

Shona Laing Interview

In 1973, Shona Laing was Young Performer of the Year and had a hit single with '1905'. In 1975 she left NZ for London on the promise of a recording contract. After seven years' overseas experience she's back in New Zealand, working at Auckland's swish Regent Hotel and her new album, *Genre*, is due out soon.

What was it like being so successful in NZ when you were so young?

"I didn't think about it — it's so much water under the bridge now. I had the impression I handled it quite well, but now, in retrospect, I didn't! I think I got a bit cocky about it — I didn't have the learning processes to go through — suddenly there was a whole entourage to



Shona Laing

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take care of things. Looking back it would have been far more advantageous to have stayed in NZ, but I was young and I don't think any 18-year-old today would have behaved differently!"

When Shona left New Zealand she was 19.

"We had contacts, we knew a record producer and thought we had it set up, but it wasn't really, there were misunderstandings. We spent months there trying to persuade him and we still got an album down, even though it was never released in Britain or NZ and I still don't know to this day why it was never released here. There were some really good songs on it, but also a lack of communication between here and London. Then my manager came back to New Zealand, we had no sense of reality about what the UK would be like and it became obvious it would take a lot of time."

She was in London for a year, took a holiday in Nepal for five months and then returned to the UK.

"I spent time writing with Robert Danora. Arista backed me up, they felt I needed to work live — there was a huge deal in the wind, but Mike Chunn decided that wasn't a good idea, so that failed and we left Arista, and neither of us had the money to get a band together. I then had voice lessons, which was a truly spiritual experience — they gave me a lot more confidence, I had some-

thing that could never be taken from me — I could rely on my voice. I also got into acting lessons, which was great, but I didn't want to act! It was probably cowardice, but it was beneficial where I could get back to the emotions I had when I wrote a song, recall what I was feeling at the time."

"We got a deal with Essex Music. There was 15 hours' studio time a month in the deal, I was playing a 12-string acoustic guitar and we were getting into some pretty interesting noises in the studio."

There seems to have been a run of bad luck for Shona Laing — along next was a deal with EMI, but at the time when they were cutting back.

"The album was released and the single was played extensively in London and also in Scotland and Newcastle, but at the time there was an EMI strike, which stopped the single being in the shops."

However, the single's airplay did spark the interest of Manfred Mann, who approached EMI with a view to covering the song. Shona wound up working with Manfred Mann's Earth Band.

"It was great experience, particularly in the studio, but after two years with Manfred I felt I had had enough of the UK. I could have been there for the next 20 years doing the same thing, so I came home. Manfred is not highly respected in the UK — more in Europe — and we had our differences, he was very

cynical. It was also the time of the Falklands, about which I had strong feelings, and I was faced with a situation of being strongly confronted with opposing views. I mean, the British can become warmongers in a minute!"

How do you think the NZ music industry has progressed?

"I have a feeling for NZ as a whole — I hated the place when I got back, but you get a sort of intense patriotism. But what's happening now is virtually criminal — TV's doing better than radio. It was probably punk — it was good in the UK, it really did achieve everything it set out to do, but here it turned people off. If the industry had gone the way it was, it would be very healthy today. We could have developed something totally unique, for example Maori awareness, if we'd gone the same way in music as we are in Maori awareness. New Zealand is an individual nation with so much cultural potential."

"Punk was a revolution in the UK, it affected the way music went, but NZ radio is wrapped up in attitudes pre-punk and therefore the public are too. It's the 'star' thing — punk broke down the 'star' mentality, but look at Telethon, where imported 'stars' are treated as being better than anyone we have here. That attitude is pre-punk in the extreme."

"If you present someone with a less supreme copy of what they have already done they can only be insulted. If you produce something that is totally unique, then you can achieve respect."

With seven years of experience behind her, Shona is back in NZ — a lot wiser about the machinery of 'The Industry'. What sort of advice would she give to anyone about record contracts?

"Just go for what you want, that's it, even if it seems like an unholy fight is involved to get what you think is right. Contracts are long-term; I would say be aware of that, because if you compromise, that compromise is going to have to go on for the period of that contract, so hold out for what you want."

So the next milestone is *Genre*, to be released on Trevor Reekie's Pagan Records.

"It's probably the most political album that I've ever done, just in terms of the fact that I've had more control over the tracks that we put on it. I've always written along those lines. It's probably a far more real representation of the way I write, but previously there's been management, record company, publisher — all those sorts of people involved in the decision of what tracks go on what album and for commercial reasons obviously they tend away from anything that isn't pop."

"It's taken three years of being back in New Zealand to get it together, it hasn't been easy. I expected it to be easier, but then that was probably unwarranted. I came back extremely paranoid, thinking that these things should drop into my lap."

"I've always tried to write from the way I'm living and things that I see and feel about where I am, so hopefully people can identify with the ideas and feelings that are on this album. It's about New Zealand — 'Haunted' is about being a white person in a country that is struggling to incorporate some indigenous aspects into its society, which I think is essential. 'Migrant Refugee' is about leaving; although I know it's totally impractical, people should stay where they are. The movement of populations around the world is essentially destructive; if we cared for our fellow man it wouldn't be."

"America" was written pre-ships ban, it was just a feeling I got about coming back to New Zealand and expecting it to be New Zealand. After being in Britain, which is just so obviously British, there was this kind of imperialism going on here where we had so many American influences in NZ, and it seemed to be hiding what cultural potential there was here, getting in the way of what we were, what New Zealanders were. New Zealanders have the power to be such a positive force around the world — we have an incredibly good reputation as "nice people", we could be doing so much. Basically this is an album about place and positivity!"

Fiona Rae

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