

Miles away from ordinary

By Josef Woodard
SEAN PASCAL/REUTERS

While the record may show that rootsy singer Gina Villalobos has been making critically acclaimed noise in the UK in the last few years and is considered a Los Angeles neo-country-rock artist to watch, stubbornly proud Santa Barbarans beg to differ (and beg to clarify).

After all, we knew her when. Villalobos, who spent much of the '90s in beloved S.B.-based groups Liquid Sunshine and The Mades, lit up local clubs with her rough-toned charms and always seemed to be an artist on the verge of a breakthrough. It took a few years, plus a move to Los Angeles and a day job in the film industry, but finally Villalobos got some buzz going — trans-Atlantic buzz, in fact — for her 2005 album, "Rock 'N' Roll Pony."

British press and radio have caught on, lavishing rightful praises for her country-tinged, honky-tonking rock, and comparisons to Lucinda Williams and Chrissie Hynde have been flowing.

She has made the trip to the UK four times in the past two years, including a tour opening for World Party, whose song "Put the Message in the Box" Villalobos covered on her wave-making album.

Now comes a dynamic new album, "Miles Away," which was released in England last summer and will officially come out in the States in April.

Her current project and new year's resolution: to do America. To that end, she kicks off her touring with a show at an old haunt, SoHo, on Wednesday.

"Since my 'Rock 'N' Roll Pony' was released in the UK, it's been going really well over there," Villalobos says. "It's really nice to have people that you don't know come to your shows and sing your songs and talk to you. That means something to me and is totally different than playing for your friends. That always makes me kind of smile."

Villalobos was on the photo recently from home in the Los Feliz area of L.A. recently, talking about her career's upward mobility and occasionally waxing nostalgic for

such local chestnuts as the short-lived, march-loved downtown club known as Nym.

She was raised in Lake Sherwood, the bedroom community north of Los Angeles, which she remembers as "a really artsy, progressive community back in the late '70s" with "a big group of actors and musicians and session players. These people would come over. I'd get home from school and there would be my mom and Jack Spears and Emily Walker — who's now a huge producer in Nashville — just sitting on the front porch

IN CONCERT

GINA VILLALOBOS, with I SEE HAWKS in L.A. and WILL RIDGE

When: 8 p.m. Wednesday
Where: SoHo, 1221 State St. (apart) **Cost:** \$6
Information: 662-7776 or www.sohob.com

playing guitar, like it was normal. And then it would turn into a poker party that night. I guess that influenced me as a kid.

"I grew up listening to Willie Nelson and Patsy Cline and Loretta Lynn, and Linda Ronstadt and Bonnie Raitt.

Those were the songs I learned as a little girl. You get influenced by what your parents listen to. Luckily, those were the songs playing at my house before we went to school."

In the early '90s, Villalobos came to Santa Barbara to go to college, and she bounced from City College to UCSB to Brooks and started Liquid Sunshine, the success of which allowed her to quit school and settle on music for life.

The band broke up after six years, so Villalobos started the more rock-band-like group, The Mades, with her brother Rey on drums and Duncan Wright on guitar (both now in the group Coral Sea).

By 2000, she had gone solo and headed down south.

Speaking of her stylistic leanings, Villalobos says, "I really feel like I've always been in this kind of straight-up, roots-rock vein. It has just been packaged a little differently as I've moved into being a solo artist, because that's just really me and really where I began with Liquid Sunshine. I feel like I've come full circle."

One delicious oddity on the new album is a radically revised cover version of the Bee Gees tune "If I Can't Have You," slowed down to a

drawing crawl and invested with new meaning and romantic angst. Gene is the disco thrum.

"For me," Villalobos says, "I would never want to do a cover song and play it exactly like the artist, unless that was the point and you wanted to learn the song like them. It's cool to voice it like your own voice. That was my goal with that song, to make it fit within my stylings. It's one of those songs you wish you wrote."

She has written plenty of songs in her time, with more on the way. She describes her songwriting as a series of "happy kinds of accidents. I've always been one of those girls who writes these folk pop songs, and it depends on what kind of package I want to wrap them in — that's the flavoring to the song."

While her musical life is on the up and up — albeit in a pressurized state at the moment — a less savory aspect of her recent life was an accident that left her blind in her right eye three years ago.

She has accepted the disorienting new condition, which robs her of depth perception and the ability to perform such basic necessities as driving at night, but she is resistant to say she has "adapted" to it.

In that dark hour, Villalobos found her greatest refuge in music, which she cites as "a huge part of my healing process."

"Rock 'N' Roll Pony" was in mid-production when I had this accident. I had five major surgeries, with all these complications, hence my blindness in my right eye. But music was the one thing that was healing to me. I just went in and poured my guts into my music. That was the one thing that made me feel normal."

As she gears up for the American component of her promotional tour for "Miles Away" this year, Villalobos feels a rush of the old excitement. "You do this for so many years," she says, "and sometimes you lose that excitement. But I'm really excited about what's going to happen." ■

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— Singer Gina Villalobos



BY PHOTOS