



## **Ilona Harker :: Coming Home**

### **Artist Profile**

**by Megan Spencer (c) 2012**

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**Earlier this year, musician [Ilona Harker](#) spent some time in her hometown of Darwin, a place she hadn't visited in a very long time.**

Spirited off to NSW when she was a nipper, recently she came back to re-connect with the place she calls home and to kick-start research for a musical theatre piece based on her early years in the Territory, called [Coming Home](#).

Oh – and she was very keen to make some music.

Harker left an impression on the locals who caught her cabaret-style shows at Happy Yess, Darwin Railway Club and Darwin Ski Club when she returned in March/April.

Inspired by the musicians she met – and rekindling her love for the Far North – Harker has taken much back home with her to Byron Bay where she is recording a double album. She's also just released a [music video](#) for her song, 'I'll Pick You Up'.

Ilona Harker wasn't out of place amongst the wild-child uke-a-phile 'alt' throng at Happy Yess, one of the Northern Territory's few original live music venues that actively fosters the development of free-spirited experimentation and unbridled musical FUN. The crowd certainly didn't mind, happy to embrace this 'fallen' Darwinian back into the fold when she performed, ably supported by two much-loved long-term Territory transplants, [Dave Garnham](#) and [Emma Stocker](#).

Harker says she was “born and bred in the far Northern Territory,” and that her music “reflects the depths and wilds of this frontier landscape.” Surely her twang-tinged crooning

wouldn't be out of place on one of Darwin's sweaty, steamy stages during the 'build up' - nor for that matter on the soundtrack of a David Lynch nightmare movie (think *Wild At Heart*). No wonder Harker likes to describe her music as "Folk-Noir", or "Border Sounds".

On her travels through music (with hip hop outfit Butterfingers and all-grrrl country band Sugartown) and overseas (where she [met](#) Nouvelle Vague producer Marc Collin), Harker says she's finally finding "her own voice".

It's a seductive, smokey one at that and one of which Tom Waits might be proud, an artist to whom she's been [compared](#) over the years.

Inspired, Harker's's aims are to continue the reconnection with Darwin and to come back home when recording and life commitments don't get in the way - or gigs at the Big Day Out, Byron BluesFest and Mullum Music Festival where she had "crowds jumping".



*Illona Harker. Photo: Françoise Schneider*

Then of course, there's living up to the demands of her voracious alter-ego [Mae Wilde](#) to consider (more about her later.)

Either way, for now at least Northern Territory music is happy to (re)claim Miz Illona Harker. Here is her NT music story as told to MusicNT's website editor, Megan Spencer.

### **MusicNT: "Born and bred in Darwin" - can you please fill us in?**

**Illona Harker:** I was born in the Darwin at Darwin Base Hospital. My Dad was a firey and my mum was an artist and clothing designer. I had two older sisters and I went to Marrara Christian School then to Jingli Primary when the school was deemed a little 'too nutty' - even for my family!

When I was 10 I left Darwin for Armidale in NSW. That year there was a massive snowstorm there, and I froze. I still don't like the cold even now.

### **MuNT: When did you first pick up a musical instrument? And who taught you?**

**IH:** Due to my parents being really good at making babies, by the time I was starting to learn



an instrument I had two younger siblings as well. So being the middle child I didn't get any musical training except for the recorder – which by the way I think should be banned under the Geneva Convention!

**MuNT: When did you first start making music publicly?**

**IH:** I just used to sing songs to my family and in the garden. My first song was called 'Beautiful Sunday', with the line repeated over and over, 'Beautiful Sunday, I love you noooooowwww' ad nauseum...

**MuNT: And what do you love about the uke?**

**IH:** I love how transportable the uke is.

You can take it anywhere and people always smile (except perhaps a heavy metal convention..)

*Photo: Donatella Parisini*

Now there's a thought: a 'heavy metal uke off'!

**MuNT: Who are some of the other NT musicians that you have worked and collaborated with?**

**IH:** Okay, so I was too young when I was living in Darwin to work with others (I was 10), but I did really enjoy working with Emma Stocker and Dave Garnham whilst I was home in March/April of this year.

**MuNT: How would you describe the music you make now? And has it changed much from when you first started out?**

**IH:** The music I make now is ever-evolving as I see/feel/hear different things as I get older. I'm really enjoying a more driven guitar sound with my last few songs, which is a break from the lyric-based dark folk-noir tunes I have been doing.

My music has changed greatly from 'Beautiful Sunday' when I was five, to hip-hop in my 20s, to the country-folk feel I have now.

**MuNT: Who are some of your favorite NT artists?**

**IH:** I think Emma Stocker and Dave Garnham are national treasures! Emma has a playfulness and a unique writing style that melds beautifully with her bass, and Dave's lyrics blow me away – "she was colder than a spring in Armidale" was one amazing line, if I remember correctly. Oh – and also [Leah Flanagan](#).

**MuNT: You have a pretty eclectic music background which includes country, folk and hip hop; are you a musical adventurer?**

**IH:** Yes; intrepid and foolish all at once.

**MuNT: How do you think living in Darwin has influenced the sound of your music - and spirit?**

**IH:** I honestly couldn't have answered that until I revisited for the first time in 25 years in March/April. But I now I know that the North does things to your soul.

It grounds you and earths you. There is a genuineness that I so admire in music that I see in everyday folk in Darwin.

I think part of my wild nature is because I am a child of Darwin. It smacked me like a train as soon as I walked off the plane. I knew this was my home.

**MuNT: What recordings have you done so far?**

**IH:** I have played on a few Butterfingers albums and I have recorded an album called [\*That Which Lasts\*](#).

**MuNT: You're working on a show about 'coming home' to the NT, your childhood, and some of the 'issues' you dealt with then.. Can you tell us a bit about it, and where we will be able to see the show? Is it theatre, does it have music..?**

**IH:** All of the above! It's basically a musical theatre show dealing with my childhood, as my Dad was mentally ill and quite violent. And because he was a police officer no-one did anything.

*Photo: Francoise Schneider*

So all these years later I am telling my story about how I turned a traumatic childhood into a creative vibrant adulthood!



There will be action, suspense, love, tears, songs, puppetry, archival footage – everything but dancing! Bascically, it's about the journey of forgiveness and redemption. My dad has given me permission to write his story as he understands that this is part of my healing.

I am writing it for Darwin Festival (I haven't been approved yet), and for Adelaide Fringe and finally Edinburgh. It will be premiered at the Byron Community Centre.

**MuNT: What are your impressions of making music in Darwin?**

**IH:** It's a beautiful supportive artistic scene with acceptance and a big booming heart.

There aren't enough original live music venues and musicians should be paid more for original music not cover bands.

I guess for me, it's the beginning of a beautiful friendship so I will be dipping in and out of like an oasis spa on a hot day.

New album commitment may override my wish to spend more time there for now, but I intend to go there whenever I can as I feel really connected with the place and the people.

**MuNT: What's next for you recording-wise? And any tours or upcoming gigs you can let us know about?**

**IH:** Oh it's so exciting... A new double album! [*Stories The Sea Told Me And Lies I Told The Sea* is available for [pre-purchase](#).] And I will tour Australia – including the NT – after this.

**MuNT: Finally - who is [Mae Wilde](#)?!**

**IH:** She is the love child of Mae West's and Oscar Wilde. She is an 'alter ego' I created for cabaret and Emceeing.

She is also a bit of a hussy and should be kept at arms-length from your single male friends and the liquor cabinet...

*Thank to Ilona Harker for the interview! Below: Ilona's 'alter', Mae Wilde*

