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How Gina got her groove back



Country music star Gina
Jeffreys has been off the radar
for four years but, as **FRANCES
WHITING** discovers, she's back

SHE'S been Gina Hillenberg, the little girl with big dreams growing up at the back of her mama's hairdressing salon in Toowoomba. She's been Gina McCormack, devoted wife and besotted mother. But right now, she's preparing to re-acquaint herself with the person most people know... the platinum-selling, award-winning, hit-producing queen of country music, Gina Jeffreys.

It will be, she says, quite a

transition.

"I haven't been known as Gina Jeffreys for four years and I haven't wanted to be", the five-time Golden Guitar winner smiles.

"But when you're a performer, that part of you is always with you, and even though I chose to leave it all, there's always been a little bit of Gina Jeffreys left in me.

"Oh, who am I kidding?", the 38-year-old laughs, "there's a whole lot of that girl still rattling around in there."

Four years ago, after 12

years on the road, 10 gold and platinum-selling albums, hundreds of sold-out concerts and an impressive collection of every major Australian country music award sparkling on her shelves, Gina walked away.

It was, as was widely reported at the time, an exit caused by the happy news that she was pregnant with her first — and so far — only child with her husband, respected music producer Rod McCormack.

While it was certainly true that she intended to care

full-time for this much wanted and longed-for baby, she's the first to admit she had no idea she would happily bow out of the spotlight for so long.

"Well, I thought I would take a year off and find out if he was a travelling baby, to see how much I could take him on the road.

"But when Jackson was born I realised I was a real routine mother, I didn't actually want to take him on the road. I wanted to tuck him in, in his own little bed, every night.



“One thing led to another . . . and now it’s been four years.”

But it wasn’t just the arrival of her son that caused Jeffreys to walk away from a career that opened the door for all the other girls – such as Kasey and Beccy and Sarah – to walk through.

There was another reason that wasn’t made public at all.

She had, she admits now, lost her voice, both literally and emotionally.

“I had been in Nashville recording an album with an extremely well-known and respected producer, and it should have been such a joyous time for me.

“Instead my voice just clamped up, it just felt strangled in my throat.

“I remember standing in the studio just completely freaking out and closing my eyes and praying to my Auntie Nina – who was an auntie of mine who had died who had always loved my singing – “Please, Auntie Nina, help me, help me find my voice.

“But nothing happened. I guess Auntie Nina was busy that day.”

Jeffreys stuck it out in the studio, recording the album *Angel*, and seeking advice from a classically trained singing teacher, who as she wryly reflects now, was “probably not the best choice for me”.

“An opera singer trying to teach a country music singer, it was a disaster.

“She was very critical of my voice and at a time when I really needed bolstering up, I was getting torn down.

“My self-confidence just plummeted.”

Normally outgoing, friendly and relaxed with her fans, Jeffreys also noticed she was becoming more introverted in public.

“We went on this cruise and I was lying by the pool and I opened my eyes and looked up and there was a woman standing on the upper deck with a camera, and her friend was standing behind my sunlounge getting her photo taken with me.

“I was lying there in my bikini and I felt very exposed, very vulnerable, and I thought, ‘Why couldn’t you have just asked me to take a photo with you, why

did you have to sneak up on me like that?’

“The thing is, looking back, I think maybe I wasn’t very approachable.

“Now I realise exactly what the problem was – I was completely and utterly exhausted.”

She had, after all, been performing for 21 years, ever since she was a 12-year-old girl who, while all the other adolescents who roamed Toowoomba’s leafy streets were listening to Michael Jackson and Duran Duran, could be found in her bedroom crooning along with Dolly and Emmylou.

“I think”, she smiles, “I was very, very uncool.”

But she was determined. When she turned 12 she

asked her parents Nola and Graham if she could start looking for singing work.

“I think they were probably a bit taken aback but my mum and dad have been completely behind me since day one.

“So off Dad and I went to all the cafes in Toowoomba and I can still remember the spiel.

“I would go in and say, ‘Hello, my name is Gina

Hillenberg and I would like to sing in your restaurant’.

“They all said no, every one.”

Finally the owner of the local Mexican cantina said she could sing there – but for no pay, just tips.

“The first time I played there my parents came to dinner and I made the grand total of 33 cents.

“But dinner cost them \$25,” she says, dissolving into

laughter. “That’s love for you.”

Undeterred, she sang on, eventually hooking up with a Toowoomba band, Onyx, and leaving school at 16 to concentrate on performing.

For the next few years, Jeffreys would remain in Toowoomba, learning her mother’s hairdressing trade “in case the singing thing didn’t work out”, and honing her performing skills.

