

GINA VILLALOBOS

Days On Their Side

Some albums you listen to, some you feel

“I just can’t get started.” Those are the first words we hear on *Days On Their Side* (Face West/RedEye), the fourth CD from singer/songwriter Gina Villalobos. She moans these words with the weariness of one encumbered by a lifetime of ache. “I just can’t get started.” Emphasized by the sorrowful sound of a distant, lonesome pedal steel guitar, these words are buoyed by their honesty. One can feel their weight, feel their truth. “I just can’t get started.” In the case of *Days On Their Side*, she got started, she just wasn’t in gear.

“At first I was just kind of going through the motions,” the Los Angeles-based Villalobos reveals. “I started knocking off tracks pretty quickly, but I was quite bored and unintrigued with the process and outcome of the songs so I essentially started over. When I finally found my voice and had a clear picture of what I wanted to do I felt I actually had a reason to make the album. A picture came into focus of what I wanted the music to look like in the end.”

Focused though the picture may have been for Villalobos, her lyrics are like a frosted window into her world, offering only shadows of an opaque emptiness. “[I try to erase, wipe out my face/Breaking pace, breathing rain](#),” she laments in “Days On The Side,” her voice straining to keep up with the gloom. In “Sun In My Eyes,” a rocking number driven by Villalobos’ longtime session guitarist Kevin Haaland’s chunky runs, she leads off with, “[Severed rhymes run, no way to make this weighted, I would lie to you if I could/Chasing lines down, the kind that keep me shaded, I don’t like the way that I look](#).” On occasion she’ll hint at what’s behind the curtain: “[I wanna take a beating with you](#),” she sings in *Days On Their Side*’s opening tune, “[Don’t wanna talk to somebody new](#).”

“Typically I don’t know what I am saying until I have finished a song,” Gina offers, “and a lot of the time the meaning is beyond the lyrics, in the space between them. The lyrics are just one color in the palette. I get to communicate with rhythm and melody, and instrumentation, tempos, which key a song is in, intros, outros, and bridges. It’s about how all these elements work together on the canvas; I think songs are like paintings, tangible things you can see.” She’s not speaking figuratively here; like many people, Villalobos experiences what’s known as sound synesthesia, which gives her a sense that notes and rhythms occupy a precise location in space. “A snare drum hit might appear closer than the sound of an acoustic guitar strumming,” she illustrates, “so not only do I hear my music, I see it.

“This directly affected my arranging skills on this record. I found myself getting deep into the arrangements, trying to create a bigger sound with simple arrangements. It was a very meticulous and precise arranging process,” she says, acknowledging her satisfaction with the end result. “Individually the parts on the record are very simple but they are all working together like an engine. If you peel back the layers you will see what I am talking about. In fact, I listen to the instrumental mixes of my album quite often. I am really proud of my orchestration and arrangements.”

Gina Villalobos enjoyed a happy childhood in idyllic Lake Sherwood, California, which is nestled in the Santa Monica Mountains near Malibu. Counting Gina, her older brother, Cinematographer father, and mother, along with assorted artists, musicians and entertainment industry types, the population numbered just a few hundred. Villalobos picked up her passion for music from her mother, who could typically be heard playing music by 1970s country and country-rock stars like Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Kris Kristofferson and Linda Ronstadt. By the age of seven Villalobos was learning guitar. At the age of 20, when she was studying photography at college in Santa Barbara, Gina caught a Rickie Lee Jones concert and pretty much immediately gave up on college and spent the next decade or so fronting a pair of regional bands, with which she recorded five CDs.

Her solo years began with 2002’s *Beg From Me*; she produced that collection of 11 original tunes, as she’s done for each of her releases. In 2003, while making *Rock ‘N’ Roll Pony*, Villalobos was moonlighting as a camera assistant on a TV show when she suffered a tragic on-the-job accident that cost her the vision in her right eye. Understandably, Gina went into a deep funk for several months; she withdrew from life until the determination to finish *Rock ‘N’ Roll Pony* gave her a reason to get back on the

horse, as it were. She released the CD in the States in the summer of 2004, kicking off a whirlwind for Villalobos in the process.

