding the right people you can connect with is so important, and it's always magical then and the process is smooth and without words.

*Lia: Who came up with the concept of the video?*

ILSE: Oh, wow, yes! That was a six-month process. The concept was written in Starbucks with Dario, who's had a very tough journey as well. He is an African-American photographer and video director who happens to be gay. He has been through so much. We were talking about the stigma of how this world is always trying to make us all conform. We wanted to do something that would involve all the people in the world, or as many as possible—women and men of all different cultures who are straight, gay, young and old. And all body shapes. We wanted to connect them together and also make them feel beautiful.

We see society as very rigid, because we're both artists, so society is rigid to us. We're more colorful than that.

And as to who came up with the idea to paint their faces and clothes I don't remember.

*Lia: But it worked.*

ILSE: Yeah, it worked. It definitely looks very strange, but that was our goal. It was a bit tricky, because we wanted to have a shower and have people walk through the shower, but no studio allowed us to wet their floors. That was a bit of a challenge. So then we managed with the sink. *(laughs)*

*Lia: You could have used a kiddie pool, nobody would have noticed.*

*(laughter)*

ILSE: Oh, my God, yes! It was a little tricky, but I think the point came across with the sink and the mirror. And I love how everybody at the end discovers themselves, almost as if for the first time. And I felt that way, too, at a certain point in my life, I felt like, "Wow, now I'm myself again!" Like discovering your inner child again, not feeling inhibited, just loving yourself the way you are. It all came together so perfectly. It was very, very sincere. On the set, everybody was so quiet and respectful, and you could feel the energy in the room. And my performance, when I was singing, that was just one take.

It was funny, but it was the same thing with the audio. That's not something that usually happens in the recording industry. You usually record over and over and over again, but there was something about this take that was so pure and so real that we just wanted to keep it. There



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was no post-production or Photoshop. It's something very organic, something very real. As soon as it came out, it resonated with fans. It's really incredible.

*Lia: That's nice.*

ILSE: Yeah, another wonderful feeling, Lia!

*Lia: I'm curious about how you've changed since your days of being bullied and people looking at you strangely. How has your reaction to these different perceptions toward you evolved over the years? Or has it?*

ILSE: Right. I feel sorry for them, because I feel like maybe their world is a bit constricted, not very rich and diverse in order to react that way. In other words, I don't take it personally anymore. For me, it doesn't bother me. It's funny, because sometimes people ask me, "If you could have it any other way, would you want two arms?" And this is a very weird answer, but I don't think I would want two arms. I'm so used to it now. It's made me so much stronger. I'm not sure if I would be the same person as I am today. That's so much more important than that arm. I'm so used to it. I can do anything with one arm.

*Lia: Were you born without it?*

ILSE: Yes. Imagine if you were in a world where everybody has three arms and people would ask you, "How do you feel? Don't you miss having a third arm?" And you're like, "Well, no. I can do pretty much anything."

*Lia: Will you update your prosthetic?*

ILSE: I had a fun one with a tattoo. It broke—oh, my God—the middle finger, of course the middle finger. I was trying yoga, and I was like, "Oh, no!"

*(laughter)*

*Lia: You were using it too much.*

ILSE: I think it's hilarious, like, of course, the middle finger has to break, right? *(laughs)* And then I'm like, "But you know what? Let me do something fun with it." And then we tried a tattoo of the phoenix symbol, and it also had the dove of the Christian symbol of peace. The phoenix is a very strong bird that comes in peace. It's a full sleeve, and I love it. So now I have two arms and I'm always joking with people, like, "I can change my tattoo!" They're so jealous of me!

*Lia: My brother has a tattoo of the phoenix as well.*

ILSE: Oh, my God!

*Lia: But he can't change his torso. He's stuck with that one.*

ILSE: Exactly, so I'm telling you, sometimes there's an

advantage! *(laughs)* And then in our photo shoot, I brought the two arms, and I was like, "Oh, which one should we use?" And the photographer was like, "Oh, let's do the fun arm!" The fun arm with the tattoo. It was a lot of fun, and another wonderful feeling!

*Lia: Do you speak other languages?*

ILSE: My native language is Dutch, and I'm also supposed to speak French, which I'm sure I could, but you would have to give me a couple of days, because every time I try to speak French, either the Dutch or the English comes up. "No, no, not that one, the other one!" I'm struggling in my own brain. "What's that other language again?" But I do understand it. I'm supposed to speak three languages. And actually, I also speak a little bit of German, but I think it's gone. I also studied Latin, but that one I definitely forgot, which I don't mind, because no one speaks it anymore anyway.

*Lia: Are there modern day vocalists you admire? Or maybe one who's passed?*

ILSE: I have a lot of inspiration. But I was thinking of Andrea Bocelli's music, which I know is not pop music, but he has such an incredible voice. I think he has one of the most beautiful voices on the planet, and also one that lasts forever. I do love pop artists and their voices, but after what I've been through with having voice damage, sometimes I'm afraid of how long it's going to last. For example, I thought Mariah Carey had the most beautiful voice on the planet, and when she came out, I began to feel like a lot of artists abuse their voices and then they lose their voices over time. As a singer, I guess that's what I think of. I can't really always enjoy it in the moment, because I think they're going to lose it soon. But Bocelli, for sure, has an incredible voice.

*Lia: Anything else you might want to share?*

ILSE: I think the most important thing that I want to share with people is for them to be themselves and to believe in that inner feeling. Never doubt it, no matter what other people say. That's something I would like to say. Don't listen to other people at all. At some point, it's something that comes from within, and happiness, too. I read this really cool quote: Happiness is an inside job.

*Lia: That's good.*

ILSE: Don't give your power to anyone else. Go inside and find it there, find the courage to continue. All the good stuff is inside of you.

*Lia: That's a nice message. You have wonderful energy.*

ILSE: Thank you, you too! This was a lot of fun, a lot of laughter! ■ **ABILITY**

ilsemusic.com