

“I’m the breadwinner, the go-getter. I’m quite male. My partner counters me”

Paloma Faith

Singer and actress

**THE
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INTERVIEW**
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BERTODANO**



I am stuck in a lift with Paloma Faith. The doors keep opening and closing, we keep pressing buttons, but we are going nowhere. Faith is unfazed, cackling every time the doors slide back to reveal the same marble staircase, the same chandelier. “It’s like Being John Malkovich,” she says, referring to the surreal 1999 film.

Frankly, if you are going to be stuck in a lift you couldn’t ask for a better companion. She is a breath of fresh air at a time when many celebrities are media-trained out of any personality. “I’m un-media-trainable,” Faith laughs. We have just had dinner at Soho House in Hollywood and are marooned at the top of the office tower block that is the exclusive club’s unlikely home. “I didn’t pay to be a member,” she announces loudly. “I just did some gigs for them years ago — it’s an exchange.” People pile into the lift every time the doors open. “We can’t get off this floor,” she tells them in her blunt Cockney accent, sounding like a cross between Michael Caine and Barbara Windsor. At last the lift moves and our fellow passengers steal sidelong glances at Faith, bemused. Despite her fame in the UK as a singer with three double platinum albums, a judge on the talent show *The Voice* and a Brit award-winner, here she was until recently just a “gobby” Englishwoman — an eccentric vision with bright blonde hair, who today has fluorescent orange chipped nails and wears voluminous white clothing topped off with a straw boater. But her relative anonymity stateside is now over. As the lead antagonist in *Pennyworth*, the Batman prequel television series that launches in the UK later this month, Faith plays Bet Sykes, a sharp-tongued villain who is a counterpoint to Alfred Pennyworth, Bruce Wayne’s loyal butler. Faith, 38, has acted before — as a naughty schoolgirl in *St Trinian’s* and as the Devil’s girlfriend in Terry Gilliam’s *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*. But *Pennyworth* — part of the DC Comics superhero franchise — is her most high-profile role yet.

PHOTOGRAPH
MATT HOLYOAK

Faith has always played up her reputation for kookiness: even Russell Brand was mesmerised when he appeared alongside her on *The Graham Norton Show*. And sharing the sofa with *Fleabag*’s hot priest Andrew Scott recently, she sparked a conversation about masturbation after telling Scott how much she had enjoyed her “alone time” as she watched his sexually charged performance at the end of the second series. “On behalf of anybody who’s got kids, been in a long-term relationship, thank you from the deepest bottom of my heart,” she told a blushing Scott. Turning to address the audience, she added knowingly: “I don’t think I’m the only person...”

It was Pharrell Williams who first called Paloma Faith a perfect contradiction. It became the title of her third album and could not be more apt. On stage, she is all glittering showmanship, belting out powerful ballads in extraordinary costumes and towering hair. Off stage, she cultivates a ditsy persona — “brain like a fish”, she mutters to herself a couple of times during our evening together. But you don’t have to spend long with her to realise that she is very astute and well read. She refers to multiple authors with ease, quoting everyone from Kipling to Deleuze and Guattari. “Who?” I ask, only later after a quick Google search realising she is referring to the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and French psychoanalyst Félix Guattari. “I choose to project a persona that’s available and non-judgmental. Sometimes people assume that means I’m stupid. I think it says more about the person than me.”

It also becomes quickly apparent that beneath the bubbly surface runs a seam of sadness, which has its roots in her difficult childhood. Even now, she struggles with depression. “The most sad I’ve ever been was after [having] my child.”

In 2017, she raised eyebrows when she implied that she was bringing up her child as gender neutral, referring to her baby only as “they”. “It’s just ➤➤➤



MATT HOLYOAK FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE. HAIR: TRACIE CANT. MAKE-UP: LAN NGUYEN. GROOMING

because I don't want any information about [my child] out there," she explains, "because I don't know who they're going to become. If they want to be in the public eye when they get older, then that's their choice."

Nonetheless, she feels that society attaches too much significance to a child's gender. "They become indoctrinated. I feel like gender's not important. I think it's to do with character. I'd say that I'm as in touch with my male side as [my partner] is in touch with his female side. Some people might describe me as quite male."

In what way? "Being the breadwinner, being the go-getter, being a bit entrepreneurial. Self-belief. Being opinionated."

Her partner, Leyman Lahcine, is a French-Algerian artist who is six years younger than Faith and is the primary caregiver to their two-year-old at their home in Hackney, east London. "He's gentler. He counters me. I'm very ambitious. And he's not very ambitious. Actually, that's something I struggle with because I can't understand it."

