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"WHEN I HEAR PEOPLE COMPLAIN ABOUT THINGS I JUST WANT TO TELL THEM, JUST LEARN TO APPRECIATE THAT YOU CAN WALK, WORK, SMELL, SEE... IT MAKES YOU APPRECIATE HOW PRECIOUS DAY-TO-DAY LIFE IS, AND HOW EVERYTHING CAN CHANGE IN AN INSTANT"

Gina battles on against all odds

Rising country rocker Gina Villalobos is back in Belfast tomorrow after a life-changing and career-threatening accident.

Los Angeles-based Villalobos — whose second album *Miles Away* has just been released to wide acclaim — lost the sight in her right eye after a fall.

The retina became detached when her head hit a metal bench.

She underwent four separate surgeries — and four exceedingly painful recovery periods — before learning that doctors weren't able to reattach the retina and restore her sight.

That was a crushing blow, and the aftermath of the surgeries meant that, for a while, her career was in the balance.

She said: "I wasn't scared before the procedures, I just thought I would go in and get it fixed, but nobody knew how delicate it was. The worst part was the post-surgery recovery — it was awful, very painful.

"I had to lie with my head hanging upside down off a bed for four weeks after each surgery without any pain medication.

"What they do is insert a little gas bubble into your eye and the plan is that the gas bubble presses up against where they were trying to attach the retina.

"My tear happened to be in a spot where I needed to lie with my head upside down for a month, literally 24 hours a day — you can't see because you have a

Gina Villalobos' new album is a knockout by any standards, but the debilitating health problems she has suffered make it little short of a miracle. Interview: Neil McKay

patch over your eye, you're getting sick because your eye pressure has shot up... literally it was a very dark period, and to go through that four times and to find out they weren't going to be able to fix me...

"There was a very definite vanity concern. My eye was completely mangled... it looks normal now but it took about a year-and-a-half before people could look normally at me.

"But it could have stopped my career for vanity reasons — the eye was mangled, I didn't feel comfortable being in front of people, but as time wore on, I got used to looking at myself and my eye healed. There was a huge adjustment period in navigating myself around things — people, stages. I don't see my musicians anymore on my right side.

"I still run into things and I still trip over things, in fact it happened last night as I was setting my guitar up, but it happens — it's just something you have to get used to.

"I also have a strobing in my blind eye... I see nothing, zero, zero, zero, but my nerve is still

attached and I have scar tissue that pulls on the nerve that sends an electric light thing that I see in the blackness.

"It is like a strobing, like a pop, pop, pop from a camera flash, and it happens constantly throughout the day. It is very distracting, and if I didn't have that I would probably feel more peaceful.

"It's like being at a dance rave or a disco all the time — it gets kind of nauseating.

"They can't fix it now but I hope maybe one day... When I hear people complain about things I just want to tell them, just learn to appreciate that you can walk, work, smell, see... it makes you appreciate how precious day-to-day life is, and how everything can change in an instant."

Viewed against the background of her personal problems, *Miles Away* is an even more astounding record, a spellbinding blend of the radio-friendly tunes of Sheryl Crowe and the raw, emotional clout of Lucinda Williams.

It builds on the good vibes stirred by her debut, *Rock'n'roll Pop*, which attracted the atten-

tion of Radio 2's Bob Harris and led to a series of trips to the UK.

"I love the new album — I'm very proud of it. There was less concentrated time to actually write it, but all the pressures were pressures I put on myself because I wanted to get it out.

"Of course I want people to like it, and any artist who says different is lying. I mean, wanting to be liked is a very basic thing that most human beings have.

"I finished up recording 18 songs and it was really apparent pretty quickly which songs were the standout album track songs, and which songs are the glue which glue the songs together, and which songs just belong on the record.

"To me an album should be an entirety — almost be one song, one feeling, one vibe — and I think a big mistake people make is that they just give too much.

"To me less is more, you don't want to throw a song onto an album just because you have recorded it and have spent maybe \$2,000 on it.

"I think restraint is very important in all aspects of music — packaging, recording, writing. I think it is probably one of most powerful creative tools artists have. The kind of music I play is nothing particularly new, it's just Americana, rock'n'roll, and there's no need to be so arrogant as to repeat, repeat, repeat."

● Gina Villalobos plays the Real Music Club at the Enniscorthy Inn, Belfast, tomorrow night. Ticket details on 0932 2925.

