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# Life



## True rock

The highs and lows  
of Sheryl Crow

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The Sunday Telegraph



She's had great highs but devastating lows too – from cancer and a brain tumour to stalkers, a broken engagement and now the death of a close friend. Yet the singer-songwriter Sheryl Crow has finally hit her stride. She talks to *Helena de Bertodano*

Photograph by **Stefan Ruiz**

# Crowing pains

“Thank God they make waterproof mascara,” sings Sheryl Crow, hauntingly, on her latest album on a track about a woman trying to hide her tears. But she herself is not using it today. Fifteen minutes into our interview Crow takes a phone call and then collapses to the floor. At first I think she is laughing hysterically, but the black rivulets running down her face make it clear she is weeping uncontrollably.

We have met at her home, a sprawling ranch outside Nashville where she lives with her two adopted sons, aged seven and four. It is a cold day but the sun slants in through the heavy red curtains to the dark wood-panelled recording studio where Crow is sitting on a sofa, a tiny figure in a pretty polka-dot Ralph Lauren dress and battered brown leather jacket.

Now 52, Crow is often described as the world's biggest female rock star: she has

won nine Grammy Awards during the past two decades, sold more than 50 million albums and performed with some of the biggest names in the industry, including The Rolling Stones, Michael Jackson and Bob Dylan. But her life has been turbulent: she has survived breast cancer, a brain tumour and even Lance Armstrong, to whom she was once engaged.

Friendly, easy-going company, she says it was her illness that prompted her recent shift into country music. “When I was diagnosed with cancer I moved [from Los Angeles to Nashville] as I wanted to put down roots and nurture my life in a way that I hadn’t before. It was a conscious decision to make a shift away from conventional pop. Country is where I come from [she grew up in nearby Missouri], and I wanted to be part of that tradition.”

Although widely respected in the music business, Crow has a more mixed public reception. “There are always going to be people that love me and people that hate me,” she shrugs. “Sometimes people have a preconceived notion of you as lightweight and you can never shake it. But those are not the people I’m writing songs for anyway. At the end of the day I’m just writing songs for me, so whoever likes them is a luxury.”

It is at this point that Crow’s phone rings. She glances at the number and apologises, saying she has to take the call. The blood drains from her face as she listens to the caller. Getting up in a trance, she moves towards the door, holding on to the frame for support, then sinks to the floor, racked with huge, heaving sobs. After a few minutes the publicist, who is waiting downstairs, comes up to see what is going on.





Seeing Crow in a heap, she shoots a puzzled glance my way, probably wondering what on earth I have said to reduce her to this state. “Just tell him I love him,” Crow is murmuring into the phone. By the end of the call the publicist and I are almost in tears as well, even though we don’t know what she is crying about: I don’t think I have ever heard such raw grief.

Crow finishes the call and collects herself, explaining that her road manager Dave Rahn, who also managed Fleetwood Mac and recently married, is in hospital with terminal cancer and has slipped into a coma. I ask if she wants to take some time. “No,” she says, wiping at the tears with her wrists. “I knew this was coming, I’ve just been holding it together because I had my kids around.”

Rahn, 50, dies the following day and Crow tweets, “Today we lost one of our most beloved. Dave Rahn was a spectacular human being and the best friend you could have.”

**‘I have a strong sense of melancholy, and I think it’s one of the reasons I wound up doing what I’m doing’**

In two minds about whether to include this extremely private moment in this article, I decide that it shows a lot about Crow, all positive. First, she sounds like an amazing friend who cares deeply about those close to her. Second, she is impressively unembarrassed about the display of emotion. Her publicist gently suggests that she might want to sort out her face – which is now a splotchy mess – but Crow bats away the idea. A complete professional, she is soon chatting away again as though nothing has happened.

An ability to access and convey emotion lies at the heart of all great performers, and Crow – whose music incorporates folk, hip hop, pop and country – is as well known for her upbeat good-time rock songs, such as *All I Wanna Do*, as she is for tear-jerking ballads including her cover version of Cat Stevens’ *The First Cut is the Deepest*. “I have a strong sense of melancholy,”

she comments later, “and I think it’s one of the reasons I wound up doing what I’m doing. I played piano at an early age out of a need to feel something. I’m definitely ‘glass half empty’ instinctively. Maybe it’s something I inherited.”

Crow’s mother was a piano teacher and her father a trumpet player and lawyer. Crow, who is the third of four siblings, remembers her mother teaching all the children together on four separate pianos when they came home from school each day. “I was definitely pushed at it, but I loved it too.”

The only cloud on her childhood was the time when her father, who defended civil rights, prosecuted the Ku Klux Klan for ballot-rigging, and received death threats. “He



slept downstairs with a shotgun. No kid takes that sort of thing in their stride.” She turns to her older sister, Kathy, who has just arrived with a huge array of food.

“Weren’t you escorted to school by police one morning?” asks Sheryl, helping herself to cheese and crackers.

“Yes,” replies Kathy, then adds with a chuckle, “Do you remember the time Dad pranked us and came home with stitches in the back of his head – he didn’t say he’d only had a mole removed!”

Their parents still live in Missouri, a three-hour drive from Crow’s new

home. She recently sold another property outside Nashville. “I had a really unfortunate stalker showing up there. In fact, I’ve had to testify against two different stalkers.”

