

"A REAL HARD TIME" – The story of Alda.

The music industry abounds with stories of bands and artists that have been duped, cheated, stolen from by signing vague contracts that hand over most of their money to unscrupulous producers or managers. This is the story of one artist who, despite doing everything right, found herself the target of malicious and greedy double-dealers who not only wrecked her career but also stifled the young ambitious talent.

Over 20 years ago, Alda left her native country, Iceland, to pursue her burning passion, to make it big in the world of music. As a 21-year old, Alda was the musical darling of Iceland having co-founded the band of the moment, a residential band on the biggest Saturday night TV show in the land as well as appearing every weekend in the biggest live shows at the time in the capital Reykjavik. Alda was also the musical muse of one of Iceland's most prolific songwriters, Sverrir Stormsker, whom Alda sang many hit songs for including the song 'Bless' that was in at the top of the charts for 16 weeks.

You would think that this amount of success would have been ample; it probably would be for most people. However Alda was extremely ambitious and wanted more. She wanted world fame. "I had a big decision to make," Alda explains. "It was a choice between going to America or London and as London was the mecca of music as well as being a bit closer to home I decided it would be a better option." So Alda made her way to London arriving with two suitcases, a thousand pounds, a bucket full of dreams, not knowing a single soul.

In those days Melody Maker was the premier medium to hook up musicians and this is where Alda saw an advert by Malcolm Mehyer, a North London songwriter who was looking for a singer. Alda applied and got the job. Pretty quickly a love affair emerged between Alda and Malcolm.

For the next ten years, Alda would sing cover gigs pretty much seven days a week and sometimes even eight gigs a week in pubs and clubs to pay their bills whilst Malcolm would stay at home and write music for their joint dream, to make it big, come true.

Endless demos were made on an old three and half-track Tascam recorder; this was before digital technology. Eventually after many years of struggle and disappointment they got their break. Othman Mukhlis, a renowned music manager saw something in the duo and signed them. Soon he had a production deal with David Howells and Steve Mac (Ed Sheeran, Westlife, Rita Ora, Celine Dione, and many others) on the table and an album was in the making.

Alda signed a piece of paper reading, 'In My Best Endeavour' with David Howells. Alda explains, "what this means is that I will try my hardest to sign the contract. Assuming we can all come to a mutual agreement, of course. "

So as the album was being recorded lawyers were battling it out. Alda had the advice of two different solicitors; Mishcon de Reya, one of the most prestigious solicitors in London with clients including Princess Diana, as well as the musician's union legal team. Both parties expressed the same concerns and comment that under no circumstance could she sign this contract, as it was one of the worst they had seen. Alda desperately wanted a signed contract but there were two highly unreasonable clauses that Howells insisted on and would not remove: A) He would own the name Alda, her birth name, not a stage name as was the case in the Prince dispute, and B) there was no limit to how much money he could claim back from her, so she could make millions and he could

take the lot as there was no limitation outlined. "I tried so hard to appeal to Howells and make him see how unreasonable this was but he refused to listen so how could I sign something like that?" Alda carries on.

By this time Alda was a pop star. She had been signed by Wildstar Records who were partly owned by Capital Radio and she was everywhere; Top Of The Pops, Bigger Breakfast, Live & Kicking, CD: UK Nickelodeon and, many more and by now had two big hits under her belt. Her debut single 'Real Good Time' debuted at number 7 in the UK singles chart after being played relentlessly over the summer of 1998. She had another big hit with the 'Girls Night Out' and worldwide Alda sold over five million records, selling over 350000 thousand singles in the UK alone.

"I remember the very first time I heard 'Real Good Time on the radio", Alda recalls. "I was driving and stuck at some traffic lights, there was a convertible next to me and the driver was blasting the radio and it came on. I was in a state of shock. *I have made it!* I thought to myself. I just wanted to cry."

So whilst the lawyers were fighting, Alda was traveling around Europe doing endless radio and TV interviews and appearances. In the meantime, 'Real Good Time' was being used by Capital radio to advertise the World Cup in 1998 so it became associated with football, hence Alda was invited to sing on the pitch at Wembley stadium for the Arsenal/Man United charity shield and again when England played a friendly against France.

Alda was on top of the world, or so she thought. Her high would soon come crashing down with a bang. Fans were eager for the album at this time however, with no contract signed Howells and Wildstar withheld the album and it was a stalemate.

"I ask myself all the time if I should have just signed the damn contract," Alda says, "but how could I? I just could not sign my name away."

With no contract in place, the album was not released in the UK. However, it was too late to stop its release in Asia as it had been licensed there as well as in Germany and the Netherlands.

"I innocently thought that I could just sign with another label," Alda added. But no such luck. "I remember being in California with my sister and getting a call from my manager saying: '*We're about to sign with MJJ, Michael Jackson's record label*'; "I was jumping up and down I was so excited. But then a few days later the whole thing came crashing down again as Howells had now gone on what I can only describe as a warpath. He was now making the industry aware that anyone who wanted to sign me would have a lawsuit on their hands and due to his threats all the labels that were showing interest in signing me withdrew. I was an artist non-grata from then on; my life was in ruins and my career; which I had worked so hard for was over just as it was starting. How I felt at that time came in stages. Firstly I was just numb and I thought to myself, surely this cannot happen like this. There has got to be a way out. But there wasn't. Remember this was before the social media age so it's not like I could just release my music like that. This is the good thing about social media, this could not happen today."

