

Safe Trip Home is the warm, moving and wonderfully musical third album from Dido, the London-born singer-songwriter with the cracked-crystal voice. The first, you might remember, was *No Angel*, a record made when Dido was a part-time backing singer with a tiny budget and no label. When that record's heartfelt snap-shots of life were released in 1999, nobody, least of all Dido, expected the album to eventually become the planet's biggest seller of 2001. The similarly affecting follow-up, 2003's *Life For Rent*, also burrowed its way into millions of hearts, hitting number one in 26 countries and lighting up the airwaves in many more. By the time Dido had toured that record around the world, she was ready for a bit of a breather.

"It was a whirlwind," she says. "When I got back from touring early in 2005, it took a while just to take in what had happened. I was so unprepared for it. As far as I was concerned I was making this little underground record for me to listen to and then, suddenly, eight years later I was getting off this incredible speeding train. I'd had an amazing time, but I guess I needed to take a step back, reconnect with normal life and bring the focus 100 percent back to music."

Although she disappeared from view, Dido took very little time off from music. However, rather than immediately starting to write new songs, she threw herself into playing, whether it be her music or others people's. "I wanted to take some time to become a better musician," she explains. "For the first two albums, any playing I'd done had been used purely for songwriting, which is very different from just playing for fun, like I had as a child. So I spent a lot of time just picking up instruments for playing's sake again. I loved it."

Dido had inadvertently set the tone for ***Safe Trip Home***, a record whose smouldering, soulful songs were to eventually feature her playing guitar, piano, bells and the trusty old recorder she'd toured Europe with as a prodigious pupil of London's Guildhall School of Music. She's even responsible for some of the album's drums (most notably on the sumptuously melancholy "Quiet Times").

When Dido met up with producer, Jon Brion (Fiona Apple, Kayne West, Rufus Wainwright, Eels) at London's Abbey Road studios towards the end of 2005, he was blown away by her musicianship. "I realised she had this beautiful feel for playing from the first day I met her," he says. "In fact, if there's anything I'm particularly proud of with this record, it's encouraging Dido to play more instruments. When she plays drums, her groove is magnificent. And her touch on piano is absolutely stunning."

"Jon persuaded me to go out to LA and do some writing," says Dido. "We had this brilliant few weeks working together. It felt like I could try anything I wanted, with whatever instrument I wanted. That was really the start of the album." Songs like the sensuous "Never Want To Say It's Love" and the string-soaked "Let's Do The Things We Normally Do" were two of several tracks to emerge from those productive sessions.

Buoyed by that initial progress, Dido decided to relocate to LA for a while to continue working with Brion on the album. It was a city ripe with opportunities, whether that be the potential for long drives into the desert listening to music, the amazing vocal sound in Brion's broom cupboard, the chance to get Citizen Cope in to sing on the gorgeous "Burnin Love," or the fact that Dido's favourite drummer Mick Fleetwood was on hand to play on "Grafton Street," the plaintive album highlight she'd written with another inspiration, Brian Eno.

"I wasn't actually a big fan of LA before," she admits, "but it turned out to be an amazing place to follow through an idea and keep going without anyone saying you're being completely ridiculous. It's a city built on imagination, story-telling and creativity. Plus, everyone seems to go to bed at 9pm, so I'd get a lot done at night."

Dido's musical experimentation also extended to learning more about the actual mechanics of recording. "I

was very impressed by that," says Brion. "It would be a very easy life for her to allow people to make stuff for her to sing on and I think it's more than a little bit admirable that she is so inquisitive about everything. She learned a ton about engineering, about arranging, about mastering, about the construction of music. She even went and took some music courses at UCLA. This is not the thing the average person who's just looking to crank it out does."

Indeed, rather than rushing to get the album done, Dido was happy to take her time. "I didn't really feel any urgency to stop writing," she says. "In fact, when I'd finished all the stuff with Jon in LA, I came back to England and realised I really wanted to start using all the things I'd learned there. So I sat down at my kitchen table with my laptop and a microphone and just started writing and recording, using a new computer programme I'd got. I ended up with a whole load more songs."

One afternoon, Dido's brother Rollo, who co-wrote and co-produced her first two albums, came round for tea, so she played him a bunch of the new songs. "He got really excited about them, so we decided to go into the studio with them. But a lot of the recordings on the album actually came from that time in my kitchen. If you listen closely, you can hear my neighbours drilling or the rain pelting down outside."

"I really think this album has benefitted from its gestation period," says Rollo. "I think Dido has gone on a musical journey with it. She'd ring me from LA and say, 'I'm recording vocals in an echo chamber!' or 'we're busy reversing 200 strings we just recorded!'. She was obviously having so much fun. But, for all that, the songs on this album still channel Dido's amazing ability to move people with melodies and lyrics. There's never any pretension on a Dido record. I think the words supposed to say what they mean but in a way that's not clichéd."

"Frankly, I don't believe what most people are singing about when I hear their records," says Brion. "I hear, 'I want attention, I want to be famous, I want you to think I'm smart'. But with Dido, I know she isn't kidding. I hear *her* in her lyrics. Take away any preconceptions and you'll hear that her words are a hotbed of truth. It's no surprise to me that so many people all over the world have connected with her."

Dido's softly-expressed thoughts, parables, feelings, hopes and concerns flow unfettered from *Safe Trip Home*. It is a record of love and loss, strength and surrender, highs and lows. And, as with her previous two albums, Dido shows an astonishing knack for extracting life's universals from its little details. "Dido bares her heart in her music in a way that she doesn't in any other public domain," says Rollo. "I think the key with her records is the idea that it all goes from Dido to the listener in the most straightforward, emotionally honest way. It's like an emotional A to B with as little interference from me as a producer."

"I still manage to get into this headspace when I'm writing where I completely forget that anyone's going to hear the songs," admits Dido. "I don't really draw any limits for what I put in the songs, emotionally. Some of these songs are about general themes and some are about other people's lives, but some are specific and personal to me. Maybe I leave myself exposed, but I find it hard to do anything that isn't emotional or doesn't move me in some way. by not explaining my lyrics to people, it actually gives me the freedom to express myself without limits in the songs."

That, as much as anything, is what makes *Safe Trip Home* such a rewarding listen. "This album is full of the joy of making music," says Dido. "The process of making it has been a wonderful experience, something to totally cherish. I've put every emotion into these songs. And now I just really hope they move people."

It's hard to imagine that they won't.