

unchained melody

A sad and troubled upbringing left Auckland-based singer-songwriter Reb Fountain looking for answers. She tells **Felicity Monk** how she found her solace, her purpose and freedom, in music

Reb Fountain snarls delicately, jabbing at her large opponent as they dance around the boxing ring. Her long ponytail swings and her biceps glisten with each duck, bob and weave. Next scene and the boxers sit hunched over a chessboard set up in the middle of the ring. Steam rises from their bodies, while sweat drips. Fountain makes a move and slams the timer. And it's back to the fight. This is chess boxing, a hybrid sport combining boxing and speed chess in alternating rounds. Fountain had watched a presentation about it and decided it would make for a good music video.

The softly spoken singer-songwriter trained hard in preparation, and on the day of the shoot had guzzled Voltaren, Panadol and a few nips of medicinal whisky to get her through. She was hurting. But that was nothing compared to a few hours later when, after throwing a punch, she spun around and slammed straight into a heavy camera fixed to a crane, knocking herself out. Fountain thinks it's a great shame they didn't keep the camera rolling while she was unconscious; it would have made excellent footage. But as it was, they resumed filming once she regained consciousness and, to her delight, her dazed and broken performance in the knockout scene was most convincing.

Fountain is a fighter outside the ring too. Parts of her life read like a catalogue of heartache and woe: a child of painful divorce, an eating disorder, institutionalisation, grand mal seizures and abusive relationships. Writing music, she says, was often the only healthy outlet she had. It helped her express things she couldn't otherwise say, plus she had good material.

Sweet, smoky and seductive, tragic, gritty and aggressive, Fountain's music ambles across a number of genres (she describes it as "alt-country-folk-pop-rock"). She has released two albums; *Like Water* and *Holster*, but is still largely unknown in New Zealand. Like most independent artists, she is responsible for her own publicity, radio plugging and tour booking. It's not easy. Following *Holster's* release in October last year, Fountain and her band, The Bandits, did a 22-day tour throughout New Zealand. "After doing *Holster* I was completely spent. I had put absolutely all my energy into it, done two tours, lost incredible amounts of money. I was exhausted and my kids needed me and that was all I could give."

Fountain took the summer off, spent time with her son and daughter and

rested. This year things got off to a good start when she signed a publishing deal with Mushroom Music NZ, one of only five female artists to be represented, along with Anika Moa, Bic and Boh Runga and Miriam Clancy.

In May she finished a New Zealand tour with Don McGlashan and the Seven Sisters, where she played support. "One of my favourite memories of the tour was playing on the ferry, to pay for our passage. So Don's playing 'Anchor Me' live in the bar area, most people aren't listening – they are watching the telly. Maybe one or two knew who he was – there was this one lady in the corner and she was rocking out. And I was just standing there going, 'Holy shit, this is Don McGlashan in front of me.' I got up and got to play with him and then we jammed. It was an amazing tour."

It was about two years back when McGlashan says he first heard Fountain, busking outside the Auckland railway station. He'd been on the lookout for someone to sing a song he'd written for the movie *Show of Hands*. "I was racking my brains because I couldn't find anyone with the right voice. I needed a really smoky, sleepy voice, somebody who could really deliver from the heart... She sounded fantastic. She had her two little kids running around her feet and was stopping every so often to give them something interesting to do and then carrying on with her song. It was just magical. It was one of those times that I heard exactly the voice that I wanted."

Then last year McGlashan asked Fountain if she and fellow musician and friend Johnny Barker would sing a Topp Twins' song at an industry event, the APRA Silver Scrolls. They did, and the audience loved it. He decided she would be perfect to open for his tour. "A lot of people sound like they've learnt how to sing from a book, but she sounds like she has always known how to do it. She can tell a story right from the heart and that's a very rare gift I think."

On the front porch of Fountain's slightly ramshackle Auckland villa lies a yellow sign. It reads: "Cruelty is failure of imagination. Free Palestine." Inside is a big, friendly dog and dandelion coffee, which Fountain serves me in a mug. A neighbour pops over with a treat for the dog. They talk about broccoli. The neighbour explains that in these tough economic times she has decided >>

PHOTOGRAPHS: STEPHEN LANGDON. MAKEUP: PETRA RUNBECK FOR L'ANCÔME. STYLIST: JACQUI CHAPMAN. DRESS AND SLIP: KATE SYLVESTER





she will start eating the broccoli stalk. Once she has gone, Fountain and I confess we both eat the stalks – always have.