The wickedness of Howell's revenge seemed to have no bounds. Alda continued: "I was raised with zero tolerance towards drugs and I have always been very much against them so what hurt me terribly to the core was that he was spreading lies about me in the industry telling people that I was difficult to deal with because I was taking drugs. A total and utter ruthless lie. And I was thinking, OMG, if my parents hear about this and start wondering if these lies are true. The thing is that

naturally people would ask him about me as I was his most successful artist at the time so what could he say other than make something up to make it my fault.”

So the gig was up.

“I went into a very deep depression completely closing myself off from the world. I had just learned how to use a computer, very basic, so I plonked myself in front of it for three years. I completely fell out of love with music, stopped singing and writing altogether, and, to be honest, I could not even listen to music I was so deeply hurt. I just hated music. By this time, I was so angry with Howells that I wished him dead as he had destroyed my life and ended my dreams. I'm certainly not a violent person, far from it, I will rescue even a mouse that the cat brings in if I think I can save its life. I mean how can someone be so wicked and evil? He had my life in his palm and he decided to squash and destroy it. It's all about greed at the end of the day. He and I could have had a wonderful working relationship but he just had to be so freaking greedy that it destroyed everything. I do believe in karma though so I'm sure she will catch up with him.” Alda continues.

So Alda closed herself off from the world and decided she was going to write a novel. Alda carries on: “Yeah, as I said, I plonked myself in front of the computer for three years, stopped going out, put on lots of weight, hardly cared about anything, and barely saw anyone. I wrote a hundred thousand word novel; which was rewritten a hundred times but at least I had something to take my mind away from the pain.”

After three years locked in her room, money was running out so Alda had no choice than to start going out into the real world and start doing pub gigs again to live. “Having burned out already a few times this was very, very hard for me but what choice did I have?” Alda explained.

As she was just about rebuilding her life disaster hit again. Alda got pneumonia and was desperately sick for almost three months. But as Alda started to get well again even more bad news was ahead. The relentless coughing due to the pneumonia had traumatised Alda's vocal cords so badly that she could not sing anymore. As if that wasn't bad enough she had also developed very bad acid reflux and suffered from hiatus hernia. This condition made it so that the swollen vocal cords never had a chance to heal as the acid kept burning them. After two years of various consultations and therapeutic sessions it was decided the best option was surgery to fix the hiatus hernia. The surgery did little good and the state of her vocal cords to this day are such that she can only do short recording sessions; the long live session hours she once was the master of is no more.

This all led to desperate financial crisis and she lost everything. Alda explains further: “I owned a flat in North London that had a mortgage on it but as I got too sick to sing I had no income and I was not qualified to do anything else as I had dedicated my life to music so it was impossible for me to get a job. The mental agony got so bad that I consciously decided to become a drunk just so I could numb the pain. That day I went to the shop and bought a bottle of gin and decided to start drinking at lunchtime in the hope it would make the pain go away. Of course it didn't so that had to stop. I can laugh about it now as it was such a crazy thing to do but desperation can make you do crazy things.”

Slowly Alda's life got back on track. She had various jobs in retail and catering but little by little she started rekindling her love for music and started writing and recording again. She explains: “Throughout the years I have managed to record a song here and there and I have of course changed styles and interests and this new album is so fantastically important to me. I know that times have changed and I'm not the young pop starlet I once was but I have a lot more to give as an artist today as I have depth and meaning and I have found my spirituality in Norse paganism and being part of that community is massively important to me and it's what inspires me today. The

name of my new album is Urð – Verðandi – Skuld, the names of the three Norns in Norse Mythology. It means past, present, and future and that is exactly what this album means to me as it represents exactly that. It's saying goodbye to the past, showing the present and introducing the future I now have."

The key track on the album is called Cries of the Heart – Vikings Versus Celts - it tells the tragic love story between two tribal families, the Celts and the Vikings. The lyrics tell the story depicted in a short film written and produced by Alda's sister, Sigrún Björk Ólafsdóttir who is currently taking the fashion world by storm with her very unique designs, again inspired by Norse mythology. Alda picks up the story: "Last summer the two of us, along with ten other amazingly creative people jumped in a van and drove to the Isle of Skye in Scotland to shoot this magnificent mini-movie. It has now been sent to several film festivals across the world and a sequel shot in the Faeroe Islands is in the planning stage. One very crucial element of belief in Norse paganism is the fact that we believe in the three Norns who spin the web of life so I'm hoping they have planned success for my new album and that I will reach an audience with my new songs. This album is very different from anything I did in the past and you can hear the influence from Norse mythology and the Vikings.

Other tracks on the album include the song 'Wounded Warriors', a song written in honour of wounded veterans. Alda explains: "So Wounded Warriors was inspired by this amazing human being Wayne Harrod who lost his leg and is now an Invictus medallist. Also it is one of the biggest joys in my life to have my father singing a lead part in the song. It's something I'll ever forget."

There are in total seven songs on this album and two are sung in Alda's native tongue, Icelandic. Alda carries on: "Yeah I feel the need to start singing more in my mother tongue, it means so much to me as every day I get closer and closer to the rediscovery of my ancestors. I am starting to appreciate just what an amazing privilege it is to have been given the language of the Vikings as a birth gift. All I can say is Hail To The Gods, Goddesses, and especially, The Norns."

'Urð – Verðandi – Skuld' is out now.