

style.



POWERFUL STANCE

Multi-platinum-selling artist Jessica Mauboy took a decade to feel completely in control of her look, sound and future. Now “this kind of freedom and celebration... it’s *living*,” she declares.

Michael Lo Sordo feather top, \$1,599, and wool pants, \$629; at netaporter.com. Cartier platinum, diamond and emerald earrings, POA; 1800 130 000. Christian Louboutin leather heels, \$1,395; 02-8355 5288



Soul REVIVAL

When JESSICA MAUBOY fell out of love with music, she did the only thing her heart truly wanted: she went home. There, in Darwin, she found a new sense of power forged from the legacy of a brave woman named Hilda

by **RACHEL SHARP** photographed by **STEVEN CHEE**

styled by **KATHERINE GREEN**

Alice McCall polyester dress, \$995; alicemccall.com.au.
René Caovilla suede and crystal heels, \$2,199; at libertyshoesaustralia.com

“

I never had a vocal coach, so I self-taught by listening to the greatest: Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey, Céline Dion. They made me want to learn their craft and tell my story on a stage too, whether it was to 300 or 30,000 people”

Toni Maticovski
cape, POA,
tonimaticovski.com

Having spent considerable time in her presence in the lead-up to this cover story, I can confirm these two facts about Jessica Mauboy to be true...

First, her reputation as the nicest woman in the Australian music industry is as justified today as it was more than a decade ago, when she sang her way onto our TV screens. She is incredibly gracious when fans approach uninvited and consistently generous to the crews who orbit her.

Second, the woman must have been born with one battery cell more than the rest of us because she has energy above and beyond anything I’ve witnessed at a magazine cover shoot. For 10 intense hours on set, she sang, danced, twirled, smiled, laughed, posed, shook hands, costume changed, moved and grooved without so much as an eye-roll. It was a photographic ultramarathon, done almost entirely in five-inch designer heels. But then, Mauboy always has been the queen of switching on game face.

Most of us are familiar with the former Darwin resident’s phenomenal trajectory from a smiley 16-year-old singing-contest runner-up to one of Australia’s most celebrated performers. If not, google *Australian-Idol-2006-Mauboy-audition* followed by *Eurovision-2018-Mauboy-grand-final* and these contrasting career bookends will give you the gist. Five top 10 albums, 15 top 20 singles, four ARIA-accredited platinum-selling albums and two ARIA awards is an impressive list of accolades for any artist to have on public record.

What’s unknown to anyone outside the 30-year-old’s intimate circle, however, is that she came perilously close to walking away while her stellar career was in full swing. (Again, I reiterate: game face, strong.) In her mid-twenties, we saw her beaming supportively as a mentor on *The Voice* alongside Ricky Martin. We saw her perform to an estimated 186 million worldwide viewers as Australia’s envoy to the 2018 Eurovision Song Contest. We saw her front row at Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Australia, in ethereal couture on the AACTAs red carpet, power suiting at the ARIAs, covering the *Who Sexiest People* 2016 issue, in social pages, on social media, even performing at corporate gigs. But what we didn’t see—because she hid it so very well—was her disenchantment and the creative passion slowly ebbing away.

“[I] fell out of love with music about five or six years ago,” a gently spoken but surprisingly candid Mauboy tells me 20 minutes into the first of several interviews for this

feature. What’s funny is that I’d also interviewed her several years before in a coffee shop not far from Sony Music Australia headquarters—where we sit today. I came away then wishing everyone loved their job as much as she did. Her enthusiasm was palpable, albeit clearly short-lived. “I was being pushed and pressured to write another record—and at that time I was not quite sure if I wanted to,” she says of her eventual crisis point. “I was alone. I was missing my family...I had lost my relationship with music. I just was not in love, and I think I had not really sat down and acknowledged everything [that had happened to that point].

“I was 17 when I released my first record. I’d just come off [*Australian*] *Idol* and an *Idol* tour [and] things moved really fast. I had a number one single and it just kind of rolled continuously. It was great because I was experiencing all of these different types of versions of people and music...[but] when I think back now, I never really got to celebrate my success. It was on to another single and a single after that and the next record, and then in between I was making money by doing gigs, corporate shows or doing charities, or doing community service.”

It was a whirlwind, but what she found hardest was the lack of personal jurisdiction over her work. “With my last three records, I had the opportunity to write with Grammy Award winners, and they kind of had the upper hand and a lot of control over what the music sounded like. I was very, very respectful. That came from my upbringing where you respect your elders, never talk back, always listen, always learn.” What eventually forced her to call a complete timeout was the growing number of people who relied on Brand Mauboy’s ongoing success. The responsibility, she says, was too scary and too hard to bear. Plus, she was exhausted.

