

Let's Get Whimsical

From Cliff Richard to John Travolta, Johnny Farnham to Phil Ramone, Olivia Newton-John has rubbed shoulders with the best of them. Decades later, breast cancer's pin-up girl is still going strong, testimony to her survival in both Hollywood and medical terms.

By Josephine Brouard

Very soon after meeting Olivia it suddenly strikes you that she's not like many other celebrities. First of all, she's expressive. "Oooooooh," she exclaims when you mention dragon boat racing, "that sounds like fun, I'd like to try that! *Always* wanted to take up rowing. Have you got the contact details for me?"

She's also curious. When we chat later in the interview about marriage, life and children, Olivia poses one of many questions. "Do *you* have children?" she asks as we agree how "confronting" the whole business of bringing up children can be.

She's also animated and truly attentive. She listens carefully, interjects with an interested *ahuh*, a surprised *oooh* or even another question and, suddenly, quite swiftly, I notice that my time with the former golden girl of pop doesn't feel like an interview, it feels more like a comfortable chat with a good friend.

Olivia appears interested in my life experiences; my opinions; and even whom I would recommend for a specialist medico procedure (we were talking women's health issues at that juncture). Talking to 'stars', I have found, is more typically a one-way street. Why, the singing sensation will even talk about "her man", cameraman Patrick McDermott, and patiently spells his surname for me so that I get it right.

Later, I ask if she and John Travolta will ever, as Hollywood rumours have it, team up again for a *Grease* sequel. You expect her to hum-and-haw like most celebrities do, because they don't want to shut any doors or upset anyone, but Olivia responds in a slow drawl, "Noooooooo, no, I don't think so ...". Too much water has flown under the bridge, she implies, she's got too many other things she's excited about.

And she's not kidding. This is a woman who has packed an enormous amount of living into her 56 years (she just celebrated her birthday, on September 26). "Since Chloe was born (18 years ago), the years have just flown!" says Olivia, "I sometimes look back and think, where did time go?"

As a performer, she has enjoyed over 25 'Top 40' singles, more than half of which reached the 'Top 10' in the United States, including five monster hits, and she's won not one, but four coveted Grammy awards for her music. Well-known songs include *Let Me*

Be There, I Honestly Love You, Have You Never Been Mellow, Summer Nights, You're The One That I Want, Hopelessly Devoted To You.

Her biggest hit was the album *Physical*, selling over two million copies, with the title song spending 10 consecutive weeks (in late 1981) in the No.1 slot on the U.S. Billboard's *Hot 100*.

These days Olivia is very excited about more than music alone. The recent relaunch of her business label, Koala Blue, marketing Australian products like wine and cheese rather than the fashion garments that put her out of business 13 years ago, has got her revved up again, and she's also proud to be trailblazing on behalf of breast cancer. She's also got a retrospective album, *Indigo*, coming out in time for Christmas, and she's helping her daughter launch her debut record album.

When I press Olivia for details regarding Chloe's career, she is seriously vague this time, appearing to know less (as most mothers do) than she would like about her teenage daughter's life.

"She does occasionally talk about getting her own place," says Olivia wistfully of the beachside Malibu home she shares with her daughter, "but I hope she doesn't leave for a while." Cliff Richard's former sidekick in the Swinging Seventies admits that bringing up children is the hardest job of all.

She is always preaching to Chloe, for example, about the importance of ageing gracefully. "Then you sit down in front of television together and watch (the US television reality show) *Who's Going to Marry my Dad?* and you can't help but notice that every second woman has had something done ...".

Olivia prefers not to judge anyone who has had cosmetic surgery, nor has she seriously contemplated it herself, but the media's current obsession with it "makes it hard when you're trying to instil values in your child".

"There's no manual for parenting," she continues. "You're so determined not to make the mistakes your parents made; so you do things differently and you screw up anyway." She makes a light sighing sound. "Nothing's perfect in life."

For example, she explains, she watched her parents (mother Irene and father Erin were both academics) divorce when she was young – and she pretty much made up her mind she was *never* going to get divorced in her lifetime. "It was the thing I feared the most and guess what? My greatest fear came true." Again, she sighs knowingly. "Life is full of ups and downs. You go through tough times and you grow from it, you simply learn to appreciate life more."

The sweet soprano whose voice soared at the 2000 Olympics opening ceremony is philosophical about everything. Being diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 46 gave her an enormous scare, she concedes. She had been married 10 years by that time she was diagnosed; the trauma of the breast cancer journey, she believes, aggravated the

problems she was already experiencing in her marriage to a man 11 years younger than herself.

Today, though, she and her ex-husband are fantastic friends. Matt even stays in Olivia's Malibu house when she travels overseas so he can spend quality time with Chloe. "We were always determined we would stay close, for Chloe's sake especially," says Olivia. "I have to say that the main reason I got married in the first place was because I wanted a child."

Certainly, Olivia took her time choosing a life partner. One of her first boyfriends was entertainer Ian "Turps" Turpie; by the time she was 22, she was involved with guitarist Jim Welch (who was reportedly married at the time) of The Shadows, then one of the United Kingdom's biggest bands.

Another boyfriend, Lee Kramer, doubled as her manager for some years in the mid to late-70s while the Bee Gees' Andy Gibb, a decade her junior, was another flame. Will Livvy, as her intimates fondly know her, ever marry again?

Well, she's been in a relationship with cameraman Patrick McDermott for eight years now – "a good man" she says serenely – and, surprisingly, they're currently not living under the same roof. Marriage is not out of the question, says Olivia, but she makes it plain it's not strongly on her radar. "Our situation is complicated," says the singer, her voice trailing off ... "I really don't think it's fair to Patrick to talk about us in public."

So what does Olivia believe is important in a relationship? She laughs a light tinkly laugh as if to say, 'Whaaaaat? With my track record, you're asking *me*?' but she proffers her views anyway. Respecting one another is critical, she says; so is giving each other space and each cultivating his or her own interests. Fun and laughter is another must, and so is compromise. "Obviously!" she stresses.

Couples also have to accept their differences, says Olivia, and there should be 'no-go' areas for those topics about which you know neither of you will ever concede or agree! "Also," she muses, warming to the subject, "couples should also look for things they have in common."

For Olivia, that would mean doing something active. She may be the granddaughter of a Nobel prize-winning physicist (Max Born) with plenty of cognitive power in her genes, but her preferred *modus operandi* is, as her award-winning album goes, physical.

She loves to walk her Irish setter, Jack, on the beach in the morning when she's home; she also loves to play tennis as often as she can with pals and she's constantly limbering up her voice and body as part of an ongoing lifestyle regime. Tom Hanks, Jim Carrey and Pamela Anderson are her neighbours in the friendly beachside Malibu community where she lives; Olivia is particularly fond of Pammie. "She's nothing like the way she's portrayed in the media," says Olivia, "and her children are delightful."

While Olivia says she has met hundreds upon hundreds of celebrities over the years, and got to like a lot of them, busy schedules means she hardly ever hangs out with celebrity pals on a regular basis. “My friends go back to my childhood in Australia, or they’re the ‘behind-the-scenes’ sort of people,” she explains.

So how has she managed to stay smiling despite the Razzie “Worst Actress” nominations (for her roles in *Xanadu* and *Two of a Kind*); her bankruptcy; her divorce; her singing career’s ‘wilderness’ years; her breast cancer experience and most recently, the death of beloved mother, Irene?

“My mother taught me to always find the beautiful in everything,” says Olivia simply. “I don’t subscribe to any specific dogma; I just try to stop and smell the roses. And I consider every day I’m still here another day of extraordinary luck.”

ENDS
