

INLAND **EMPIRE** WEEKLY

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EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE Gina Villalobos draws you in

By John Roos

It's one thing to imagine disappointment and pain, quite another to actually live it. Gina Villalobos knows the difference, and more importantly, how to persevere through the tough times.

A talented roots-rocker from Los Angeles, the raspy-voiced Villalobos plays an earthy, potent blend of rock, folk, and country. She glides comfortably from contemplative whispers to outright growls, exorcising whatever demons may lurk within. Fitting somewhere between Neil Young, Lucinda Williams, and Sticky Fingers -era Stones, her band's

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sound rumbles from energized, guitar-driven stomps to more twangy, acoustic-tinged numbers.

Villalobos' career got rolling, particularly in Europe, with the release of *Rock 'n' Roll Pony* in 2005. Her solid follow-up, *Miles Away*, was released earlier this year on the Face West label. With good press and word-of-mouth behind her, plus enthusiastically-received gigs, Villalobos is finally establishing firm footing.

But it's been a dangerously slippery slope.

Villalobos lost sight in one eye after suffering a traumatic accident while working as an assistant camera operator in October, 2003. It left her retina detached, and she underwent four major surgeries until being told, on Christmas Day, she would remain completely blind in her right eye. Prior to the devastating injury, she was smack in the middle of production on *Rock 'n' Roll Pony*. Suddenly lost and scared, Villalobos shelved the project while searching for something— anything —to find inspiration that would lift her spirits.

Eventually, Villalobos left the solitude of her isolation (“I didn't leave the house for months”) and returned to the studio to immerse herself in her greatest passion, her music. She dug deeper into her work, tapping into feelings that helped heal the physical and emotional scars. For Villalobos, sharing these feelings through her art takes both courage and vulnerability, but she believes both are necessary to make an emotional connection with her audience.

“The honest artists are willing to expose themselves totally,” she says.

“You have to be open and honest, and just let the truth come out. I'm willing to do that . . . it's very natural and therapeutic for me.”

But a dark song (from *Miles Away*) like “Somewhere to Lay Down,” where she asks God to “leave me some drugs and a place to die,” must be disturbing to sing onstage now, right?

“I like art that makes you feel every emotion, it means you're usually brought to a certain place to learn, reflect, and turn inward to face your emotions and issues, whether happy or sad,” suggests Villalobos. “I think everyone has secrets inside that are just waiting to get out. If I can make a listener feel happy and sad at the same time, then I've really nailed it.”

Villalobos grew up experiencing a mixture of good and bad times in Lake Sherwood, located just a stones-throw from Malibu. Her father was a

respected cinematographer working in Hollywood. Her mother could often be found on the front porch—playing an assortment of songs by Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Hank Williams, Kris Kristofferson, Linda Ronstadt and others—with neighbors known in the entertainment



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industry, such as session guitarist Billy Joe Walker, pop/country songwriter Don Robertson, and Disney writer/ animator Jack Spears. But as her parents' marriage ended in divorce when she was only eight years old, Villalobos lost the only security blanket she would ever know. She would learn to play the guitar, and then drums, finding some solace in music really for the first time. It wasn't until many years later, at age 20, that Villalobos knew music would change her life.

Singer/songwriter Rickie Lee Jones was playing the Santa Barbara County Bowl one night, and that performance—and the conversation that Villalobos had with Jones after the show—opened up a new world to Villalobos.

“I was completely drawn in. Even though I still really don't know why, from that moment on, I knew who I was,” she says.

While Villalobos' journey continues down a rough-edged but brighter path, one lined with hopeful optimism, she knows there are no guarantees. Loneliness on the road is always a real possibility, one that Villalobos has already experienced. She tackles that very topic on her new *Miles Away*.

“While on the road, particularly in Europe, New Zealand, and Australia, I was in hotel room after room, and the isolation starting taking its toll,” recalls Villalobos, whose band features guitarist Kevin Haaland, pedal steel player Sean Caffey, bassist Brian Simpson, drummer David Piribauer, and percussionist/backing vocalist Dawn Fintor. “That's where the title, *Miles Away*, comes from. I was miles away from myself, from anything, from everything . . . I felt like I was everywhere and nowhere. But something good did come out of that—the music. I frequently remind myself that there was this silver lining to it all.”

Gina Villalobos and Kingsizemaybe perform at Pappy & Harriet's Pioneertown Palace, 53688 Pioneertown Rd., Pioneertown, (760) 365-5956; www.pappyandharriets.com. Sat., 8 p.m. Call for cover.