

The voice was there, as pretty and pure as it ever was. It didn't matter that it hadn't been called upon in almost five years, at least not professionally. "I'm not sure what's going to come out," she'd said as she entered the vocal booth and stepped up to the mic. But the clutch of songs she sang – covers of tunes by such male artists as Tom Petty, Damien Rice and Neil Young – were transformed, even enhanced, by her sensitive interpretations. Having taken a break from music to reassess her priorities and her life, Natalie Imbruglia was back.

Male is Imbruglia's first album since 2009, with the first single, *Instant Crush* dropping on Thursday.

"My voice is stronger than ever, which was a lovely surprise," says Imbruglia, 40, sitting on a couch inside the Sony Music offices in South Kensington, London wearing jeans, high-heeled Patrick Cox boots and a fetching pair of oversized black-rimmed specs.

"I'm rediscovering the joy of singing, of being fully engaged with the craft," she adds with that dimpled smile.

"Deep down I always knew I'd go back to music, though at the time I couldn't think of anything worse."

The covers album, to be released on September 11, is a canny move, especially as it has been produced by Billy Mann, who has worked with Pink and John Legend. "I might not be the best songwriter or singer," Imbruglia says, "but it's how I communicate what I'm singing about that I think is my gift. I'm about honesty and truth, so the more I connect with the lyrics the more as a listener you're going to feel that."

Her previous album, *Come To Life*, was widely considered a flop, with its British release scrapped in 2010 despite featuring two songs co-written with Coldplay's Chris Martin, and actually being rather good. She'd stuck to her guns for that one, parting with her record company and releasing the album on her own label, Malabar Records, which must have made its subsequent



AFTER A SELF-IMPOSED MUSICAL HIATUS, NATALIE IMBRUGLIA IS READY TO RE-ENTER THE SPOTLIGHT – BUT ON HER OWN TERMS.
BY JANE CORNWELL.

commercial failure all the more hurtful. At any rate, she called it quits.

"I just wasn't enjoying doing music anymore." A shrug. "I don't know why. It's like when a painter can't paint or a writer has writer's block. Luckily I have other interests, and I think you should follow your joy," she says in her sweet, breezy way. "I had the luxury of being able to afford to go to LA and study acting for two years [with famed coach Ivana Chubbuck], so that eventually the joy for singing came back."

We knew her, of course, as an actress first, playing teenage surfer chick Beth Brennan in *Neighbours*, a role that mirrored her life growing up in salt-sprayed Berkeley Vale on the NSW Central Coast, the second of four daughters born to a Sicilian father and a mother with British ancestry.

Tired of dud scripts with bikini clauses, she moved to Notting Hill in London and partied a lot before recording a demo of four songs.

That demo included *Torn*, a version of a song by forgotten American alt rock act Ednaswap that Imbruglia turned so compellingly that it broke airplay records in Britain and Australia and thrust the then 22-year-old, wide-eyed and blinking, into the global spotlight.

"I look at pictures of myself back then and think, 'Oh, bless,'" she says, shaking her head. "I was a rabbit in the headlights, just trying to handle it all."

Everyone seemed to want a piece of the dark-haired gamine, unassuming in her combats and hoodie. Her 1997 debut *Left of the Middle* sold more than 6 million copies worldwide and is the highest selling debut album by a pop/rock female act, ever.

There were fashion shoots, turns on *Letterman*, sold-out gigs and tours. Around about then this writer interviewed her for a glossy fashion magazine; in between being primped for the cover photo Imbruglia asked me not to include the fact she'd just had a tattoo, the Chinese word for "courage", inked on her left foot ("My dad will kill me," she'd grimaced). When her phone rang it was her then beau, Lenny Kravitz.

Reminded, Imbruglia claps her hands – there's a large pale blue ring on her left middle finger – and laughs. "Yes! What a wonderful man he is [Kravitz]. We don't see each other very much these days but I'm so fond and proud of him. He always wanted to do acting and

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he's gone straight in at that high level.

"As for the tattoos..." She pushes up the sleeve of her Yves Saint Laurent military parka and shows off the large but delicate feather tattoo on the underside of her right forearm. "I've got tattoos on my wrist, neck and lower back. My little sister [singer-songwriter Laura Imbruglia] has loads of tattoos too." She pauses, grins. "Poor Dad."

