



# Jonna Pirinen

*Jonna Pirinen is a Finnish singer/songwriter. She recently returned to Finland after spending a year and a half in the United States writing an English album. Website: [jonna.fi](http://jonna.fi)*

***You've been performing since you were a little girl. How old were you when you decided to pursue a career as a singer/songwriter?***

I always kind of knew that that was my ultimate goal and dream, but you can't just start—you need some kind of sign to lead you so that you're not blindly following your dream without any signs telling you which way to go.

I never really took any music theory or singing lessons from institutions; it was more like private lessons here and there. Because of my lack of formal training I couldn't start studying to become a professional musician, so I figured it would happen some other way. And then, when I was studying social services, there was this TV show called *Pop Stars* in Finland. My friends said, "Hey, you sing—you should go and audition." I thought, "Sure, I have nothing to lose," and I went. That was the first really good sign that I should go this way. Then, after winning, I knew that this was what I needed to do and I knew that I had it in me—that it wasn't my imagination.

***What is it that attracts you to being a singer and a performer?***

It comes naturally. I can't think of anything else external that attracts me to it; it's all I ever wanted and knew how to do. I mean, I know how to do other things, but it comes so naturally—as a little girl it was all I wanted to do. I watched music videos and I liked singing in front of the mirror and dancing. I started taking dance classes as a little girl, which is when I really started down the path toward being a performer.

***You said you got your start because you appeared on Pop Stars and won. Tell us more about that.***

They were looking for a girl band. They were auditioning girls who could sing and dance, and they chose me and three other girls for the band. The band didn't work out, so I had to leave. I realized that it was the best

thing to do, because I didn't like the music they asked me to sing, and I wanted to do something more than just sing someone else's songs. After that show, I was free to make any contracts with anyone else if I wanted to, and Sony Music (as they were called then) was interested in signing me as a solo artist. And I ended up going with them.

***Where do you get your inspiration for the songs that you write?***

Well, I write about my life, so most of the stories—or most of the songs—are about me. Actually, in a way, I write songs *to* myself more than *about* myself. I've done a lot of songs about self-esteem issues. A lot of girls have self-esteem issues, and I'm no different. I'm comfortable being up on stage, but that doesn't mean I don't have any self-esteem issues of my own. But that's actually not all that uncommon with artists.



***When you write your songs dealing with the emotions that you have, does it help you figure things out?***

Yes, it's therapeutic to let it out in my songs so that it's not just all somewhere inside me—I let it out and share it with other people. But the thing is, I don't like to write depressing songs, so there's always some kind of solution in the song. Then, when I'm performing, I try to believe what I wrote. I try to help myself by singing my songs and thinking positively.

***Part of your song "Explain" is written in English. Tell us about writing that song.***

Well, that was the first song we released on my album that was English. My record company asked if I'd like to have someone featured on the album—a duet or something—and I decided I wanted to work with someone outside of Finland, since I had already sung with many Finnish artists. They suggested maybe someone from Sweden, and I thought of a second-place finisher from *Swedish Idol* named Darin Zanyar. Since he was kind of big at that moment, I figured it would be good for my album to have him there.

Because I needed some kind of reason for why I was writing songs in English all of a sudden in between all the Finnish songs, I wrote the song about the language barrier that can prevent two people from understanding each other.

***What music has influenced you and the types of songs that you write?***

Everything that you can find online is my old material—the Finnish material—and it's very different. Within a year and a half I've started listening to a little more independent. I'm going to make some changes to my music style thanks to the influence of artists like James Morrison (a new artist from the UK, not the well-known Jim Morrison). He sings pop music, but with a soulful twist. So, that's what I'm looking for with my new album: to add a soulful twist, because I love listening to that kind of music—to artists like Alicia Keyes.

***So now you're moving toward doing something that you feel more connected to?***

Yes, and something that's going to be different from what everyone else is doing, because it's so hard to describe it as "pop" in the traditional sense of the word. People think of pop as music that requires no brain

functioning to listen to. My music has always had more meaning to it, as far as the lyrics are concerned, and now the melodies will be more interesting too. It's not going to be as mainstream and catchy as it has been in the past.

***You've spent the last year and a half in the United States. How has that experience affected you as a singer/songwriter?***

It's affected me a lot because I've had different experiences; living in a foreign country helps you learn and experience a lot. But having been here has made me also appreciate my own country a lot more. Not that it's been awful here, but I've realized how amazing my own country is.

***What was it like to write an album entirely in English as opposed to one in Finnish?***

In some ways it's easier because I listen to English music myself, so my influences are from English music. That was the problem for me, writing in Finnish—I never had any influences because there was really no one else doing Finnish pop music.

***What was your inspiration for the new album that you've been working on?***

Life, once again, but I'm also dedicating this album to my mom. She passed away in March. But even though it was a sad event, I have a lot of hope, and I know that I want to dedicate it to her and keep on living my life. This album is about our life journey, and my journey here, and growing and finding out how to be happy. I think a lot of people in this world live in an unconscious state. They're on automatic and they go from one day to another without thinking, "Oh, wait, maybe I can control my feelings, maybe I can control my mind and be happier." So, I'm trying to share things that I've learned with other people—things that I love, and what I've learned through this experience, especially being in the United States.

