



Doing the hard miles

WORLD FAMOUS IN ICELAND, SINGER-SONGWRITER HERA PREFERS TO PLY HER ART IN NEW ZEALAND. LEE SUCKLING ASKS HER WHY

‘When a room full of drunken men are yelling “Take your top off”, it teaches you pretty quickly not to get stage fright,” says Hera Hjartardóttir. She’s talking about her first stage experience – performing at Lyttelton’s Wunderbar – “I figured if I could handle that, I could probably handle anything.”

Hera started her career onstage that night between drag queen shows – and she was paid \$30 for her half-hour stint. That first gig at the Wunderbar, amid a pack of rowdy Russian sailors, was also one of the first catalysts in her desire to work professionally in the music industry. “A friend pointed out that I made a dollar a minute on stage, and suggested I quit school and pursue singing instead.”

Born in Reykjavík, the artist known simply by her first name has been based in Christchurch for more than a decade. “I’m always a foreigner,” Hera says. “When I’m in Iceland I’m the New Zealander, and when I’m here I’m ‘that singer from Iceland.’” Hera moved to New Zealand with her family in 1994, and has repeatedly flown back to Iceland to promote her music since 2001. “While my roots are Nordic, I now call the South Island home. But I’ve seen more of Iceland than my grandparents have, so I’ve got a real respect for both countries.”

Hera’s extensive travels in her native land peaked with 2004’s Not Your Type tour, during which she performed 37 concerts in two months. It was the largest Icelandic tour ever undertaken by a solo female artist. Since taking her friend’s advice and leaving school at 16, Hera has supported Joe

Cocker and Nick Cave, played after Tori Amos at the Glastonbury Festival, and released five albums – four in English and one in Icelandic, which went gold last year in her home country. She has also taken away an Icelandic Music Award in a category previously won only by vocal virtuosos Björk and Emiliana Torrini.

So why is Hera still living in New Zealand, vehemently trying to pull together a music career, when she could be a superstar in Iceland? “I’m here because I love this country, it’s a sanctuary,” she says. “I want to be in a place that I love, with the people I love.”

“I’ve only been trying my career fulltime in New Zealand for nine months. I’ve released one new CD here (Live at Al’s, recorded last year as part of New Zealand Music Month), and have just finished putting the final touches on my video The Devil And Me (to be released on Monday). It’s a slow process, but I think I’m gaining a following.”

Hera’s love for music began with a love of the written word. “I was obsessed with books as a child. I remember begging my mum to teach me to read my favourite stories by myself,” she says. “But she wouldn’t let me learn before I started school. As a compromise, she taught me to read music.” At eight years old Hera transcribed her own piece of music to the page, after learning to bang out The Girl from Ipanema on her guitar. “It was the first piece I learned to sing and play together,” she says. “After mastering both at the same time, I decided to write my first song.”

At 15, she recorded her first album, Homemade, with her dad on the family computer. “We made a pop filter out of a coat-hanger and a pair of

pantyhose,” says Hera. “My parents saw the potential in the songs I had written and didn’t want to see them lost.” In 2001, Hera’s self-produced album Not So Sweet was recorded at Blast Studios, and was distributed among friends and family as her first official album. “Mum sent a box of CDs to the rest of our family in Iceland, including my grandma,” says Hera. “She flogged them off to anyone she could, from her oldest friends to the owners of most of the local shops.”

While shopping at a small bakery in Reykjavík, Icelandic movie director Baltasar Kormákur heard Hera’s song ‘Itchy Palms’. He probed the bakery owner for information on the artist, and a short time later chose the song as the title track for his new film Hafid (The Sea). Hera performed Itchy Palms live at the film’s premiere later that year, and she instantly shot to fame in the eyes of the Icelandic public.

Whilst repeatedly flying back to New Zealand for family time, Hera released the album Not Your Type, further propelling her into the limelight in her homeland. The single Makebelieve was released in late 2002. “It became the third most played song on Icelandic National Radio,” says Hera, who adds that this was a major achievement as the station has a very strong international playlist. The success of Makebelieve saw her nominated for two Icelandic Music Awards, and she took away the top honour of Best Female Singer. “It still feels a little bizarre winning the same award an artist like Björk has won so many times,” says Hera. “She has such a huge body of work. Up against her, I feel like I’ve written a poem while she has written a series of novels.”

IN 2003 Hera secured a recording deal with Iceland’s biggest distributor Skifan, who produced Hafid þennan dag. It was her first album entirely in her native tongue. Hera’s Icelandic language debut quickly went gold, selling 5000 copies. “It was quite an accomplishment, considering there are only 300,000 people in Iceland,” she says. “In New Zealand, gold status is 7500 sales and this is a country of over 4 million.” Hafid þennan dag was followed up with a tour of Iceland, visiting 37 locations with one of her musical idols supporting her, Bubbi Morthens. “Bubbi is one of the most loved singers and songwriters in Iceland, he’s like our version of Bob Dylan,” says Hera. “I used to play his songs when I first learned guitar. Performing alongside the person you grew up listening to is, well, pretty emotional to say the least.”