Several American states have recently given parents a gender-neutral option on birth certificates. Faith says she wouldn't go that far. "If people want to do that, then fine, it's their decision. But I wouldn't. At some point the child's going to decide, and probably in those instances the child will be vehemently one gender just to slap their parents in the face."

Her own child's toys are mostly unisex: "Play-Doh. And gardening — watering the plants, sowing the vegetables and sunflowers." At the moment, they want to be a builder or a firefighter. "As long as they're happy, but I wouldn't want a porn star or a prostitute. Or a drug dealer," she says. If they were gay or transgender, Faith would embrace them. Her iPhone screen shows a happy toddler and, off the record, she tells me their gender. "I can't control everything and I need to be relaxed about it," she sighs. "I just don't want to be the one who is plastering my child everywhere." Above all, she says, she wants them to have a normal life. "In the parenting community, no one cares [who I am]. I'm always in the park, in play areas. My child goes to a state school."

It was after a difficult birth and emergency caesarean that Faith went through a period of severe depression. "The only time I've been really unwell mentally was post-baby. [I felt] alone. Something was really wrong with me and no one guessed or saw it in me — people were just focused on the baby."

She is a devoted mother and takes her child almost everywhere with her — even on this work trip to Los Angeles, while writing new music and meeting casting directors. "I'm naturally quite maternal. I told everyone at the music studio I had to leave at five today because I needed to engage with my child for two hours. I went home, cooked dinner and then did storytime, bathtime, bedtime. As soon as the eyes were closed and I could hear heavy breathing, I jumped up, put my clothes on and came to meet you."

She orders shrimp tacos, brussels sprouts and

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TIME TO SHINE
Right: on stage during last year's The Architect tour.
Below: with her partner, the artist Leyman Lahcine



sparkling water. She is "almost" vegan and rarely drinks alcohol. "I try to have a healthy relationship with addictive substances," she says. Did she ever go through a wild stage? "No."

This is the thing about Paloma: she is very focused. "I like to achieve the impossible," she says when I ask what drives her. "I don't think I like fame, but I do like success. The music and acting industries are both so fickle. Even if you have the biggest-selling record or the biggest film, it doesn't mean the next thing you do will be [successful]."

Her fourth album, *The Architect*, was her first to top the UK charts. In it she turned her focus from personal heartbreak to politics, including *Guilty*, a song about Brexit. She has begun work on her fifth album, which will be addressed to her child. "It's more social than political, about how I wish the world was a better place. It's the duty of a musician to report on the times."

Also contrary to possible expectation, Faith is far from a hippie-dippy, anything-goes mother. She reads multiple books on child rearing and maintains a strict routine. "It's really good for security. Children can be overwhelmed by how powerless they are. If I can make things as predictable as possible, then it takes away some of that anxiety. I don't think there's anything relaxing about parenthood. It's the absence of spontaneity and the presence of anxiety."

She and Lahcine have no plans to marry. "It helps that we're not married. Every day feels like a choice." Faith was married once, to a New Zealand chef called Rian Haynes. "For five minutes," she says.

They divorced after 10 months but kept in touch; she looked him up when on tour in Melbourne, where Haynes now lives. "But I don't like him any more because he spoke to the press."

Faith is not the sort of person one crosses lightly. She no longer speaks to her father either. "I had quite a bad relationship with him. I don't really go into detail because he's still alive. Maybe when he's dead I'll tell all. I just don't want to poke the fire."

Her parents divorced when she was two. "But it was traumatic for a long time. There was a lot of horrible stuff for a good 10 years." Her father, who is Spanish, had another daughter from a subsequent relationship, but something went wrong there too. "I became her legal guardian when she was 16," Faith explains. "For two years she came to live with me. I had to report to social services once a month to prove that she was safe. She's my best friend. We have a mutual understanding about certain things that have happened."

An only child, Faith was raised in Stoke Newington by her English mother, a teacher. The name Paloma ➤➤➤

BAD FAITH
Right: as the villain
Bet Sykes in the TV
series Pennyworth.
Below: playing the
goth schoolgirl
Andrea (right) in
St Trinian's (2007)



means dove in Spanish. “Or pigeon,” she says. “It depends how you want to perceive me.” Her mother paid no attention to gender either. “She just dressed me as a person. I loved He-Man and Lego. I never really liked pink — red’s always been my favourite.”

