

Back in 2002, Nerina Pallot was unceremoniously “freed” from her recording contract with Polydor after her debut album, *Dear Frustrated Superstar*, failed to set the charts on fire. She would spend the next three years going back to university, knitting, eating ribs, drinking tequila and making a follow-up, *Fires*, which was finally released last April on her own label, Idaho, and published by Chrysalis – her original publishers, who were shrewd enough not to let her go. Calling the shots herself, she certainly appears to know what she’s doing. The album garnered four-star reviews in the UK broadsheets, suggesting that not only had Polydor made a very big mistake, but they had also done Pallot a great big favour. Since then, Pallot has been touring non-stop, both as a headliner and in support of acts as diverse as Paddy Casey, Keith Urban and Jamie Cullum. Tonight, however, she is playing what could be her most prestigious gig to date: opening for Sheryl Crow at a sold-out Hammersmith Apollo. **Michael Banna** accesses all areas...

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Backstage at the Apollo, Nerina Pallot is pacing the room. I can't quite work out if she is doing so out of nervousness, or strutting confidently, awaiting a triumphant performance and legions of new fans, but I suspect that it's a little of both. It's a slight observation, certainly, but it highlights a recurring dichotomy with Pallot; is she a shy and nervous shoegazer or a fierce, snarling rock chick? I certainly can't tell from having seen her live before, or from meeting her today, but again I suspect that it is a rare and wonderful combination of both. I have seen her say, "OK I'm going to do one more song – yes, don't worry, I'll be leaving soon" in one support slot, yet at another shoot back to a heckler "yes of course you are the authority on all that is musical aren't you? Perhaps that's why you're in the audience and I'm on the stage!"

As we sit down to begin the interview, Nerina is polite and well-mannered, having perfect command of the Queen's English. She also happens to be extremely beautiful, and I find myself wondering what this woman lacks that the likes of KT Tunstall, Jem and Dido do not. Something tells me that I probably won't find out today...

*At what point did you realise that the Polydor deal wasn't going to work out?*

When my A&R man still couldn't pronounce my name a year after signing me.

*Not a good sign. I hear that at the time you also had a bit of an "experience" on Saturday morning TV - care to elaborate?*

Ooooh, I think it was that moment where I realised that all those little pop puppets are really the dreadful little creatures you imagine them to be when reading Heat magazine. It involved stilettos, and two females, each of which were members of now defunct pop outfits, and I simply can't say any more, as it opens up all sorts of old wounds for me [laughs].

*Your first album was very impressive, what made you choose to work with different people on the second?*

Aw, that's so nice of you to say that. It was more a product of circumstance, I guess. A very nice circumstance. Ordinarily, when you get dropped there is a lot of skulking about and feeling unwanted, but the same day I got dropped, my lovely publishers Chrysalis music offered to pay for some recording in Los Angeles, with Wendy Melvoin. While on that session, I met the other producers, Howard Willing and Eric Rosse, who went on to make the rest of the record with me. It was great actually, because none of it was anything other than people getting on and becoming friends, and roping in their musician friends to do a few favours, because there was very little money to make *Fires* with. Of course, I still skulked about and felt unwanted, but I

think I've been doing that since I was about 5 years old, so no change there really.

*Did you find that releasing music on your own label as opposed to being on a major label limited you in any way, with regards to these things?*

Well, I may harp on about how little money I had to make the album, but because all the producers became such good friends, I was extremely fortunate in that they roped in all their mates to do me favours too – who just happen to be the cream of LA studio musicians. This was the cheapest \$200,000 album ever made, I'm not kidding. But, it did directly affect how long it took to make the record, because I couldn't just book studios or musicians, I had to wait until they had a gap in their schedules to just drop by and play. See, that old adage about patience totally applies to me. I think the musicians were more sympathetic to my cause because I wasn't on a major label, and that helped in some ways. And, while I was A&R'd by my publisher at Chrysalis, he took a very hands off approach which was amazing. He has a really interesting way of overseeing things - he doesn't really come to the studio, but I will play him things and he knows immediately what he likes and doesn't, and then I would go off and think about it, work some more, and somehow we'd reach the place where we were both happy. The flipside of this is that I had to be very self-motivated, because there wasn't a release schedule and nothing was rostered, and I was very slow because I didn't feel very confident about making a record again. I was second guessing myself a lot, but that was probably no bad thing in hindsight.

*Well it does seem to have paid off, but does that mean we'll have to wait another 4 years for your next album?*

Erm, I hope not. But I would still like to finish the English degree I started while making *Fires*, so I might go back for the final year while I make the third album.

*If the deal was right would you ever be tempted to go back to a major label? I hear there's a lot of sniffing around at the moment?*

The deal is right, and I just have. I am now on 14th Floor, the Warners label behind Damien Rice. They specialise in taking finished albums by artists with existing fanbases, and then building from there. It's quite something to be signed for ex-

actly what you are right now, rather than what they would like you to be.

*Congratulations! Sounds like a great position to be in artistically. If it was a different kind of deal, how much, if any, of your artistic control would you be willing to relinquish for fame and fortune?*

That depends on how much fame, how big the fortune, and thus how many shoes said fortune would afford me.

