



# Best Bette

A show business phenomenon, Bette Midler – cabaret star, singer, actress and comedienne – talks to SHARON KRUM about what makes her tick at home and why she's looking forward to touring again Down Under.

**"The Divine Miss M", Bette Midler, 59, brings her *Kiss My Brass* show Down Under next month – 26 years after her last visit in 1979.**

ROBERT ERDMANN/CON INTERNATIONAL



The hotel door opens and a tiny figure with blonde hair bounces off the sofa and moves into the foreground. She is a picture of curves – part-mermaid, part-vixen – and wicked smiles, just as you expected. Then the eyes dart mischievously over you, taking you in. "Hi, I'm Bette," she announces, placing her hands in her pockets. "Sorry, I'm not going to shake your hand, I'm getting over a cold and I don't want you to get sick."

You thank Bette for her consideration, then tell her the handshake is unimportant, all you really want to do is talk. Suddenly, her eyes light up like a Christmas tree. "Oh baby, I can talk," she says, laughing. "Sit down!"

It's not easy holding the title of "divine" for 30 years – there is so much that can ruin one's divinity quotient along the way. Scandal, divorce, drinking your talent into oblivion. Not Bette Midler, though. Nothing she has done in the three decades since first hitting the radar has altered her status as "The Divine Miss M".

If anything, her talents as a singer (four Grammys and record sales exceeding 14 million) and actress (three Golden Globes, three Emmys and two Oscar nominations) have catapulted her to living legend status. To hear her belt out *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy*, then serenade you with *Wind Beneath My Wings*. To watch her play a self-destructive rock star in *The Rose*, a floozie on the run in *Outrageous Fortune*, then a neurotic Jewish housewife in *The Stepford Wives*. To hear her tell a blue joke with a wink, while she totters across stage on high heels, is to know the true meaning of "divine".

"I have to say I've had a helluva career," she exclaims. "I am so grateful that I chose this strange path that nobody in my family chose. I think it must have been blind instinct that led me here, because there is no question I was destined to do it, even though I've had my ups and downs."

Next month, at age 59, Bette Midler makes her return to Australia after a 26-year absence, with her hugely successful *Kiss My Brass* tour.

"What I remember about my Australian tour in 1979 was the light. Incredible. And the people. So funny. There is no one there who isn't witty."

This time Bette comes with a 12-piece band, a set built to resemble Coney Island, her infamous backing singers The Harlettes, a slew of hit songs and jokes likely to turn a beetroot red. Despite nearing 60, this broad has no intention of reining it in.

"I've seen Christina Aguilera," she told a US audience last year. "She was wearing pasties and garters. All these new girls are so trashy. And do I get a thank-you note? I opened the door to trash. I was trashy before [they] were born."

At an age when most performers are slowing down, it's curious that Bette, who long ago earned both her glory and respect in the industry, is still taking her show on the road. Yet talk to her and you instantaneously understand why. She's old school showbiz and nothing, certainly not age, is going to



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**In a long career, Bette's great voice, outrageous humour and perfect comic timing have won over Hollywood, the music industry and an adoring public.**

to curtail her love of performing. There's something else, too.

"I have had a much stronger sense of what my function is now as an entertainer. First of all, it's very revitalising. People say to me, 'I walked into your show with no energy and walked out high.' There is a transfer of energy and I love that. Also, after 9/11, I found some audiences are really under a cloud... So, to be honest, I feel like a healer in a funny way."

"Of course, I like to have a good time, to be raucous, and there is nothing more wonderful than to look out into the audience and see all the heads bobbing up and down in unison, laughing. I think laughter is good for the soul and I am really happy that I can do that."

For anyone unfamiliar with Bette Midler in concert, be prepared. She is big, brassy, soulful and, yes, blue, so to meet her in person turns out to be a contradiction: she is softly spoken, expansive, yet chooses her words carefully.

Bette adores being in show business, cares deeply about the environment, but her passion is her daughter. "Part of the reason I waited so long to go on tour again was Sophie," she says of 18-year-old Sophie Von Haselberg. "She left home to go to college and I left home to go on tour, and it made the nest seem less empty."