Faith says she owes her success mostly to her mother. “She made me feel I could achieve anything I wanted. She’s the most harsh, reality-giving fix. Sometimes I say to her, ‘Can you just say something nice?’”

She learnt to read late and was intensely shy as a child until she started acting. As a teenager, she blossomed, earned starred As in all her exams, then moved to Leeds to study at the Northern School of Contemporary Dance. Afterwards she got a master’s degree in theatre direction and design at Central Saint Martins in London, supporting herself by working as a magician’s assistant, a burlesque performer and in a lingerie store. “I worked at Agent Provocateur for three years and met a lot of very interesting but quite lonely people with obscure fetishes who saw the shop as a refuge. It taught me a lot about empathy.”

Her music career took off while working part-time at a pub: the bar manager asked her to front his fledgling band, which became known as Paloma and the Penetrators. Seeing her perform, a scout from Epic invited her to sing for his boss, but the audition went awry when Faith asked him to stop texting while she sang, then told him to “f*** off” when he refused. She stormed out, but nearly a year later he contacted her again, saying hers was the most memorable act he’d seen. She signed.

It was around this time that Faith knocked four years off her age. “It was a social experiment. We live in a sexist [society] and at the time everyone was talking about [the singer] KT Tunstall and saying, ‘She’s very old, she’s 27.’ So I was, like, ‘Oh my God, I’d better lie.’ I always intended to own it once I got to the height of my career, but then some bore [who had unearthed her birth certificate] decided to go ‘Na-na-na-na-nah.’” Faith rolls her eyes.

In fact, she says, she doesn’t mind getting older. “I feel much more confident and accomplished. Accomplished emotionally too, in my ability to cope with situations. But in terms of fertility... if I could add 10 years to my ability to have children I would. I’ve already had two miscarriages since my child was born.”

When she and Lahcine met in New York seven years ago, it was, she says, love at first sight. But she does not sugar-coat their relationship. “Being with anyone in the long term is quite boring. But if you’re going to raise a kid, you might as well do it with your best friend because it’s bloody hard otherwise.”

These days, she says, not a lot upsets her. “I’m very good in a crisis. I’m the type of person you’d want to have around if you have a heart attack. I’m just very level, calm and measured.”

She says she channelled some of the darkness of her childhood into the character of Bet Sykes. “I feel



Bet is quite damaged. She’s very misunderstood. And she doesn’t understand why people think she’s so bizarre. She’s very lonely and she really wants to have human touch and contact.”

Faith says she did not mind filming the sex scenes, “although Bet doesn’t really want to have sex, she just pulls her knickers to the side. Legally, they have to check you’re OK — and for good reason, because of the #MeToo campaign. But I used to be a life-drawing model, and I’ve had a kid, so quite frankly I’m happy if someone wants me to be naked. And I’d be happy if someone got an erection.”

The fact that the series was cast in the States helped her land the part. “They didn’t have any idea who I was, which worked in my favour. In the UK, it’s hard for a casting director to envisage me as anything other than myself. I sat in my front room at home, put on a wig and taped myself for the role.”

Sadistic and hilarious as Sykes, Faith is a revelation, dominating the first episode as she doles out vicious beatings with dry asides. The only downside, particularly for someone who loves flamboyance, was the costume. “It was grim — she never changes. It was [1960s] Britain, when people just washed the armpits and put it back on.” Faith is keen to further her acting career, partly because she feels the pressure to keep the family afloat financially. “It’s on me to make sure we’re all OK. We’ve got a nice lifestyle, but it would go away if I stopped working. If [Lahcine] earned money, I would probably have a year off. I feel like I’m missing out [on being with my child].”

Equally, she says it is important for her child to see her working. “It’s not just about money, it’s also about leading by example. We’re in the ‘why’ phase, so they go ‘Why do you go to work?’ ‘So I can get money. And work makes me very happy.’” What she missed more than anything during that miserable postnatal period was the attention she enjoys in the public eye. “It felt like I could never work again. To be a musician or an actress, you have to be quite narcissistic and a little bit self-involved. And to be a mother, you have to be the opposite.” She sees a therapist regularly. “The other day she was talking to me about relationships and saying how important it was to accept the banality of domesticity with open arms and I was just, like, ‘I can’t, I can’t.’” She looks pensive. “But raising a child with someone can’t always be explosions.”

So she brings the fire to the stage instead. “When I go on tour and play to arenas of 15,000 or 20,000 people a night, I feel validated.” ■

Pennyworth begins on the on-demand service StarzPlay on October 25

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