As a child Hera’s mind was “always on the devious”, something that has inspired many of her songs. Years before meeting Bubbi Morthens, Hera had the honour of being introduced to another idol of hers, Icelandic rock and roll singer Megas. “He played my guitar and we recited Edward Lear’s limericks together,” she says. “We became friends, and he helped me find inspiration for my music. He gave me books such as The Best of Edgar Allan Poe and Patrick Suskind’s Perfume, books that delved into wicked and sinister themes.”

Horror stories such as these have had a significant impact on Hera’s lyrics. “I think I’ve always had a preoccupation with all things menacing. When I was a kid everything around me was pink and pretty but my mischievous mind wanted to play with the devil!”

Despite her music’s malevolent nuances, Hera describes her sound as ‘laid-back folk-pop-rock’. “When you’re just one voice and one guitar, you’re basically pigeonholed into folk music, which I’m fine with,” she says. “Nothing is ever going to sound heavy with an acoustic guitar – my sound is just what comes out and feels natural.” Through songs such as Beautiful Face and In The Dress, she employs the format of the murder ballad – a tale that unfolds to somebody being killed. “I don’t want to be an obvious ‘death rocker’ – I want to play gruesome songs in a pretty, happy, upbeat way. I love being a little naughty underneath.”

Hera’s isn’t just known for her flair for cheery tunes with wayward lyrics. She has also created a trademark from her stage makeup, although it’s far from the Gene Simmons variety. “My face paint is a

bit of a mask – people in Iceland think it’s a tattoo – so it lets me walk the streets without being stopped too much,” she says. Hera’s face painting process takes just three minutes before a show, and the design unfolds as her brush hits her skin. “I take inspiration from the Maori moko, which represents my life in New Zealand, and historical warrior designs from back home,” she adds. The dots, lines and symbols all represent the things on Hera’s mind at the time of each performance. “I’ll never reveal what they mean specifically, I paint them on depending on how I feel. I like that my stage makeup is something personal that only I understand, but at the same time has become my signature.”

Since her burst of fame in Iceland, Hera has focused more of her time accruing fans in New Zealand. Don’t Play This was released online in 2005, and she followed up with live performances in Dunedin and other parts of the South Island. The album was enthusiastically received, attracting reviews that called it “immensely beautiful” and “scintillating, soaring and acoustically clean”. She released her first New Zealand single from that album, Feels So Good, two years later, and has been trying to break deeper into the Kiwi market ever since.

Hera agrees that chasing fame on a tour bus back home is exciting, but it’s hard to do long-term. She would rather have a steady combination of performing and family time, which is the reason she has decided to give the New Zealand music scene a good shot instead of being a star in Iceland. “I’m working towards further success and more people listening to my music, but I’m happy to do it slowly,” she says. “I’ve always resisted being anchored anywhere, but I’m beginning to love having a kitchen, a place for my books, a veggie garden. Maybe I’m more of a New Zealander than I think. My days are becoming all about that Kiwi mindset of the work-life balance.”

Being able to release her music digitally enables Hera to continually feed her Icelandic fan base. “With online releases, you don’t need all of the things you needed years ago to promote your music,” she says. “You can be accessible to the whole world without a middleman.” Hera’s online efforts make her steadily available for her Kiwi fans as well; recent gigs at The Loons in Lyttelton and The Fringe Bar in Wellington have attracted groupies from all over New Zealand to see her play live. “I blog, send out regular updates on my mailing list, and I’m on Twitter. I often say I’m gaining a following through being a geek.”

The locations where she performs in New Zealand, Hera says, is the other reason she is keen to stick around in our corner of the globe. “I live to play outside,” she gushes. “Some of my first performances were at Christchurch’s Arts Centre and I still get up on that grassy spot today.” Recently Hera also performed at the Ellerslie Flower Show and Lazy Weekends in Hagley Park. “When I’m outside, it’s much more intimate, even though you’re in a wide open space. It feels like a storytelling session.”

Hera is certainly going places. Her audiences have grown from just a few dozen inebriated sailors at the Wunderbar, to tens of thousands at premier music festivals such as the UK’s Glastonbury and SXSW in the US. New shows are in the pipeline in New Zealand for the coming months, with the summer season set to bring crowds out to hear Hera sing.

“The bigger the audience, the better,” says Hera. “While I don’t get stage fright before I go on, leaving the stage is another story. It’s like telling people your deepest, darkest secrets and waiting for their response,” she adds. “But that adrenaline rush of finishing your set and waiting for the crowd to pull apart something so personal? That’s the kind of thing that keeps me coming back.” **YW**



DISCOGRAPHY:

NOT SO SWEET (2001)

NOT YOUR TYPE (2002)

HAFID ÞENNAN DAG (2003)

DON'T PLAY THIS (2005)

LIVE AT AL'S (2008)

www.herasings.com

Photos: David Hallett