Unlike some showbiz mums, Bette always kept Sophie away from the press. Curiously, given her brazen public persona, Bette was also a traditional mother at home. She insisted on dinner as a family every night, then homework and no TV, unless it was old movies. Yet Bette admits it was not easy for Sophie having the Divine Miss M for a mother.

"You know, I think she has had a struggle with it, but she has been very private about it. She doesn't whine, she's stoic. She keeps her own counsel and doesn't complain. But, to be honest, at home, we never paid attention to 'Bette Midler'. Once the door was closed, it really was the day-to-day of life, what are we going to have for dinner?"

"And I think that's important because the banality of your life really is what life is, whereas the glamorous part of it, the exciting part, that's all an illusion. When you walk into my house, there are no gold records on the wall, or pictures of famous people, no movie posters, none of that... I always kept it separate because I wanted Sophie to have a sense of normalcy."

Of course, Bette says with a laugh, that didn't stop her daughter from asking questions about the other "Bette" anyway. "She always wanted to know what drugs I took and how much booze I had, [Bette

overdid it in the early '80s]. And I'd tell her I never did drugs or drank and that's like a joke in my family because I've always told her you must tell the truth, and then I lie like a rug!"

Born in New Jersey, Bette grew up in Hawaii, the third of four children of Fred, a house painter for the navy, and Ruth, a housewife. Named for the actress Bette Davis (her sisters were named after Judy Garland and Susan Hayward), Bette grew up poor and the only Jewish girl in her class. Encouraged by her mother, Bette started performing early. In first grade, her rendition of *Silent Night* won a prize and "after that you couldn't stop me from

singing". When she was 12, she saw the musical *Carousel* and her fate was sealed. "Everything else in my life receded once I discovered theatre," she says. She studied drama at the University of Hawaii and, after being cast as an extra in the film *Hawaii*, she quit her studies and moved to New York. She sang cabaret in clubs before landing in the chorus of *Fiddler on the Roof* on Broadway (graduating to the role of Tzeitel).

Bette's real break came when she accompanied a young piano player named Barry Manilow on stage at New York's Continental Baths, a gay men's club. In her act, she sang standards from the '40s, '50s and '60s, such as *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy* and *Do You Wanna Dance*, told raunchy jokes, and created such a buzz that record executives came flocking to see her. Signed to Atlantic Records, she released *The Divine Miss M* in 1972 and watched her career as a singer take off like the Concorde.

It was no surprise then that Hollywood came calling. Despite Bette being a buxom 157cm tall dynamo with flaming red hair, Tinseltown laid out the welcome mat. After her first film *The Rose* earned her an Oscar nomination and two Golden Globes, she was everybody's darling. "I love acting," she says. "The greatest moments are those where you feel you are being swept away. I guess it's like a drug."

Yet, when her next film *Jinxed* tanked at the box office, Bette was no longer flavour of the month. "It was like I was invisible. It was very upsetting. Finally, I decided that it was a conspiracy. So I gave up on it."

Once she stopped worrying, Bette forged her own path both as a producer ▶

with her company All Girl Productions, and as a dramatic actress and celluloid comedienne in the films *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*, *Ruthless People*, *Outrageous Fortune*, *Big Business*, *Beaches*, *Stella*, *Scenes from a Mall*, *First Wives Club* and, most recently, with Nicole Kidman, in *The Stepford Wives*.

"Nicole is adorable," Bette has said of working with her. "She's hilarious and a broad's broad, and loves her wine."

Today, she says, while Hollywood is notoriously hard on older women, Bette

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doesn't let it affect her any longer. "I'm not frustrated by Hollywood because I don't live there any more. I left and moved to New York because as soon as you are 40, it's over. I've had a phenomenal career past 40 and I feel very blessed, but the stress of getting those pictures up and running is simply not worth it."

"I closed All Girl Productions in 2001 because it was too hard. We had gotten in over our heads with *Bette* the TV show [her 2000 sitcom was cancelled] and I was unable to make it work."