Rock 'N' Roll Pony was well-received in the U.S. press, including favorable write-ups in national publications such as *Paste*, *No Depression*, *Acoustic Guitar* and *Harp*. When the CD hit foreign shores a few months later, the praise spread across the pond to the European press, with several magazines, including the German version of *Rolling Stone*, all chiming in. *Rock 'N' Roll Pony* hit #3 on the Euro-American charts and BBC Radio 2 DJ Bob Harris called it the “album of the year”; by 2005 Villalobos was performing in Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

But all was not well, as the extended time on the road coupled with ongoing eye problems caused feelings of isolation. This was her headspace as she wrote her third album, *Miles Away*. It was the first album released on Villalobos' own Face West Records (licensed to Laughing Outlaw Records in the U.K., where it benefited from a round of hosannas and BBC Radio 2 support similar to its predecessor). Upon *Miles Away*'s release in 2007, she was personally invited by World Party's Karl Wallinger to tour the States with them after he heard her cover of his “Put the Message in the Box,” from *Rock 'N' Roll Pony*. Moreover, songs from *Miles Away* and *Rock 'N' Roll Pony* were showing up in movies and TV shows, with “You Don't Like Me Anymore,” “What I'd Give,” “Somebody Save Me,” “Trying To Find You” and “We Got It Slow” being heard in the WB's *One Tree Hill* and ABC's *Army Wives*, and films like the documentary *The Invocation*, and indie film *North Starr*.

Now comes the highly anticipated *Days On Their Side*, and with it favorable comparisons to a slew of heavy hitters: “*Days On Their Side* takes the Lucinda Williams/Sheryl Crow model to a new level,” says *American Songwriter* magazine, while *Vintage Guitar* magazine namedrops some of the all-time great rootsy male rockers, including the Byrds, the Flying Burrito Brothers and Gram Parsons, adding that “Villalobos' melodies remind one of the best Bruce Springsteen, John Fogerty, and John Mellencamp. She often slowly builds the intensity of a song in an almost cinematic manner, setting a mood, introducing a plot, then moving in for the emotional kill.”

Written over a two-year period, *Days On Their Side* finds Villalobos at the top of her already-lofty game. As with *Miles Away*, Gina shared producer credit with engineer Erik Colvin; she also handles all the vocals, plays acoustic and electric guitars, and pitches in on some bass and organ. Back for their third stints recording with Gina are [Kevin Haaland](#) (electric guitar, banjo) and Sean [Caffey](#) (pedal steel), while multi-instrumentalist Ben Pringle, who contributes some organ here, has played on all of her CDs. Colvin also plays some organ and Wurlitzer, while [Josh Grange](#) and [David Dyas](#) (pedal steel), [Tanya Haden](#) (cello), [Dawn Fintor](#) (bass), [Andrew Gerferes](#) (drums) and [Jaime Candiloro](#) (piano) round out the players.

Previously hailed by some as the new “Queen of country-rock,” Villalobos has delivered a rock & roll record camouflaged as an alt-country record by the proliferation of pedal steel. “The country leanings come from the variety of bands I listened to growing up, including Rickie Lee Jones, the Eagles, Bob Dylan, The Band, Linda Ronstadt, Tanya Tucker, Willie Nelson, Loretta Lynn, Kris Kristofferson, Patsy Cline—all the good earthy '70s stuff—and the slight shading of pedal steel on my records, but when you get down to the core of my songs they have nothing to do with country.”

In the end, Gina Villalobos is too busy feeling the vibe to think too much about how to categorize her music. “I'm just here to express the inner voice of my music,” is how she puts it. “My mission is to listen to it and be a vessel for it. I feel like I make music because I have to...to be alive.”

Listen to *Days On Their Side* and you'll feel it too.

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