When no amount of meditation, working out or healthy living helped reverse that sinking feeling, Mauboy deferred to the only thing her heart still wanted—she went home. “I knew deep [down] that I just needed to buy a plane ticket [to Darwin] and have a good laugh, have a good yarn, have Mum’s home-cooked meals and just chill and process my own mind,” she says of the Northern Territory capital where she grew up as one of five siblings (all girls) with her Indigenous Australian mum, Therese,



“Tina Turner is a great vocalist but also an artist with a very **POWERFUL** story. She went through a lot and had to transform to build herself up as a kind of **SUPERHERO** with her [trademark] attitude”

Balmain velvet blazer, \$4,499; at davidjones.com.
Bodysuit, stylist's own.
Christian Louboutin suede boots, \$4,895;
02-8355 5288

Featuring musicians from the Sydney University Marching Band Association

and Indonesia-born West Timorese dad, Ferdy. It was a noisy, happy, musical household. Both of her parents are musicians and Mauboy grew up singing in the church choir with her paternal grandmother. Still, it took more than just a reunion to flick the happy switch. She needed to process.

“Music was not coming to me at that point, so I went to Officeworks and bought this huge, blank art book and began to draw.” Doodling for days turned into playing with her full signature for hours, until Mauboy was eventually drawn to the word Hilda, her middle name gifted in tribute of her maternal grandmother, who tragically died young. “After that I started to have visual dreams of the name, too. My partner Them [Darwin-born civil construction worker Themeli Magripilis] came home one day and found me on the lounge crying.” Those tears were not for herself or the fact she’d never met her grandmother, but rather because she was patently aware of the cruel and deeply unfair life challenges that Hilda had battled.

“She and her husband, my grandad Raymond, were lovers, but back in those days, in the 1940s, it was white man, Aboriginal woman, so...”

It was frowned upon, I suggest. “It was forbidden. They had met on an errand that Nanna was on and he basically fell in love with her. It was a love story, but it saddened me [to really think about it] because they were not allowed to be together. She broke culture and broke tradition because she was told that it was not right.”

By his family? “No, by *her* family. He was a white Maltese man, green eyes, dark hair. Her parents did not like the idea of a white man coming onto a mission and being in love with their daughter. They feared that she would be taken away, her children were going to be taken away, because that [the stolen generations] was just occurring. But Nanna, because she felt the love from Grandad, she did it, she married him anyway.”

She followed her heart. “Yes, she followed her heart. She would have been just under 30 then. She passed away when she was 37. It was not long after that Grandad took off. He loved her so much that he pretty much lost his world. He never came back. He tried to see the girls [including Mauboy’s mother] but Nanna’s family were just like, ‘No, these girls are staying here’.”

The fact that Mauboy exists as a result of Hilda’s courage is poetic but heartbreaking, so it was only fitting the singer named her latest album—the eventual by-product of her Darwin epiphany—after its inspiration. “*Hilda* is a narrative story not only about my own personal experiences, but my observations of family. It’s pretty much a bank of memories and emotions. I’m the most confident I have ever been in music now...knowing what I know about my family and my blood line. I have never been so open and passionate about who I am. Their strength [Hilda and Raymond’s] is reflected in all the stories.”

Mauboy’s decade-long relationship with Magripilis is a far happier love story. His extended family live on a remote Greek island, speak little English and knew absolutely

nothing about Australian-Indigenous culture, but have welcomed Mauboy with open arms and endearing curiosity. The day after our cover shoot, the pair flew out to Greece to visit his grandparents. “Them has quite a few cousins who’ve all gotten married and had children, but I think I’m the only one within the family who’s not Greek. I don’t think they’d ever had contact with dark skin before, but they’ve been really fascinated and it’s amazing,” she says.

Her grand, short-term plan—once she’s finished holidaying in the Mediterranean, marketed her album and filmed a few strategic music videos—is to watch a

truckload of movies. Netflix definitely, but don’t be surprised if you’re in Sydney and spot her flying solo in a theatre, too. Because if music has been restored to its rightful love-of-her-life position, Mauboy wants them to honeymoon in a cinema. While she won’t be drawn on details, she confirmed she’s already lined up her next screen project, hinting that script- and score-writing are part of the deal.

This much is certain, though: from now on, Jessica Hilda Mauboy intends to surround herself with friends and collaborators who share a common vision, then trust her own instincts. “It’s taken me more than 10 years to be where I am at this point in terms of control—control of my music, control of my own feelings and control of how I want to look and how I want to feel. This kind of freedom and celebration...it’s *living*.” ■

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Pallas Collective
silk robe, \$1,750;
pallascollective.com.
Michael Lo Sordo
wool pants, \$629;
at netaporter.com.
Gucci metal choker,
\$1,690; 1300 442 878

Hair: Keiren Street
Make-up: Christian
McCulloch