What Bette has made work – and in show business this is really cause for a medal – is her marriage of 20 years to artist Martin Von Haselberg.

A one-time commodities broker turned performance artist, filmmaker and painter, the mid-mannered Martin and Bette were wed in Las Vegas on December 16, 1984, two months after they began dating. "He's the kindest man I've ever known," she said when she shocked everyone by settling down at the age of 39.

Daughter Sophie Frederica Alohilani (bright sky in Hawaiian) was born two years later. "We are so different, but I think our marriage was meant to be," Bette says today. "We are still revealing ourselves to each other. I think the fact there is always a surprise keeps it fresh."

"I have been the breadwinner for many years, but he basically raised my daughter and has done a brilliant job, so our roles were reversed, but that is how it is in some marriages."

When Sophie was young, Martin joined Bette on sets or on tour, but only on the weekends. Now they can travel together and he's planning to join her in Australia. "He's good for me to be around. I know it can be hard for him being 'Mr Midler', but he has a great sense of humour about the whole thing and that helps a lot."

ROBERT ERDMANN/CON INTERNATIONAL



Above: Bette with her daughter, Sophie, then 16, in New York in 2002, and (top) her husband of 20 years, Martin Von Haselberg, last year.

As for daughter Sophie, though she looks like her mother, Bette says she is really a combination of both her parents. "She loves art, music, dance, religions, she's interested in a lot and I don't press her," Bette says. "I think she will find her way when she's ready."

By all accounts, Sophie is a wonderful young woman – well-mannered, intelligent and kind. How does the daughter of a certified show business diva turn out so well, normal? "I got out of Hollywood," Bette says. "In New York, she's been exposed to so much – museums, shows, ballet – she studied ballet. She's had a rich life that she wouldn't have had in LA."

She is hoping Sophie can join her in Australia, too. Does her daughter ever tire of watching her perform? "No, she loves it. She always gets a kick out of it," Bette says. Which, of course, doubles for Bette, who says she has had the time of her life touring with *Kiss My Brass*. "On this tour, I am more relaxed than I used

to be. I've been doing it a long time. I know they're not going to take it away from me. On stage, I always try to do things I know the audience is waiting for, the scenery chewing songs and the heartbreakers, and things to satisfy my own sense of self."

Which, of course, extends to her striking sartorial choices – so lavish, so glittery you could, frankly, see them from space. On stage, Bette pours herself into, among other costumes, the mermaid skin of her alter-ego Delores Delago, a sailor suit and

the body of a devil. Though curvaceous, she is slim as a pin, which she admits she works at.

"On the road, I do the South Beach Diet, religiously. I also run three miles [4.8km] a day, otherwise your lungs don't work at all. They say, 'Oh to hell with you, not today!' If you run, they have no choice, they have to work."

"The last time I went on tour, I was 10 years younger and not so sleep deprived. Now I am menopausal, so I don't sleep and it's really been hard to find a way to get into shape, so hats off to me!" she cries out. "Good for me!"

Once her Australian tour is over, Bette plans to return to New York (where she runs the New York Restoration Project that cleans up public spaces), read many books each week and, most important of all, start thinking "pink" as she readies herself to star opposite Tim Allen and Cher as a door-to-door cosmetics saleswoman in the comedy *In the Pink*.

So, why does Bette keep on in show business? "It's such a blessing to be in it. I can't imagine a time I would ever want it to stop," she says.

"I've serenaded Johnny Carson [she was his last guest], I made *The Rose*, a movie I ached to make, my first record, oh, that was such a thrill, and now I'm on tour having the time of my life."

Is it the last tour, you ask nervously? She raises one eyebrow, then the other, then smiles a mile wide.

"I am not so stupid as to say this is my farewell tour, but I think it's the last of the really big shows. Honestly, when it's farewell, I will probably be in a wheelchair. Oh heck, I know I will be."

Bette Midler's *Kiss My Brass* tour visits Brisbane's Entertainment Centre on April 8, Sydney's SuperDome, April 13, and Melbourne's Rod Laver Arena, April 18.

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