Then, when she was 22, came a trip down south in a battered, non-airconditioned Mazda 323 to a festival that would change her life.

When Keith Urban handed the Starmaker award to a completely unknown singer at the 1991

Tamworth music festival, a ripple went through the country music industry.

Who was this girl from Toowoomba who had blown into town, and blown everyone away?

It was Gina Hillenberg, and obviously the surname would have to go.

“As part of Starmaker, I won a recording contract and the record company said my surname was too hard to remember and too long.

“I wanted to keep something of my family in my name so I came up with Jeffreys, after my older brother, Jeff.

“Mum and Dad didn’t mind at all, as I said, they have always been 100 per cent behind me.

“It didn’t really cause much talk, but in Toowoomba there was a bit of a ripple.

“One bloke said to me, ‘How could you change your name, it’s your history, it’s your heritage – and besides’, he said, ‘there’s nothing wrong with Berghofer.’

“I thought, ‘I rest my case’.”

But new name or not, cracking the big time wasn’t easy.

“I did not know a soul in Sydney but I remember thinking, ‘Oh well, I’ll be famous soon and then I’ll know everybody’.

“I remember I went on *Hey Hey It’s Saturday* and I thought, I actually thought, ‘Right, that’s it then, when I wake up tomorrow I’m going to be famous’.”

In fact, it would be three more years before Jeffreys’ first album came out.

During this time, the years were spent scrapping together an existence, and anxiously awaiting the arrival of the big red, blue and white striped bags her parents would send down on the Greyhound bus from Toowoomba filled with canned food and instant noodles.

BUT when her moment in the sun did come, it was a scorcher.

In 1994 her first album, *The Flame*, was released and immediately went platinum, and for the next

decade Gina Jeffreys was everywhere, the undisputed Queen of country who admits she loved every minute of wearing her crown.

It was, she reflects, “all about me, me, me” until a little girl started writing to her in 1996, her words changing the way Jeffreys saw the world and her own place in it, forever.

“I started getting these letters from this extraordinary little girl who could write so beautifully.

“She would write things like, ‘Dear Gina, I love your song *Wildflower* because it’s about strong women, and my mummy is strong’.

“I loved getting her letters, and then one day one arrived and it said: ‘Dear Gina, I’m writing to tell you goodbye because Mummy and the doctors say it’s time.

‘I’ve got leukemia which is a very big word for me to spell because I’m only six.’”

Jeffreys’ voice catches, before she closes her eyes and continues.

“I had no idea. She had two wishes, one to swim with the dolphins and the other to meet me.

“We raced back from tour, but I missed her.

“I missed her and I wish with all my heart I could have made it there.”

Instead, Jeffreys got busy, immediately contacting the Australian Leukaemia Foundation.

She has been with the organisation for 10 years, donating her time with performances and appearances, raising cash and the foundation’s profile as its patron.

“It has done more for me than I have ever done for it.

“Louisa had a big impact on me and I just thank her and the foundation for showing me what’s important, who’s important and what really counts.”

Which may account for how easily Jeffreys slipped out of the spotlight.

Married to ex-Bullamakanka member and respected music producer Rod McCormack, who counts Paul Kelly, Beccy Cole and Adam Harvey among his clients, when Jeffreys walked away from



the industry, it was to their one hectare "little piece of heaven" nestled deep within the New South Wales central coast.

There she has been, for the past four years, bringing up her son, baking biscuits for the local mothers' group, wandering over to her husband's recording studio on the property, joining on music sessions, occasionally performing for the Leukaemia Foundation, but mostly just being Jackson's mum.

"The people in our community don't know who

Gina Jeffreys is, they only know Gina McCormack.

"I've loved every minute of the last few years, and a friend of mine said recently, 'I can't believe how easily you let it go', but I think it was because it was my choice.

"I wasn't pushed, my sales weren't down, my seats weren't empty — but my heart was."

Right now, however, it's full to the brim with an enthusiasm and passion for her life, her loves, and for the first time in a long time, her music.

Jeffreys is about to step out of her self-imposed musical exile and launch her new album *Walks of Life*, at the Tamworth Country Music Festival in January.

She has come full circle, going back to where it all began for her, but while the setting will be the same, she knows all too well that this time around, the industry is very, very different.

When Jeffreys started out, there were very few successful female country singers — now in her absence there's a new group of girls out there — Kasey Chambers, Sara Storer, Beccy Cole — singing a new style of country.

But Jeffreys isn't worried, isn't scared and isn't sorry she's no longer touted as the Queen of Country.