In the late 1980s Crow – who started out as a music teacher, singing in bands at the weekend – became a backing singer for Michael Jackson on his *Bad* tour and there were rumours that they were in a relationship. “I was having his baby!” she laughs today. The truth, she says, was rather more prosaic. During 18 months



From top With Michael Jackson at Wembley Stadium during his *Bad* tour, 1988; with former boyfriend Eric Clapton in 2007; with ex-fiancé Lance Armstrong in 2003



touring with him, Crow says Jackson barely spoke to her and never grasped her name. “In the end he knew some names but he wasn’t sure which name went with which person.”

Crow released her own first album, “Tuesday Night Music Club”, in 1993, but recognition was slow and she did not feel

accepted by her peer group. “I wasn’t considered hip or cool. The people who inspired me became the people who embraced me: The Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Stevie Nicks...”

At 4am one day in Amsterdam, Crow received a call from Mick Jagger. “I was like, ‘Ha ha,’ and put the phone down.

Then he called back and said, ‘This really is Mick Jagger. Do you want to come and sing with us in Florida?’ It was surreal. I arrived and was so nervous I threw up all day. As I was walking out to perform, Bobby Keys, the infamous sax player, offered me a shot of tequila and said, ‘Don’t worry, here’s a little shot of confidence.’”

Crow says she never really sought fame and found it hard to handle. “It creates a weird thirst for more and then it sets you up for a sense of failure when you can’t keep your heightened position.”

Despite her growing international success, she experienced periods of deep depression and a tangled love life, including relationships with Eric Clapton and the actor Owen Wilson. *My Favorite*

‘The brain tumour was nothing to worry about. But it does make me feel like every day is a day I do not want to waste’

*Mistake*, which includes the lyrics, “You were the only one/That I ever loved,” was reputedly a song about Clapton. “He’s a dear friend,” she says of him today.

She met Lance Armstrong in 2003 and put her career on the back burner to support him. They became engaged in 2005 but split in 2006, with Armstrong later saying that he didn’t want to have children with her. Since then, she says, her attitude towards relationships has changed. “I quit letting people run over me. When I was little, I decided I was going to make everybody happy. I’ve had a series of relationships with people [in which] I basically altered who I was to make the relationship work. It’s not unusual for women to do that but I [now] think you both have to be able to hold your place in the constellation.”

I ask her if she felt drawn to people who needed nurturing. “No, not really. I picked some overachieving people.” Is she still in touch with Armstrong? “No,” she says emphatically, adding, “I know you have to ask: he’s a source of insatiable curiosity.” She must be relieved she wasn’t still with him during his spectacular fall from grace. “I am so

happy,” she mouths silently, then adds out loud, “Just suffice it to say I love my life and it could have been very different.”

Crow was diagnosed with breast cancer a couple of weeks after she split with Armstrong. She had a lumpectomy followed by seven weeks of radiation before getting the all-clear. A few years later, she felt what she describes as “a weird sensation” in her temple. “I was diagnosed with a brain tumour, which was terrifying, but they told me right off the bat this was nothing to worry about.”



With her two sons, Wyatt (left) and Levi, in 2012

It was meningioma, a typically benign tumour, and Crow has chosen not to have it removed. “But it does make me feel like every day is a day I do not want to waste.”

In her mid-forties, Crow decided she could no longer wait for the perfect relationship before having children. Adoption was the obvious choice. “My desire wasn’t to bring a kid in; there are kids coming in no matter what. I just looked up at the heavens and said, ‘Whatever you want to give me...’” She met the mother of her first son at his birth but says her second son arrived as if from nowhere. “Like contraband,” she laughs.

On her latest album, “Feels Like Home”, many of the songs touch on motherhood. In one, she voices the words of a child asking, “All my friends have daddies, Momma, why don’t I?” Although not in a relationship at the moment, Crow says she would still consider marriage to the right person. “I love the idea – even though I don’t think it’s a piece of paper that is necessarily going to make the relationship good or solid, but I like the tradition of it...”

But she says she is very careful about introducing her children to any new man in her life. “I’ve had the experience in the past where I’ve been introduced to people’s kids too soon. It’s hard on the kids when an adult inexplicably vanishes.”

Another song, *Stay At Home Mother*, describes the guilt a mother feels balancing work and family. “Last year my then six-year-old happened to wake as I was leaving the house at 5.30am and he just dropped to his knees and started crying, ‘You’re not leaving.’ It’s not normal for a child to have his mom leave and I made a promise to him in that moment: ‘I will figure out a way to bring you guys with me.’ It’s hard being a single mom. It’s the best and hardest job in the world. I’m not a mom who phones it in or hands over to the nanny. I make myself emotionally available to my children 24 hours a day.”

So, in the past few months, her sons have accompanied her on the country circuit. “They love the bus: they wake up every morning in a different town. I’m sure they’ll reach the stage where they say, ‘Mom, you’re so not cool’ – but for the moment it works.”

Despite the juggling act (“now I have to schedule inspiration,” she jokes), she feels that motherhood has enhanced her career. “I feel like I’ve finally figured out what I’m doing and have hit my stride as a performer. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever been better.” ●

*Sheryl Crow will be touring Britain from tomorrow. See [sherylcrow.com](http://sherylcrow.com) for details*