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ANNIE LENNOX ON HER OWN
BY ZOË HELLER

AMERICA'S RAVING
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DOING IT FOR HERSELF

Annie Lennox became one of the most famous – and multifarious – faces of the Eighties as the singer with Eurythmics. Now, after a two-year sabbatical during which the group broke up and her daughter was born, Lennox has recorded her first solo album. She spoke to ZOE HELLER. Photograph by ANTON CORBIJN

There is a photograph of Annie Lennox and Dave Stewart taken at some point in the late-Seventies, before they ceased to be lovers, before their first, ill-starred band, the Tourists, had broken up. They are posing madcap fashion in a crazy-paved garden. Stewart stares in mock bemusement at the sky. In spite of a goatee and leather trousers, he bears a spooky resemblance to the man who played George Roper in the Seventies sitcom *Man about the House*. Lennox, aloft a plant stand, is balancing on one leg with her arms outstretched and her mouth wide open: very kooky, very Seventies. She is wearing transparent plastic sandals.

It is a striking photograph, as photographs of stars before they were stars often are. It doesn't indicate the inevitability of their fame and fortune; on the contrary, it points up how narrowly they missed the boat to obscurity. You can imagine meeting them at the time: Annie running her fingers through her peroxide feather-cut and telling you, in her earnest, Aberdonian way, how she's been in a couple of bands that didn't work out but now she's chucked in her waitressing job to concentrate on making music with Dave; Dave explaining about their little flat in Crouch End and how they spend all their time there, writing songs together. And you thinking, quite reasonably, yeah yeah – wake up and smell the coffee, you saddies.

Fifteen years later, Lennox is sitting in the foyer of a recording studio in Primrose Hill, north London, dressed in the dour garb of the off-duty pop star: black leggings, black leather waistcoat, T-shirt, battered biker boots. Her hair, now returned to its natural brown, is cropped close to her head; she is without make-up. But her magnificent, big-boned face still screeches the high-pitched alarm of celebrity. "I'm not just me, am I?" she says. "I'm like someone with three heads. I mean, we've never met before but you know all this...stuff about me that you've read. And before you walked in the door you knew what I looked like. Anyone who's famous has got that weird thing..."

She and Stewart made it. After the

Tourists folded and their love affair disintegrated, they became Eurythmics – one of the biggest pop successes of the Eighties. Their songs were clever hybrids of European electro-pop and American R&B. Stewart played guitar sullenly in the shadows. Lennox, the vocalist of the duo and star of their uncommonly sophisticated videos, took the limelight with a repertoire of strange, slightly sinister personae: gangster, Weimar *chanteuse*, dominatrix, angel, prostitute, Elvis, bored housewife, Hollywood starlet, glitter-rock camp queen, and, perhaps most memorably, woman dressed as a man dressed as a woman. The British tabloids branded her a "gender bender". The American channel MTV demanded to see her birth certificate as proof that she was not a youth-corrupting transvestite.

"You get boxed into ideas," Lennox says now. "All I wanted to do was present myself in a way that avoided the usual girly image of female singers. Girly wasn't me, but then 'gender bender' wasn't me either. I felt, oh shit, you can never do anything without people turning it into something that it wasn't."

However misread, Eurythmics were adored. Their records went gold. They recorded songs with Aretha Franklin and Stevie Wonder; they made it big in America. They got so famous that for a while Lennox found it "scary" to go out of her front door. And then, at some indeterminate point in the last 18 months, they split up. "Well, we've placed Eurythmics on the shelf, put it that way," Lennox says. "Dave and I have been together so long – longer than time itself, it seems – and we have such a complex relationship, it just got to the point where it was quite painful to continue."

Last year, their *Greatest Hits* album – an unofficial acknowledgement that Eurythmics was, for the time being, over – sold more than a million copies in Britain and five million worldwide.

At the age of 37, Lennox, who grew up in an Aberdeen tenement with a father who worked as a boiler-maker in the shipyards and a mother who cooked in hotel kitchens,

now owns houses in west London's Little Venice, in Paris and in Majorca. She is as rich as Croesus. John Preston, the managing director of her record company, BMG, calls her "one of the very biggest fish in our pond". Now, after a two-year sabbatical from the music industry, during which she has been lending her support to Shelter, the charity for the homeless, she has released a single this week, and her first solo album follows shortly. The girl in the crazy-paved garden has travelled far.

"Well I don't *feel* like that," Lennox says. "I don't *feel* such a big fish. I understand that my name has a certain power. I know that people will answer my calls – but I don't use any of that much. I don't hang out in smart circles. I don't really feel comfortable with people who are in the same situation as me. I'm still in awe of famous people."

She looks up as I prepare to say something. "What I *mean* is," she continues urgently, "I've been me the whole way through. When I was working class I didn't feel that I belonged. Now I have lots of money, I still don't feel I belong. It's not like I know who I am all of a sudden because I'm rich. It's not like my true vocation was to be famous and now I've arrived."

Lennox takes interviews seriously, listening to the questions with the anxious concentration of a gameshow contestant and pausing, often with her eyes shut, to consider her replies. "Oh," she'll say, "that's a difficult one..." before unleashing a flurry of staccato sentences in which diffidence and self-confidence fight it out, from clause to clause, for supremacy.

The conflict between little-me-ism and self-assertion recurs throughout her conversation. When Lennox left Aberdeen at the age of 17 to study the flute, piano and harpsichord at the Royal Academy of Music in London, she found the Big Smoke "shocking", she says, but also "disappointing". She was "daunted" by her new circumstances, yet the girls she shared a room with in south London were "of no interest whatsoever". Lennox says she is "vulnerable", but also "foolishly fearless".