*I noticed that you worked with Delerium on a dance track on their last album - how was that?*

It didn't really feel like I worked with them – it was more a sort of recording by correspondence, whereby they sent me a backing track, I wrote a melody and lyrics, recorded those in London and sent them over to Vancouver and LA, and then they worked on that further until we were all happy. I quite enjoyed it actually, even though Delerium make very different records from my own. It was easier in some ways because not all the onus was on me, so I didn't fret as much as I do when I am working on my own stuff.

*I have counted that eleven of your songs mention death, and even more mention religion – why the fascination?*

One is our only certainty in life; the other our only satisfactory medication for that nasty little certainty.

*If you had to pick one song from your repertoire to represent your entire body of work, which one would you choose and why?*

Aaaaargh. That's hard. That's a bloody good question too. I think *Idaho*. It was my 'manifesto' song, I guess. I wrote it when I was feeling utterly wretched, but defiant too, and it's musically very representative of me, i.e. lots of piano and fiddly orchestration, and lyrically, my most honest, and personal, I suppose. I get lost when I play it, and I never get bored of playing it either.

*It is a great song – I hear that the story behind it is far deeper than you simply liking the place though – what is it?*

Well, it was inspired by the book *Zen & The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert Pirsig, which involves a road journey that takes in Idaho *en route*. My favourite part of the novel takes place there, and so I harbour this strange idea that the secret of the universe may in fact be unravelled in the state of Idaho alone. That, and my other

pipe dream of running off to the mountains to live out my life as a batty old bird with horses and cats, drinking port of an evening and writing cod-Cole Porter songs on a battered old piano in my mountain log cabin.

*As a musician/artist, what has been your finest moment so far?*

My Dad's face when he heard a song of mine on the radio for the first time.

*How sweet – it must be a really interesting thing for family and friends to watch you unfold as an artist, especially when some of your songs are about them. What ever happened to your soldier friend in Everybody's Gone To War?*

As far as I know, he is alive and well, and I hope that he stays that way.

*How does it feel to have your songs played on Hollyoaks and Eastenders? [Damascus was used during an emotional goodbye scene in Hollyoaks, and Patience is a regular in the 'Enders caff']?*

Unnerving, as it always happens when I'm doing the ironing and I nearly always narrowly miss a potential domestic catastrophe [laughs].

*You are often compared to other female artists of both the past and the present; have you ever been compared to someone you think is terrible, and how do you respond to it?*

It happens a lot. More than I would like to mention. There is one artist in particular that comes up a lot at the moment, and I just smile and nod like a poodle at a dog and pony show and hope I come across as sincere. There's a time and a place for lamenting about things you instinctively know are rubbish, but tons of people buy anyway, and I reserve that for when my friends need entertaining. My particular problem is that I am highly critical, and so think nearly everything is crap.

*Well, often it is! Speaking of which, of the female singer/songwriters around at the moment, who do you think will still be around in 20 years time?*

Hmm. That's another good question. I can only think of PJ Harvey and she's already been around for about 10 years. Oh Lordy, I don't really know. How can you know? I guess you base it on who do you think will still be making interesting work 20 years' hence, so PJ definitely. But the newest crop? That's hard, because while some artists may

well be equipped to go the distance, it's questionable whether the industry will support that. I hope so. But this increasingly common three album cycle for artists (Album 1: hello we love you, Album 2: you're ok, Album 3: please go away now) is not conducive to long term artist development.

*You've often spoken about growing up in Jersey, and you're going back there later this month for a special gig - tell me about the Help a Jersey child charity project you've been working on.*

Well, the charity is being launched by Channel 103 FM, the main independent radio station in Jersey, and they have asked me to play a gig as a fundraiser for the launch night. I haven't been involved in the creation of the charity or anything like that, I just agreed to do the show that will hopefully make everyone aware of the charity's existence.

*What does the future hold for you?*

When I look into my crystal ball, I see suitcases, and pianos, and guitars, and the acquisition of yet more strange objects from foreign lands. I think there's the odd hangover in there, too.

*And what's this about knitting?*

Knitting? It's my reason for getting out of bed in the morning....

*And finally, are you nervous about tonight?*

YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW NERVOUS. I always get nervous, but I love Sheryl to bits, so not only is it a big honour to be opening for her, but I don't want to let her or her fans down.

And it is with this that I leave Nerina and take my seat for what is arguably the most winning performance by a support act that I have ever seen. As Nerina takes the stage, she informs the audience of her "wardrobe malfunction" [she stood too close to the sink when washing her hands] and tells us that she doesn't usually start speaking before she plays as it puts people off. She is wrong, winning the crowd over within a matter of minutes, and by the end of her set she has them eating out of the palm of her hand. Afterwards the venue is buzzing about how good she was, and the merchandise table quickly sells every copy of *Fires*, and I am still left wondering why this woman is not a household name. But with a new record deal and a re-release of the album coming very soon, 2006 might just be Pallot's year.. ■