

**From The Be Good Tanyas to solo splendour, FRAZEY FORD has fused folk, country and soul with aching vulnerability – a bittersweet legacy of her troubled childhood. “I had to make a choice whether I was going to live, or die,” she tells BOB MEHR.**

Photography by **ALANA PATERSON**

**W**HEN SHE WAS 19 YEARS OLD, when it should have felt like everything was in front of her, Frazey Ford believed there were only two options left in life: the sanitarium or suicide.

“I had to make a choice whether I was going to live, or die, or just disappear into some fog,” she says.

Having suffered an acute nervous breakdown, the teenager found herself convalescing in the mountains of British Columbia. But rather than curl up and die, as she thought she might, she began running in the woods, running every day. “And as I ran, I would sing,” she says. “I would sing loud, mostly to scare off the bears.”

Three decades later, Ford has stopped running – from a complicated past and her own fears – but she’s still singing. After first finding fame with Canadian folk ensemble The Be Good Tanyas in the early ’00s, Ford has carved a deliberate niche as a solo artist, evolving her dreamy country-soul over the course of three albums, including her latest, *U Kin B The Sun*.

Even now, for Ford, making music is more than mere expression or career pursuit. “It’s central to my soul and my survival,” she says. “It’s cliché, but music definitely saved my life.”

**I**T’S A DREARY DECEMBER DAY IN Vancouver, as a soft drizzle wets the streets of the city’s east side. Behind a bright blue house is a garden apartment that’s home to Ford and her teenage son, Saul. The singer has taken the last couple years off from touring to be more present for him, following a custody battle with her estranged partner. The atmosphere in the house seems reassuringly stable, staid even. It’s a far cry from the way Frazey Ford grew up.

Her parents were Americans on the run from the draft. Doug Ford was an artist and revolutionary, wanted by the FBI. Her mother, Diane Williams, struggled to care for a young family of four in a state of perpetual flight. They eventually escaped the US to Toronto where Frazey was born in 1973. But in Canada, life remained chaotic. Ford says her father was an addict and that “there was violence and trauma in the house.” Enough that her brothers moved out at 14. Her parents, who never married, split a few years later.

Ford’s mother was – and remains – an outsized character, a globetrotting adventurer. “She’d do things like take my sister and I backpacking around Asia when I was 10,” says Ford. “Once, she picked up a boyfriend in Nepal climbing the Himalayas. ➤



She can be the sun: Frazey Ford on Gabriola Island, off the coast of Vancouver, Canada, November 2019.



**“WHEN YOU’RE RAISED IN A DYSFUNCTIONAL ENVIRONMENT THERE’S ALMOST A SENSE OF LOYALTY TO THAT DYSFUNCTION.”**  
Frazey Ford

“This feels like me”: Ford in 2019; (insets) The Be Good Tanyas’ debut LP and her Memphis solo set; (right) with Hi Records’ Teenie Hodges.

◀ He took us to his village where they’d never seen any white people before.”

Back home, Ford pored over the family’s LPs: Dylan, Neil Young and Joni Mitchell, Otis Redding and Van Morrison, Afrobeat and world music. A Midwesterner with Acadian roots, Ford’s mother sometimes sang in bars, and always around the house, teaching her daughter the nuances of close harmony.

When Ford graduated high school, her mother took her to Guatemala. “Which was kinda crazy because they were in the middle of a civil war. We spent seven months there. That’s where I started performing,” says Ford. But when she returned to Vancouver, Ford suffered a nervous breakdown. “Probably because I saw people killed in the street, mass graveyards, all this intense political stuff that was going on in Guatemala at the time.”

Ford was borderline suicidal for months and her singing voice went silent. But slowly, in the woods and mountains, she began to come out of her shell. She enrolled in music school, started an All Green covers band and wrote her own originals. “I got a strong reaction from people because I was so emotionally invested in what I was doing,” she says. “It was a way to heal myself, and other people responded to that.”

