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A once-local filmmaker makes it huge. Too huge? Now, everybody wants a piece of *Smokin' Aces* writer-director Joe Carnahan.
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COVER ILLUSTRATION BY JASON BASH
COVER DESIGN BY DAVID JAYNE

Country from the city

Los Angeles songstress Gina Villalobos visits Sacramento's Americana scene

"It's a long way to heaven and hell lives next door," Gina

by
Rachel Gregg

Villalobos opines on her soon-to-be-released album. While she might be right about that, it isn't a long way to Marilyn's on K, where she'll play a late-night set on Friday with Sammie winner Aimee Chapman and the Big Finish. Villalobos, who hails from notoriously artificial Los Angeles, offers up a slice of authentic country rock that will more than justify staying out past your bedtime.



The writing's on the wall for Gina Villalobos.

With a five-piece band in tow, Villalobos is on tour in preparation for the American release of her second album, *Miles Away*. She penned the record while on tour for 2005's *Rock 'n' Roll Pony*, and a mournful longing permeates it at every turn. The title and opening track is an energetic rock song meant to get you geared up for the rest of the album. Instead, it belies the sullen steel-guitar vibe that makes up the bulk of the record and keeps you listening.

Gina Villalobos with Aimee Chapman and the Big Finish, 9:30 p.m. Friday, \$30. Marilyn's on K, 908 K Street, www.rnrlysonk.com.

On a superficial level, *Miles Away* makes for an easy comparison to Lucinda Williams. Keep listening and you'll soon find out that Villalobos has some moxie all her own. The 10-track album has a sound so straightforward you could almost overlook it, but slow down and you'll find *Miles Away* has a genuine intensity and poppy catchiness that begs you to take it on a road trip and turn it up, loud.

While Villalobos has yet to find a solid American audience, she already enjoys plenty of commercial success in the U.K. After earning kudos for *Rock 'n' Roll Pony* on BBC Radio, Villalobos found a European audience that, from her perspective, "really craved the Americana experience." And Villalobos offers nothing if not solid Americana-inspired music.

Villalobos, who grew up in a small "artsy" community in Southern California, picked up the guitar around age nine. "It was just what you did," Villalobos recalled. She kept at it and started writing songs at 20. Feeling bored in college by 21, she joined a band, dropped out and started touring the West Coast.

The band experience was "like being married to five people," Villalobos said. After six years they broke up. Echoing the sentiment of so many divorced people, she said, "I found that the band was holding me back. Now I make records the way I want them to sound."

She wants it to sound like folk-pop, a goal she hits right on the head. At 36, she's cranking out heartbroken pop songs like "Don't Let Go," where she longingly sings, "Gray me away, that's pretty. Light thru our veins, I'll disappear like magic in day."

Shying away from interpreting her songs, Villalobos said, "The meaning of my lyrics is found in the spaces in between. I like the listeners to project their own meaning." While she doesn't call herself a poet, her songs have the poetic quality of being confessional without being narrative. "It's something that comes through me," she explained. "I just kind of let it be what it is."

What it is—toc-tapping country rock—should find an eager audience here in Sacramento. If the U.K. was "craving" it, then Sacramento is primed for it. With local female singer-songwriters like Dre and Ruebi Freyja already kicking around in the Americana vein.

***Miles Away* makes for an easy comparison to Lucinda Williams. Keep listening and you'll find Villalobos has moxie all her own.**

we've got ears honed to hear it. What separates Villalobos from our hometown counterparts is her slickly produced presentation. While that (along with her SoCal address) might cause her to lose a little street cred here in the valley, her appearance should make for a damn good time.

Promising "a guitar driven, no frills rock show," Villalobos expects the listener to discern the honesty in her music—even if she is from L.A.