"I don't know what I am any more," she laughs, "maybe Matron of Honour?"

"When I came on the scene it was all blokes — John Williamson, Keith

Urban, Graeme Connors and Lee Kernaghan, not many women at all, apart from Anne Kirkpatrick.

"It was easy for me in some ways to come out and make an impact.

"I think the girls who have come through now have had a much tougher ride than I did.

"To tell you the truth, I don't think I was anyway near as talented as they are when I first started out, but I've got years of experience behind me now and I've figured out what it is about me that works as a singer.

"I'm not a girl any more, I'm a woman and I think I'm a better singer for it."

After the album comes out, her family, she says, will remain her priority.

"I love this album, I think it's the best I've ever done, but I'm not going to go crazy promoting it.

"It won't be like the old days when you gigged six nights a week. I can't do that any more.

"I have a son who needs me, and who I need to be with."

What she doesn't need any more, she says, is the adulation.

"I did get an ego there for a while.

"I mean I was never a diva, I wasn't into tantrums or dummy spits and I always treated my fans and band and my crew really well.

"But yes, there was an ego there.

"But not any more, not a shred of one."

"The thing is," she smiles, "when I left the industry I felt like a star.

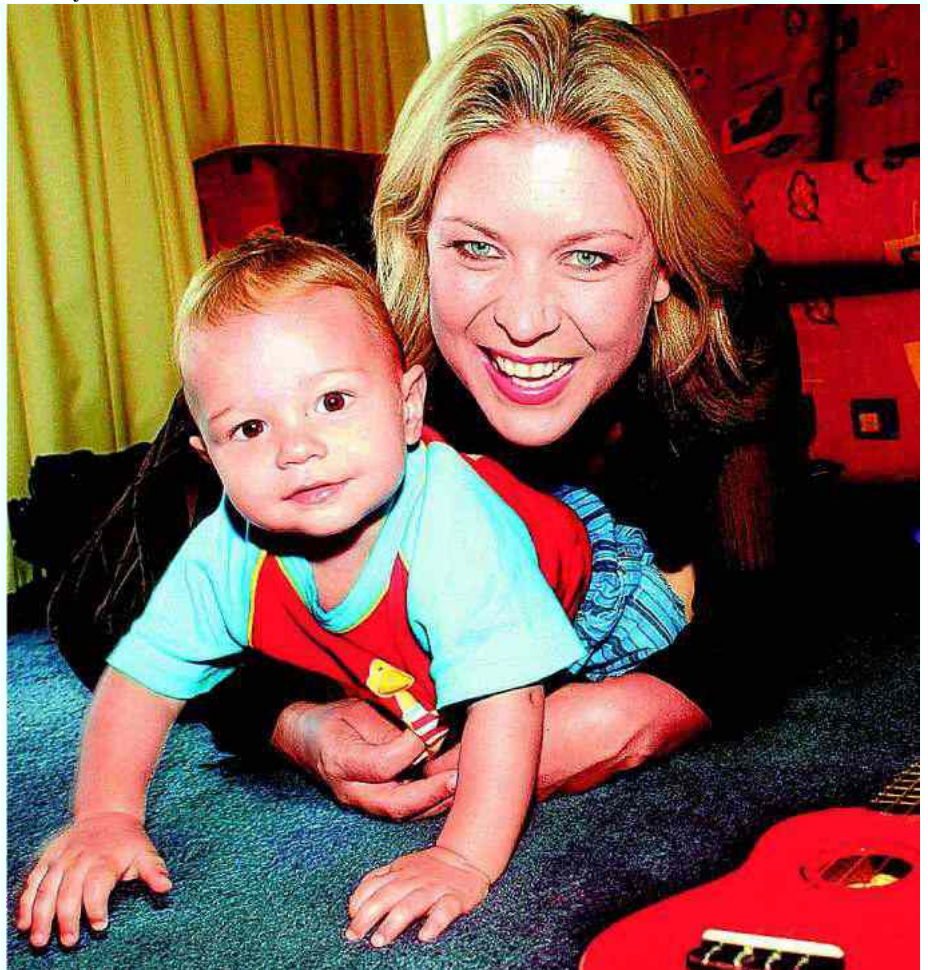
"Now I feel like a mum who can sing."

“ “

I'm not a girl any more, I'm a woman and I think I'm a better singer for it



BIG DAY: Gina Jeffreys marries Rod McCormack in 1998



FROM HITS TO LULLABIES: Gina Jeffreys now relishes her most important and rewarding role, as mother to son Jackson