Imbruglia's career, and her life, has rollercoasted since those early, heady days. Sales of 2001's *White Lilies Island* were so-so, a blow sweetened by a six-figure endorsement deal she signed with L'Oreal in 2002. In 2003, the year she married former Silver Chair frontman Daniel Johns in a beachside ceremony in Port Douglas, she co-starred in Rowan Atkinson's 007 spoof, *Johnny English*.

In 2005 the single *Shiver* from her album *Counting Down the Days* topped the British charts for several weeks. Then in 2009, the year after she and Johns divorced (unsurprisingly, perhaps, given that they were living on opposite sides of the globe), *Come to Life* tanked.

Strong-minded like her sisters ("We're half Italian; it comes with the territory"), Imbruglia is now reinvigorated. She's ready to take on questions about where she's been, who she's seeing – which, after rumoured dalliances with everyone from Prince Harry and David Schwimmer to will-i-am and Justin Hemmes, is apparently no one – and the fact that, having spoken for her desire for children, she's yet to become a mother.

"When I realised my life wasn't going the way I'd projected, that none of us are in control at all, I felt this enormous freedom," she says. "I turned into an adventurer! I was like, 'I'm going to jump out of a plane! I'm going to do these crazy things!' So you can see it as a negative or you can think, wow, I discovered something after my divorce that was actually a gift and a beautiful thing that helped me grow."

She flashes a smile. "It's easy to look at other people's lives and think that you're the one missing out on something.



At Christmas she's off to Peru, to trek the Inca Trail.

She prefers reading poetry to novels, particularly the poems of Rumi.

She once tried to learn the guitar but gave it up: "I was terrible."

But there's a lot of things I get to do that my friends with two kids don't. I love my road less travelled. Not that I've been single the whole time," she offers, twinkling. "I've been in love and had relationships; you just don't hear about it 'cause I'm a private person."

She and Daniel Johns no longer speak. Why? "You'd have to ask him," she says, adding "But I love his new music. It's beautiful. He's very talented."

Her close-knit friendship network keeps her buoyant, whether she's in London, Los Angeles or Australia, which she visits three times a year. "I'm surrounded by bold, brave women, and we have really exciting, fun lives." Another pause. "But I'm hopeful. I want to fall in love. I want all that. Kids. It's something I won't miss out on," she adds firmly, "regardless of how it has to happen. From a very young age I've felt sure it was my destiny. At a certain point there's a need to not be completely selfish, to give something back."

To that end, she's an ambassador for Virgin Unite, the charity arm of the Virgin Group created by her friend Richard

Branson. Her chosen cause is the UN-backed Campaign to End Fistula, a preventable condition brought about by prolonged childbirth, that affects many poor young women in Africa.

She's nothing if not prismatic. There's the actor who won plaudits last year for her British stage debut in Alan Ayckbourn's *Things We Do For Love*. The model and businesswoman who promotes jewellery and cosmetics and recently launched her own skincare range. There's *The X Factor* judge, the designer label-lover ("Do say these boots are by Patrick Cox, he's a great friend") and the beauty-about-town, photographed at openings, featuring on society pages but never, really, in gossip columns.

There's the free spirit who has studied Eastern philosophy and transcendental meditation, who occasionally battles melancholy, who treasures her daily runs through Kensington Gardens in the company of Mr Wilson, the white terrier-cross she rescued from a bin in Los Angeles and brought back to London: "My runs are my happiest moments. I'll be listening to music and looking at the trees and thinking, 'This is what it's all about.'"

Oh, and then there's the bold, brave woman with a penchant for bad boys. "I'm working on that one!" she mock-yells, rocking back on the couch. "But yeah, all these Natalies you mention – they're all me. That's why I need to find a guy who..." She stops, starts again. "Look, you could sit me at dinner with the Queen or put me, I don't know, wherever. I'm interested in people, which I think is a lovely quality, so I'd like to try and find a man with that same thinking."

In the meantime, she's ready to put herself back out there: "I've kind of been under the radar, so there's that first little tough bit, remembering how to build the armour and connect with yourself, and then you're like 'Oh, that's right.'"

All while writing original material for a new album that will come out later this year, or early next. No pressure.

"Spiritually, I'm not a careerist anymore," says Imbruglia. "For me, happiness is success. All I want to do is be happy. I don't care about anything else. If that means giving up work completely and going to live in a commune, then so be it.

"It's about seeing you're not what you do." That dimpled smile. "You're who you are." ●

