

Flying the Flag

Brooke Fraser returns home this month for a tour celebrating the release of her third album *Flags*, with a show at The Civic on 30 October. She talks to **Sarah Illingworth** about the thinking behind her new songs and why New Zealanders will always get to hear her new music first.

It's been three years since the release of Brooke Fraser's second album, *Albertine*, a collection of songs largely inspired by her work in Rwanda, a country haunted by the ongoing impact of genocide. The intensity of the subject meant the two years Fraser spent touring and performing its songs took their toll; when it came time to record her third album, *Flags*, the singer felt weary.

"I think I subconsciously knew it was necessary for my survival of this album cycle that I wrote songs which energised me, and were buoyant songs," she explains, adding that she's looking forward to getting back on the road. "I'm really happy about the balance I feel I've struck with this album, and I think it's gonna make touring a lot more, kind of balanced and fun for me."

Other people's stories, and Fraser's interpretation of them, form the backbone of *Flags*, and this no doubt also contributes to their 'survivability' as tour material. *Flags* is a tribute of sorts, to the cast of characters Fraser has crossed paths with over the last few years.

"Just travelling all over the place and getting outside of the cities was something I really enjoyed about [being in America] the past couple of years," she tells. "Like getting into North Carolina, and 'round to the remote parts of the country, where you get to meet and talk to the people who actually live on the land, rather than people living bustling city lives. I think those people have made it into the songs."

Fraser cites one encounter in particular as inspiring her storyteller approach to *Flags*:

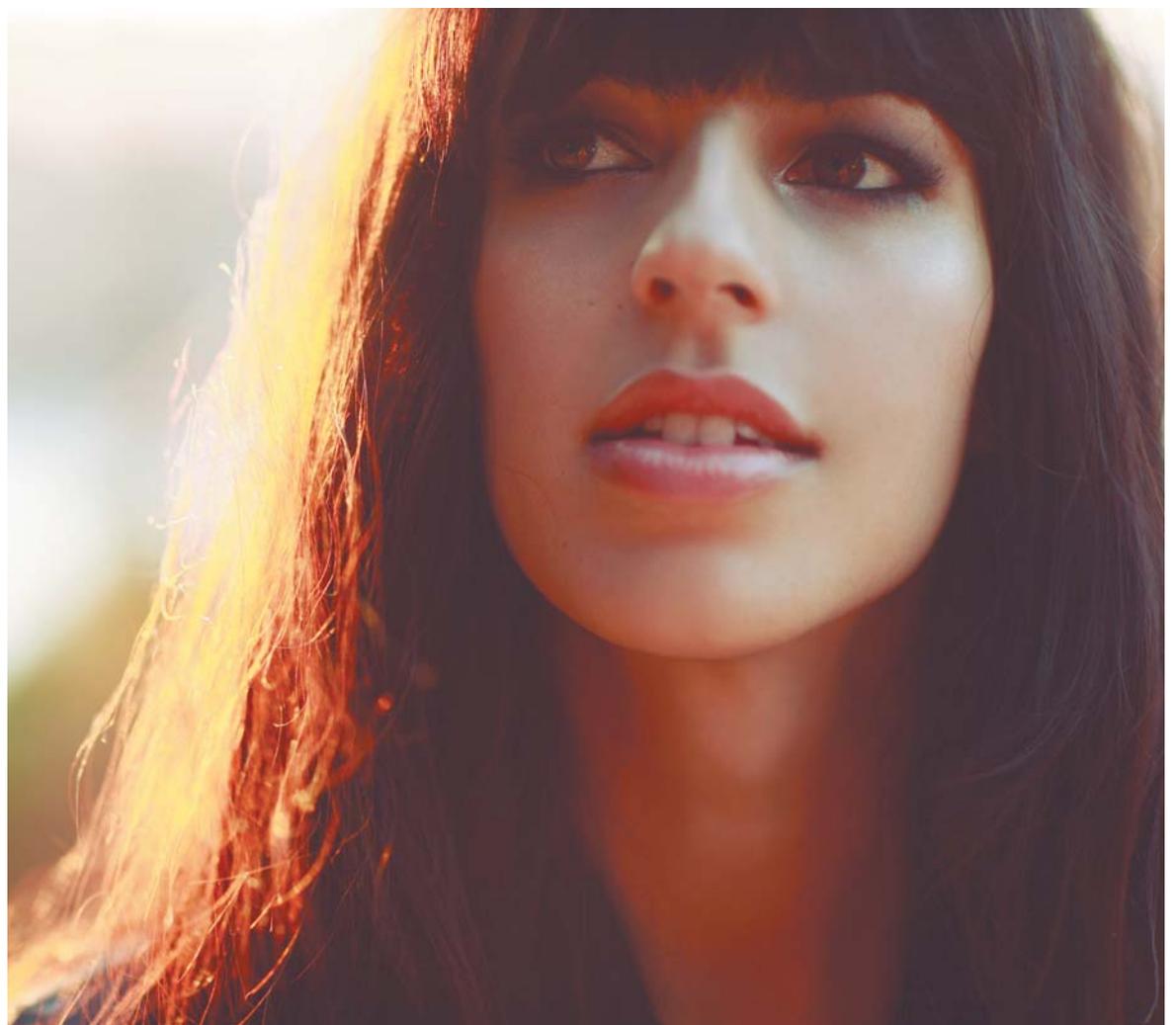
"I was in LA, probably two years ago, and I was on a train [that] took me through Compton, through the 'hood," she laughs. "At Compton, these guys boarded the train who were, I'm pretty sure they were packing some sort of firearm, and one of them kind of kept looking over at me. I asked him which stop I should get off at, and we just struck up a conversation and had a really good talk for about 20, 25 minutes.