With her gentle eyes, long tawny hair and not a dash of makeup, Fountain looks younger than her 35 years. She is graceful and measured, an earth mother type. Yet beneath her fragility, and it's not far beneath, lies a steely determination.

Rebecca Fountain – she's always been 'Reb' – was born in San Francisco. Before her sixth birthday the Fountain family had moved to Ontario, Vancouver, New Zealand, Vancouver again, and then finally back to New Zealand to settle. It was 1979. Her father, an economics professor, had been offered a job at Canterbury University. Adjusting to life in New Zealand was difficult, for Fountain's mother in particular. She found it a backward place, particularly when it came to gender roles. "Women were still quite subservient to their husbands at that time and they all thought that was the way to go," says Fountain. "Culturally it was huge."

When Fountain was nine her parents' marriage ended and "everything turned to custard. My parents were really lost – didn't know how to communicate with us at all and they kind of did all the wrong things."

The next few years were very hard. Fountain's relationship with her mother was fraught, made worse when her mother moved in with a man who would eventually become her stepfather. There was drinking and physical abuse. Fountain became depressed, stopped talking and developed an eating disorder. "I couldn't communicate and I just boiled and boiled for a long time."

At 15 she moved to boarding school in Colorado Springs, but felt out of place among the wealthy American kids. While she was there, two girls attempted suicide. Both survived but it triggered a kind of hysteria. Not long after, Fountain casually mentioned to a teacher that when she was younger she had tried to kill herself; something she'd never told anyone before. The school responded by admitting her to a suicide rehabilitation unit. It cost \$600 a day and she couldn't voluntarily leave. "It was horrible because I had no idea what was wrong. I knew I was a complete mess, I was still cutting myself, but I had no way of articulating what was going on with me." Eventually Fountain convinced

"I had no idea what was wrong. I knew I was a complete mess but had no way of articulating what was going on with me"

them to release her and returned to Christchurch. She lived briefly with her mother, then her father, until moving out on her own at 16.

She met up with some local musicians (including Pete Woods, who would later join Salmonella Dub) and together they formed the band Immaculate Sun. But Fountain's heavy drinking mixed with her prescribed anti-depressants saw her end up at Queen Mary Hospital in Hamner Springs. She was asked to leave before the end of the programme because she refused to end a relationship that was deemed inappropriate for her. It turned out to be a catalyst. "I knew in my heart that I could do it on my own." She stopped drinking and went overseas with the inappropriate boyfriend, first to the UK, then to California. There, they decided to get married. "We found this lady out of the Yellow Pages, borrowed this dingy car from one of the guys who worked at the Greek restaurant that I was at, drove across town to her house and got married in her lounge. It was just bizarre – her brother and children walked in during the middle of the service and we were like, 'Hi, we're just getting married.' Yeah, it wasn't perfect."

Not long after, Fountain suffered two grand mal seizures within a year and was hospitalised. She lost her driver's licence and could no longer work. She decided to return to her music and they moved to Seattle so she could study jazz at Cornish College. "I was completely terrified. But just to have that supportive environment; playing music with amazing musicians – from there I just built up my confidence and knew that I could sing."

The marriage began to fall apart and Fountain left her husband and moved back to Christchurch. She was 23. There, she reconnected with a former band mate and in 2006, together with her brother, a jazz drummer, and a few other musicians, she recorded her debut album *Like Water*.

At Canterbury university studying gender studies, and not long into a

new, tumultuous relationship, she discovered she was pregnant. Shortly after her son Calvin was born she fell pregnant again and had her daughter Lola. "By the time Lola was born it was really crap and had gone beyond the point of being saved. When I finally did ask him to leave, I started once again rebuilding my life."

Four years ago Fountain decided it was time for a move. She took the children and shifted to Auckland,

where she barely knew a soul. One night she was asked if she wanted to fill in for a musician who could not make his gig (Steve Abel was otherwise engaged, protesting on the top of a roof). She did, and impressed, and was offered more work. Soon she was meeting other musicians, some of whom became The Bandits. Fountain says she now feels settled in Auckland and has dealt with much of the past. She has a good relationship with her parents and ex-partners, and all are supportive of her music. Serious about a making a real go of it, she is determined to get to a place, financially, where she can move off the DPB and support herself and her children. But success or not, she says she'll never stop making music.

It's a frozen Wednesday night in Auckland city and Fountain and The Bandits are playing at a fashion launch. It's a tough gig. The crowd, mostly women, are more focused on picking through racks of clothes and clucking and squawking over this frock or that. Fountain is graceful as she smiles in response to the pitifully thin clapping. With her guitar slung around her slim neck, she takes a swig of whisky, grins at her band and above the noise they play on. ■