

Fit To Burst

Bic Runga

Recent times have been strange for Bic Runga, and chances are they're about to get stranger. This month, after several aborted recording sessions, a serious car crash, and a lengthy, frustrating "humble trip", Runga celebrates the release of her first album, Drive. Its unveiling also delivers her into the centre of major record company wheeling and dealing. And as Runga reveals, it can be a tricky place to be.

Three years ago, Runga was taken to Sony Music NZ's headquarters in Auckland by drummer / producer, Wayne Bell, and introduced to the label's General Manager of A&R, Paul Ellis. At the meeting, Runga played Ellis a demo recording of her song, 'Drive', and while he remained non committal at the time, Ellis told Runga later, he was, "quietly wetting his pants". Shortly thereafter, Ellis signed Runga to a four album deal with Sony.

Back then, at age 19, Runga already had a high media profile, not as a musician, but as host of the local music video show, *Music Nation*, that screened on TV2. Today, sitting on a couch in the boardroom at Sony's Symonds Street office, Runga reveals she was uncomfortable with her public image.

"I was definitely worried about that. I've always seen myself as a musician, so to be recognised only as a face on television was a really weird trip."

In December 1995, Sony released the *Drive EP*, featuring songs from Runga's original demo recordings, and put the wheels in motion to record her debut album. Then, Runga says, "there were lots of false starts." Recording sessions with Wayne Bell, and later on, with former Supergroove vocalist, Karl Steven, were abandoned midway through, as Runga was unhappy with the progress being made. While pointing out that she did have a resolute idea as to how her music should sound, Runga admits she was too shy and insecure to speak up in the studio.

"I wouldn't express anything, I was on some ridiculous humble trip, I thought that everyone was doing me big favours and that I had no right to say what I wanted. The failure of those sessions was my own fault because I wouldn't say a word."

With the situation at a standstill, in August last year, Runga travelled to Sulan Studios in Ballyvourney, Ireland, to work with producers Nial Maccan, and former Crowded House bassist,

Nick Seymour. Again, the project ground to a halt.

"It was possibly my own fault again, I just didn't speak up and say what I was after. But the two producers... well, I don't think they had it sorted out between themselves what they wanted to do."

Runga says it wasn't her choice to record in Ireland, the decision was made by executives at her record company, based half a world away; 'It was Sony America's idea, they'd heard my demos and heard the single, and they thought it would be a good place to go. I just wanted to see Ireland [laughter], and I suspected it wouldn't work, but they wanted me to use a well known producer."

From the Irish recording sessions, Sony NZ released the single, 'Sway'. "Everytime it comes on the radio I think, 'doh!'", says Runga.

After returning to New Zealand, Runga was scheduled to enter the studio in December with a new producer, musician Dave Dobbyn (who has previously produced two albums for former Go Between's singer/guitarist, GW McLennan). But a month prior, Runga broke her collar bone when she was involved in a head-on collision while returning from the first Michael Jackson concert in Auckland, and was unable to make the sessions. While recovering, Runga made the decision to take control of the project, and assume the production role herself. Looking back, she says, the abandoned recording sessions were massively beneficial.

"I do blame myself for the whole mess, if I had just been a little bit stancher I wouldn't have farted around so much. But at the same time, I learnt so much from each session, and I couldn't have produced it myself if I hadn't learnt so much."

Runga was confident in her production abilities, but was it a battle to convince Sony? "It was a little, I had to write a proposal to them saying, 'I want to do it myself and it's going to sound

like this', but they were pretty cool about it."

Runga began recording *Drive*, last March, at Revolver Studios in Royal Oak, Auckland, with her live band; Andrew Thorne on guitar, bass player Aaron McDonald, and Bell on drums. Aside from shedding the odd tear ("but not in public"), Runga is stoked with the result.

"It was a real relief to do it myself. It's like giving a baby away if you have to give a producer your songs, because a producer's role is to actually give you a sound. I did this record the way I wanted to do it, and I'm roughly 100% happy with it. It's not a perfect record by any means, but it's all mine."

At the request of Sony America, Runga had *Drive* mixed in Los Angeles