"He was a person who I might never have been able to speak to if I hadn't gotten on that train. He talked to me about his life, and how he'd just gotten out of prison, and had been in there for a long time, because he'd done some really horrible things when he was younger. He was in his 30s, but he was on the train that day because he was travelling into a programme where he could finish his high-school education. His name was Lewis and that experience really stuck with me, and I found inspiration there... I suppose previously my albums have focused on my experience of things, whereas [on *Flags*] I've spoken of my experience, but through other people and their stories."

"I kind of set out to make a really honest album, and to stretch myself as a writer and as a musician, and I guess as a producer as well."

The new LP might mark a change stylistically for Fraser, but other people and their stories have been integral to her music from day one, and she has become part of ours. In the short space of six years, the Wellingtonian has become one of New Zealand's iconic artists; her songs are already part of our folklore, as evidenced by the consistently huge turnout when she performs.

Absent from our shores for some time, Fraser holed up in Hollywood earlier this year to record at EastWest Studios, a storied facility that counts everyone from Sinatra to the Rolling Stones among its clientele. More gold, platinum and number



one records have come out of Studio Three, where Fraser and her crew recorded, than from any other studio in the world.

"The actual studio recording rooms themselves have been restored, and are completely as they were originally," the songbird recounts. "They haven't changed anything, so they're still the old linoleum floors Frank Sinatra walked on, and the smells of embedded smoke from 50 years of people making amazing music, whilst inhaling tobacco; it's a really sensory experience."

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Are there any songs on the album that are particularly close to her heart?

"There's a song called *Crows and Locusts* which I really love. I think it's one of the songs I'm most proud of that I've written. It felt like a big leap forward, as a writer, to me... I kind of feel like I was able to merge personal and prose really well."

Flags is the type of album one imagines will go down a treat in a live setting, especially on hearing rollicking first single *Something in the Water*. And local audiences are about to find out for sure: in a matter of weeks, Fraser will be back in town.

"I'm really excited," she says when asked about the upcoming shows. "Home will always be the priority, because I'm really aware that I wouldn't even be making a third album if Kiwis hadn't gotten behind me and supported my first. So we'll always honour home soil. [New Zealand] will always be the place that I tour first, if I can help it. So I'm really looking forward to it."

The same can be said of *Flags*. Full of expertly woven narratives like *Betty* and *Ice on her Lashes* that conjure people, places and emotion in colourful detail, it's the first of her albums Fraser has self-produced.

"We were looking at producers, and we kind of realised that we were looking for someone to do what I could probably do myself," she recalls. "Not because I think I'm really awesome and know exactly what I'm doing, 'cause actually I have no idea what I'm doing, but I think that I've learnt to trust my instincts. I knew that it would be a huge risk, and that I probably wouldn't make a perfect album, but I never

**BROOKE FRASER
THE FLAGS ALBUM TOUR**
30 October, 8pm | The Civic