**A**LTHOUGH FORD WAS COMMITTED TO MAKING music her life, she doubted it would ever make her a living. In college she wavered between science studies (“I thought I might become a midwife”) and music classes. It was in the latter she met Trish Klein.

“We were starting a trip-hop band; that’s what Frazey and I were into,” says Klein. “Meanwhile, I was doing this folk project on the side. We thought it was nerdy and weird and nothing that people would like. That was The Be Good Tanyas.”

Klein had started the band with two other roots-obsessed singers, Samantha Parton and Jolie Holland. Ford added her voice and the quartet busked outside Lilith Fair, or played thrift stores in exchange for free clothes. “It was a pretty casual thing for a while,” says Ford. “I was actually back in Guatemala when I got an e-mail from Trish saying, ‘Come home, we’re gonna make a CD!’ I was like ‘Really?’”

Holland left the band for a solo career before the release of the

Alana Paterson (2); Erin Starfield; David Leonard; Getty

Tanyas’ 2000 debut, *Blue Horse*, and Ford became the group’s *de facto* lead singer. Over the next six years they moved from street gigs to selling out the Royal Albert Hall, but Ford says the band weren’t suited to success. “We’d been these young gypsy types doing whatever we wanted and suddenly we were beholden to a record label and a touring schedule, and it wasn’t really on our terms.”

Eventually, both Ford and Klein wanted to break free of the group’s roots format, often finding themselves butting heads with the more purist Parton. “There was a sense that everyone wanted us to stay this old-timey thing, with us playing acoustic instruments, and wearing vintage dresses,” says Klein.

Following the release of their third and final album, *Hello Love*, in 2006, The Be Good Tanyas effectively came to an end, though they would reunite for a one-off tour of the UK in 2013. “There were tons of wonderful times,” reflects Ford, “but I was ready to move on, and I did.”

**T**HE RELEASE OF FORD’S FIRST SOLO ALBUM, *Obadiah*, in 2010 saw her meld her roots and soul influences, while she began a period of intense therapy to overcome her troubled past. “I was a new mom,” she says, “and I thought, I don’t want to pass all this shit along to my kid.”

For her second record, Ford was afforded an extraordinary opportunity – to work with Al Green’s Hi Records band in Memphis. Recording with the Hodges brothers – guitarist Teenie, bassist Leroy and organist Charles – was “terrifying and dreamy at the same time,” says Ford, who did one session with the group but was unsure if she could go on. “But Teenie kept calling me: ‘Come on Frazey, you gotta come back and finish this thing.’ He was so sweet and insistent. I soon realised that he was really sick. The first session we did, Teenie was living his rock star lifestyle. When I went back he was on an oxygen tank.”

Five weeks after the last session with Ford, Teenie Hodges died from complications from emphysema. “It was like he hung on to finish the record,” says Ford.

*Indian Ocean* found Ford reviving the Hi sound while vividly chronicling the pain of her childhood. But its catharsis was incomplete. While recording, she discovered Doug Ford was not her bio-



# FORD FOCUS

Four albums with that Frazey feeling, by John Mulvey.

## THE BE GOOD TANYAS CHINATOWN

(Nettwerk, 2003)

The second and best album by Ford’s folk harmony group. A crisp, wise take on bluegrass and tradition betrays strong affinities with Gillian Welch. But amid some fine covers (Townes Van Zandt, House Of The Rising Sun), Ford’s own songwriting begins to flourish: beneath the banjo, *Ship Out On The Sea* is a covert intimation of funk.

## FRAZEY FORD OBADIAH

(Nettwerk, 2010)

With the aid of Be Good Tanyas bandmate Trish Klein on guitar, Ford negotiates a graceful *entente* between country and soul on her solo debut. *Bird Of Paradise* is a high-stepping highlight, like Dolly Parton riding a jazzy breakbeat; Dylan’s *One More Cup Of Coffee*, reconstituted as slow-burning blues, showcases Ford’s knack of deploying emotional heft with uncanny lightness of touch.

