

# OUR NATALIE

**Kris Griffiths talks to Natalie Imbruglia about her music, her man and the good and bad of living in England**

It's been twelve years since a 19-year-old Natalie Imbruglia and alter-ego Beth Brennan decided to abandon Brad Willis, Neighbours and Australia in one fell swoop and move to the only country where the programme still enjoys successful daytime ratings. Although it was Britain that became her launchpad to the big screen and international music superstardom, Natalie confesses she still has a "love/hate relationship" with the country which, despite the customary weather gripes, thankfully errs on the loving side.

The bad: "Sometimes the weather makes life a slog and you wish you could work somewhere without getting seasonal depression. I got it bad when writing my second album and ended up buying those stupid fluorescent lamps because it was the middle of winter and I couldn't get out of bed."

The good: "It's good for writing certain songs as it brings out a melancholy in me that Sydney or LA wouldn't, and it'd be harder to focus in a sunny place because I wouldn't want to be working. I've grown to love Februaries here, when it starts getting sunnier but it's still cold and you can see a blue sky behind bare branches."

The better: "England ends up getting under your skin. I like the feeling that I'm in a bigger sea with more going on. It gives me an edge and makes me feel more alive. And I've made friends for life here."

The Sydney-born beauty spent her first English years living the rock'n'roll lifestyle in London, reportedly dating a string of fellow international ex-pats including Jacques Villeneuve and Lenny Kravitz, and experiencing the showbiz thrill of being seen out on the town only hours after being on telly at teatime (Neighbours runs about two years behind here). A blessing in disguise arrived when her money started running out and she had problems securing a work permit, with the government effectively telling her she couldn't stay just because she used to be in Neighbours. Knowing she wasn't a bad singer, a demo was hastily recorded and serendipity saw her swiftly signed by BMG, with all financial worries extinguished by 1997's *Torn* spending several weeks at #1 and breaking the record for most UK airplay.

"The singing was always there and getting a record deal was the real turning-point in my life where I got a second chance. Not only was it the start of my music career but I was heavily in debt at the time and about to be kicked out of the country. The next turning-point was *Torn*, which broke itself like a wave and I was chasing it all around the world."

Debut album *Left of the Middle* achieved the rare status of being a major hit in the UK, US and Australia, but the ensuing fame saw Natalie deciding to up sticks again, this time to the more peaceful surroundings of Windsor, Berkshire, and the idyllically-named *White Lilies Island*, after which her sophomore album was named.

"I just wanted a garden and some

space but didn't want to spend £5m on a house in Hampstead. Windsor Park is also perfect for walking the dog. The views of the castle are spectacular."

Ironically, the move at first proved to be a disguised curse as writer's block set in and frustrated the composition of new album material, turning Natalie into a "paranoid, schizophrenic weirdo". After lengthy delays and threats from her label that she wouldn't get paid, *White Lilies Island* was finally released but to a muted commercial and critical response.

Despite this musical blip, Natalie 'the face' landed a six-figure deal as the new L'Oreal girl and a starring role alongside John Malkovich and Rowan Atkinson in British hit comedy *Johnny English*. In 2003 she married Silverchair frontman Daniel Johns in a top-secret ceremony in Port Douglas, Queensland. Despite being dubbed an Aussie equivalent to the Beckhams, Johns has refrained from moving to Britain while Natalie can't bring herself to leave. However, she still maintains her contentment in long-distance domestic bliss and attributes it to her contentment with new album *Counting Down The Days*, despite any insecurities remaining from her previous effort.

"It's definitely been a more positive and enjoyable experience. After getting married I've just been more content and I've grown as a songwriter. I don't feel like people are watching as closely this time and even if they were I'm not scared of what they think. I don't feel like I have to prove myself anymore. I don't have to be the best songwriter. I don't have to be the best anything. I'm happy with how I am."

After its April release, *Counting Down The Days* beat Mariah Carey to #1 in the UK albums chart despite the latter's extravagant marketing campaign, and the *Shiver* video, shot appropriately in the Ukraine, was a vast improvement on some of her admittedly "dodgy" earlier videos. Does she miss acting?

"I'd love to do more film but definitely don't miss TV - the soap storylines and getting up at four in the morning."

To prove she isn't lying, Natalie recently turned down the offer to appear in the 20th anniversary special of *Neighbours*.

In November 2004 a crazed fan was detained under the Mental Health Act after flying from Australia to London and turning up at Natalie's house, claiming he'd been summoned by messages in her song lyrics. Though admitting she was "freaked out" at the time, Natalie is more philosophical about it now.

"You've got to take the good with the bad, including invasions of privacy, from both press and public."

No plans to move on again then?

"No, I'll always be an Aussie but Windsor and England definitely feels like home." □

