

# Boh's LA story

Boh Runga is working on her first solo album in LA – but looking forward to a visit home soon, writes Sarah Lang.

**A**T A desk in her Los Angeles duplex apartment, Boh Runga is sipping a cup of coffee and mock admonishing her husband Campbell. “He keeps sticking his head through the door to see what’s going on. Shush, it’s quite irritating!” she laughs, telling him she’s on the phone to New Zealand for “her first solo interview as an artist”. Not a solo artist, mind you – Boh’s not a fan of being categorised. “Though I guess I need to be put somewhere!”

Certainly she doesn’t slot neatly into just one box. Not to be confused with her fellow-songstress sister Bic, award-winning singer/songwriter/musician Boh made her name as the frontwoman and guitarist for multi-platinum chart-topper Stellar\*, whose three punchy-pop-rock albums scooped sales, airtime and awards between 1999 and 2006. Despite the five-year break between their last two albums, the band behind such hits as *Violent*, *Part Of Me*, *What You Do* and *Undone* haven’t “officially disbanded”, says Runga, and aren’t ruling out another album one day. “We’ve just gone on with our lives, and I’m doing a solo record now because I have a bunch of songs I’d very much like to sing.”

When we speak, Runga has just spent two weeks recording vocals for her as-yet-unnamed first solo album (to be released in New Zealand in April) with heavyweight producer Marshall Altman at Hollywood Studios.

“When I finally got into the studio I was like ‘Oooh! I’d actually forgotten what this is like.’ It’s all-consuming, especially when you get to hear a song becoming something other than what I demo-d on guitar. My skeletal musings get a new body to wear for everyone else to hear.”

Expect a softer pop album with a quite different sound to Stellar\*s. “There’s more guitars, it feels more organic, not as electronic, quite moody in places,” says Runga. “Maybe I’m being more romantic than normal, which is quite funny as I’m not normally romantic at all.” Would her husband agree? “He already knows that’s true! I do like a ballad-sort-of love song and big anthems but I don’t always feel the need to write very up-tempo pop songs, like I was [in Stellar\*].”

As an appetiser, her light, catchy single *Starfish Sleeping* hit the radio airwaves on December 2. Look out for the music video, with the youthful-looking 38-year-old crooning in various Hollywood hotspots, including beside the giant Hollywood sign. “Because the single’s out as New Zealand hits summer I wanted a light pop introduction back into the music scene because I’ve been out of the public eye for quite some time.”

Although we haven’t heard much from Boh since Stellar\* released its last album, *Something Like Strangers* in 2006, it is not as though she’s been lounging around. She’s been designing her own jewellery range Birdland, launched at last year’s New Zealand Fashion Week and based on her love of New Zealand’s native birds. (Her third collection and children’s range Girls and Boys comes out in the new year).

And for the past 12 months Boh has been quietly “thinking around” her album from new base LA, strumming guitar when she’s coming up with songs, and playing drums when she’s singing “just for kicks and giggles”.

It is her second stint in Hollywood, invited (and paid) by her US music publishers Chrysalis to hone her songwriting skills, and to meet and collaborate with songwriters and musicians. “It’s a real vote of confidence and a really positive thing to come overseas and do something different for myself. And it’s an amazing experience to be thrown in a room with strangers who are also phenomenal musicians and come up with something.”

Her collaborators on this album read like a who’s who of the

music world. There’s songwriter Pam Shayne (who has written for Christina Aguilera and Jessica Simpson) and highly respected drum and bass artist Photek. Playing are ex-Robbie Williams guitarist Phil Isler and Michael Chavez (who’s played for John Mayer) on guitar, Kris Pooley (who’s played with Morrissey, Gwen Stefani, Jane’s Addiction and Smashing Pumpkins) on keys, Alanis Morissette’s keyboardist Zac Rae on keys and banjo, Vertical Horizon’s Sean Hurley on bass, Aaron Sterling (who’s played for Fiona Apple) on drums, and guest vocalist System of a Down’s Serj Tankian.

Despite these collaborations and the “brilliance” of her producer, stepping out solo after 24 years in bands does feel a little odd. “It feels like starting again, which effectively it is. I don’t have the boys to ring up and go, ‘Right, what are we doing today?’ I have to talk to myself, write things down, and actually get organised.”

But there’s a payoff: she gets to work out exactly what she wants to sing, rather than moulding songs into a band template. “This first single, *Starfish Sleeping*, is actually a song I presented to Stellar\* a while back, and we had a go at trying to ‘Stellify’ it. It didn’t really work but I really like that song and here it is.” And she’s enjoying that autonomy. “Before it was a democracy – I could have been outvoted by the boys – but now if I don’t like something, it doesn’t make it.”

She is laidback and open about everything from babies (“I don’t know if I want to be part of that club”) to LA’s stick-figure, size-zero trend (“I’m not sure whether I agree with it, I’ve seen some really unhappy-looking people”), to her delight at seeing Prince perform in a sequined jumpsuit at desert indie festival Coachella (“I was nearly gagging I was so excited”). It’s clear Boh is thoroughly enjoying her independent life in east-Hollywood suburb Silverlake. When she moved over again late last year, husband-of-seven-years Campbell Smith couldn’t up come too. (Smith manages artists including Scribe, Brooke Fraser and Bic Runga and is CEO of the Recording Industry Association of New Zealand which represents 500 record companies and runs the annual music awards.) “He has quite a few jobs so he spends half the year in Auckland, and half here.” That’s not as hard as you might think, says Boh. “I’ve never actually lived so independently before, so I really enjoy it and he does too. I think it makes us better [as a couple] actually.”

While she’s looking forward to heading home for some February gigs in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, and hanging out in New Zealand more next year, plans beyond that are up in the air. “I only live in the present and there’s some fun stuff going on for me musically in LA, so right now I’d like to see what I could do as an artist here.”

Growing up in Hornby, Christchurch, Boh never imagined she’d be able to make a living, let alone an international career, out of music. The eldest of three daughters of Maori ex-serviceman Joseph and ex-cabaret-singer Chinese mother Sophia, Boh showed musical flair early on. As well as learning piano and guitar, she made up and taped songs with sisters Bic and Pearl “then taped over them! It was all a bit subversive, just terrible dirty words that kids aren’t supposed to know”.

Playing in bands from age 14, she got a job in a resident covers band at the Papanui Tavern where she met drummer Andrew McLaren. By the time the duo moved up to Auckland, formed Stellar\* and released first album *Mix* in 1999, Boh’s sister Bic was already a star singer-songwriter.

“People were saying things like, ‘She’s Bic sister, but what does she do? Are her songs like Bic’s?’” recalls Boh. She admits once dyeing her hair red (her locks have been every colour from blonde to their natural black) partly to differentiate herself from her very-close sister.

“It was a really fun thing to have a different, visually-interesting persona but now I look back at the hair and think ‘Crikey’.”

That’s also the response when Boh realises Stellar\*s first album is about to celebrate its 10th birthday.

“Listening to some of that music now, I just remember the gigs and the enthusiasm people had for us at that time, and hope that people will enjoy what I’m doing now. Because I’m sure enjoying myself.”