## FRAZEY FORD INDIAN OCEAN

(Nettwerk, 2014)

Like Cat Power’s *The Greatest* in 2006, Ford makes good on her soul aspirations by recording with the Hi Records Band in Memphis. Her delicate vocal feints invoke Al Green without impersonating him, while the band’s empathy and discretion bring the funk to a killer set of breakup songs: check the righteous contempt for a “drive-by shooting son of a bitch” on key single, *Done*.

## FRAZEY FORD U KIN BE THE SUN

(Arts & Crafts, 2020)

Recorded back in Toronto with her regular live band, Ford’s third solo album expands on the progress made in Memphis. The drum and bass grooves are punchy and unadorned (think D’Angelo’s band, *The Vanguard*), her measured anger focused on new targets: “We’re out here to evolve/I guess you missed the call,” she sings on *The Kids Are Having None Of It*.



logical father. “My mom denied it at first, but I eventually confronted her and said I wanted a DNA test,” says Ford. “Her line was: ‘You got me.’”

Frazey nervously sent an e-mail to Adam Godfrey, the scion of a notable Toronto family. “I said, ‘Apparently I might be your daughter.’ He e-mailed me back immediately: ‘I’ve been waiting to meet you.’ He said he’d been following my career.”

Godfrey soon flew to Vancouver, where they met for the first time. “It was very intense,” says Ford. “We sat and chatted and it felt so... weird and awkward, honestly. But the next day, he invited me to a dinner at his sister’s place to meet the rest of my family. When I walked in the house, it was so familiar, the way they were and were interacting. I thought, This feels like me.”

SIX YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE Frazey Ford’s previous solo album. “I have a thing where I need to completely stop doing music for a while,” she says. “After you make an album and tour it, there’s a process of letting it go – letting it die. I have to wait ‘til the next thing comes to me that needs to be said.”

Ford might still have been waiting to make her third album, if not for the patronage of the Canadian government. Having signed to Toronto-based Arts & Crafts, the label secured a time-sensitive grant that pushed her back into the studio in the spring of 2018.

“I hadn’t really written anything so we went in with the guys in my band, and started jamming, which I’ve never done before. But it had this incredible raw vibe,” says Ford. “We’ve been joking that this whole album was done backwards – the songs were made first, and then I wrote them.” She worked to complete the album fitfully over the next year. “I had some lyrics, but didn’t know what they were about,” she says. “Then, right when I was really ready to get to work, my brother passed away.”

The death of her older brother Kevin – a wild child who was the subject of her first solo single, *Firecracker* – brought her own experiences into stark relief. “Watching my brother fight addiction after addiction, it was a slow suicide,” she says, quietly. “When you’re raised in a dysfunctional environment like we were, there’s almost a sense of loyalty to that dysfunction. I could have gone down that same path.”

A few months later, Ford was hit with another loss, when Adam Godfrey died after a battle with cancer. “I got to know him slowly and found we had a similar mind and endless things in common. Genetics really are profound,” she says. “Because of that relationship, I’m much more solid in myself now. It feels like this album embodies that.”

As she prepares for a long year of touring behind *U Kin B The Sun*, Ford has decided to make it a family affair, bringing Saul out on the road to travel with her. She’s also considering tying up some other musical loose ends – including a return to the trip-hop-style project she and Trish Klein were contemplating before The Be Good Tanyas, as well as cutting an EP with her mother of the close harmony songs they sang together growing up.

“No matter what happens in life, and I’ve had some weird stuff happen,” says Ford, “music is always the thing I come back to. It has to be.”



“I’m much more solid in myself now”: Frazey achieves a balance in her life; (left) on-stage in London, 2014; (opposite page, top) The Be Good Tanyas (from left) Trish Klein, Ford, Samantha Parton.