***How did you find out about the LDS Church?***

I was studying social services, and we had to do a practice placement in either an elderly home or a kindergarten or a day care center. So I did mine in a kindergarten. Since I was studying in English (it was a British degree program), we had to find a placement for that

month and a half or so that would have English as the language they used there. In Finland it's not easy to find a place like that, because they're mainly Finnish, but I found one. It was actually on the other side of the street from an LDS chapel. The missionaries came there every Friday to volunteer, to sing with the kids and have a little music moment with them. So then I talked to the missionaries, and I wanted to know what they were all about. I was kind of just wondering why they kept on changing—why there were always new missionaries. Half a year later I went to work there as a substitute teacher, and I asked, "Where do you guys come from?" I was just curious. I thought that they were going to want to date me. It was kind of funny—I was like, "Oh, yeah, you can have my number." Then they wanted to teach me, so I just said to myself, "Okay, I'll let them teach. Let me figure this out." That's how I was first acquainted with the Church, and then a year later I was baptized. It took me a while to figure it out, but when I did, I knew I was going to stick with it.

### ***What was your conversion experience like?***

It was difficult because for the longest time I kept telling myself, "No, I don't know if this is true, so I can't do all these things they're asking me to do—the law of chastity and the Word of Wisdom and everything. It sounds like too much." But then when I had been investigating for half a year or even a little more, I noticed that I had already come to the conclusion that I don't need any of those things in my life. I was ready to try it out. That's pretty much when things started to happen—that's when I started to feel the Spirit really testifying to me that this was true, that this rang true to me. The longer I went, I understood it more and more, and I thought, "There's nothing more true than this."

It was a big shock for people when I joined the Church because I was very different before that. No one expected it to happen. People still ask, "So, do you still go to the church?" And I say, "Yes, why not?" I mean, I joined the Church—why would I stop going? I changed my whole life around. I'm going to go.

### ***Where were you at in your singing career when you joined the Church?***

I started investigating just after I left the band. A year later my album had come out, in June 2003, and I got baptized a few months later in October. My career was actually at its peak then—when I joined the Church, I had the most successful summer by far—but it definitely took a little twist downhill after that. People weren't quite prepared for a preacher kind of girl, which wasn't what I was, but that's what they thought I would become if I joined some weird religion that people don't know about.

### ***Do you feel like it affected your fan base at all?***

Yes, it did. Not necessarily directly from the fact that I joined the Church, but indirectly because I made choices, as far as the pictures that I would use for my album cover and what type of music videos I would make, and everything just went from one end to the other. It was too big of a change for most people. Maybe it was the better content.

I've tried to speculate afterwards, or try to understand what happened, if there's anything I could do better. And I've realized that it was just such a drastic change from one extreme end to the other that people turned it down in their heads. They weren't ready for that kind of a change.



I think people will appreciate it more over time. Back then, I think it was too sudden and too quick, and they still didn't know as much about the Church. Since then, we've actually had a lot of good experiences in the Finnish mission; we had our temple open up and had our open house, and it was a great success. A lot of people came and were really interested in it, so I think the turnaround is not going to be as big of a deal.

It's already been about five years since I joined the Church. I think I blend in pretty well. I'm not trying to be different. All I'm trying to do is just do what makes me feel happier. I'm not trying to convert people. All I want to do is have my principles. I'm hoping that this time around it'll be better. All of this, of course, has made me stronger. At times, I would think to myself, "Great. Thank you, Heavenly Father, for turning my career downhill." But of course that's just the human thing to do, and when trials come of course you blame the person who is blessing you. Now, though, I'm grateful that my career didn't go skyrocketing on after I joined the Church. I had this epiphany: "Hey, I can actually do this in English, and I can reach more people." I've regained my strength, and besides, it's good to take a little break. Now it'll have been almost three years since my last album was released, and I think Finland especially needed that time to let things cool off. They can see that, hey, she's still the same person—that it's not so scary.

***What effect did your conversion to the Church have on your focus as a singer and a songwriter and the types of songs that you write?***

Since I write about my life and about how I feel, it changed quite a bit. But not so much that I would just be singing religious songs, because I don't sing religious songs. As an artist in the Church, someday I'd like to write a spiritual album, but for now I think I'll just try to be the breath of fresh air in this very contaminated pop industry. I feel like it's something I should do, so my songs are positive and hopefully have something more to give to people than the typical pop artist's songs would. And everyone can relate to it—you don't have to be Mormon to believe or agree with what I'm saying. If I'm singing about the Holy Ghost, I'm not using the word "Holy Ghost," but I'm talking in terms that everyone can relate to.

***What are your plans for the future as a performer?***

I'm looking forward to meeting with my band in January and practicing all these new songs that I've



written. We're going to perform a few times before March, and then I'm going to meet with all the different producers I've talked to and see which one I end up working with. And hopefully, if they have free time in the spring, they can start recording and producing the album. It's all very exciting.

Actually, what's really exciting, but at the same time a little scary, is that I've decided to do this as an independent artist. My last record deal ended two years ago when I told the record company I wanted to do an English album because I think I have potential to reach more than just the Finnish market. They didn't want to take the risk of changing what was already working, and so I was forced to leave. But I can do everything they're doing except for distribution, and I can easily make a distribution deal with a record company. I'm in control of my own product when I'm the one who produced it. I'm basically ready to sell my apartment, a condo in Finland, and get a smaller one so that I can make some money in between and pay for the whole album myself.

I'm going to start fishing for opportunities to promote my album in every possible country I can. When the album is ready, I'll start promoting it online first—on MySpace, for example—and we'll see how it spreads. ■