She says she feels "pretty grounded" and at the same time "uprooted".

"That dichotomy between strength and uncertainty is one of the most interesting things about Annie," says Sophie Muller, her friend and the director of many of her videos. "She has this headmistressy manner that people often find intimidating. But then she is also quite unsure of herself – and looks to people to tell her what to do."

Such tensions do not make for a breezy conversational style, but they do constitute a large part of Lennox's fascination as a performer. When she first started getting famous, her mannish clothes and unsmiling stage manner were frequently identified as a feminist statement – which they were, in a way. Then, as now, there were few women in mainstream pop who departed from the rock-chick norms: if you were a female appearing on *Top of the Pops*, you wore a bikini-dress and stroked your thighs a lot, or you wore a long dress and sang a ballad. If you did neither of these, you were probably Joan Armatrading. Lennox herself began her singing career – after abandoning the

fustiness of the Royal Academy – in a dinky girl duo called Stocking Tops, performing cover versions of "Don't Go Breaking My Heart" at working men's clubs.

"It was pretty seamy," she recalls. "I was with this girl called Joyce. Our manager was a weaselly-looking guy who had advertised for attractive young girls in *Melody Maker*..."

But if in Eurythmics Lennox set out to bury the embarrassment of this enforced "girlyness", she never simply acted the hard nut. With the notable exception of "Sisters Are Doing It For Themselves", a feminist pop-anthem which she sang with Aretha Franklin, most of her songs have complicated their assertions of female strength with lugubrious admissions of vulnerability, dependence, even masochism. While her videos were praised for their parodies of sex roles, they were never as ideologically pure as that phrase suggests. Lennox blurred and ironised masculine and feminine stereotypes, suggesting, as she did so, momentary identification with all of them. "I've carved a niche for myself", she says, "where I don't have to wear a ra-ra skirt but I *can* wear make-up. I can do what I want."

Other aspects of being a woman in the music business have proved harder to manage. Unlike Stewart, who has embraced pop stardom – the white grand pianos, the wacky camaraderie of fellow stars – with the candid enthusiasm of a man fulfilling boyhood dreams, Lennox has often felt embarrassed by – and shut out from – what she calls "the Spinal Tap element" of the pop world: "There's something about the rock'n'roll tribe when it gets together that is really quite ludicrous to me. The men, they love it – they're like pigs in shit. When they start doing the lad's thing, I just have to go to my room." For years, she says, she was driven "slightly mad" by life on the road.

"When I was not on tour, I led quite a monastic existence – and that's probably why I had so many messed-up relationships after I left Dave. It was just one long series of disasters because I was so desperate. I was really miserably lonely and I wanted to be with somebody – but I was touring all the time, so how could anybody be with me?"

Among the most dramatic of her well-publicised "disasters" was marriage in 1984 to a Hare Krishna monk called Radha Raman. ("Yeah, I really hit the tabloid jackpot with that Krishna stuff," she remarks ruefully.) She met him in the middle of a world tour. He was a fan who won her heart by sending specially prepared vegetarian meals up to her hotel room. She married him within months of meeting him. She took out divorce proceedings within a year, and exorcised the unpleasant episode by

Annie Lennox and Dave Stewart in their pre-Eurythmics incarnation as the Tourists, in a north London garden in the late-Seventies



George Bohner

writing a song called "Thorn In My Side".

In 1987 she met her present husband, Uri Fruchtmann, an Israeli documentary film-maker. Like her previous partners, Fruchtmann has not always found it easy playing the "Mr Lennox" role. ("My husband can get very put out when people address me and forget he's there. Even though we both understand the phenomenon, it's still terribly hurtful for him...") Nonetheless, the marriage is, by all accounts, an exceptionally happy one. "Uri keeps me clued in," Lennox says. "There is always a danger, when you are famous, that the people around you will become afraid to say no to you, and you'll sort of lose the plot. But my husband would never let anything pass that he thought was bullshit."

They were married in 1988, shortly after Dave Stewart got hitched to Siobhan Fahey, formerly of Bananarama, now of Shakespear's Sister. At the end of the same year, Lennox gave birth to a still-born baby and the newspapers went crazy on "Tragedy Annie" stories. "You never really get over that loss," Lennox says now, "and everybody knowing about it and talking about it is not the best medication in the world." At the time, however, she responded to the press furor with astonishing stoicism. "Millions of other people have experienced the hurt we're feeling now," she told the press. "This is not a tragedy story. We will try to have another baby."

In 1990 she gave birth to a healthy baby girl, Lola, who, she says, "has changed my life and my perspective on things in all the corny ways that children are supposed to." She has found "equilibrium" now. "I have always suffered from extremes of emotion – great, excessive depressions and mad highs. It was quite good for creative purposes, but it was hell for having a happy life. I'm calmer these days and it's a great relief. This new record is certainly not as bloody miserable as a lot of the stuff I've done before."

The record comes out on 6 April and will be called, with some irony, *Divva*. Lennox is anxious about the business of promoting it – having to return to the media fray after two years of relative privacy. "The newspaper stuff is always quite embarrassing, frankly. There's the provincial newspaper angle, there's the cynical music-paper angle, there's the woman's magazine, 'sophisticated beauty' angle, there's the in-depth 'We will get to the core of the woman angle', and, you know, none of it's me..." Lennox is veering rapidly towards neurosis. Then, quite suddenly, she rallies: "But oh," she says, smiling, "people who know me understand. They know there is intelligent life on the planet *somewhere*." ●