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Belinda Carlisle: 'We've gone backwards – and the industry is still run by men'



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Each week, Benjamin Law asks public figures to discuss the subjects we're told to keep private by getting them to roll a die. The numbers they land on are the topics they're given. This week, he talks to Belinda Carlisle. The American musician, 66, was the lead singer of the Go-Go's and is best known for her international solo hits, including *Heaven Is a Place on Earth*, *Leave a Light On* and *Mad About You*. Her latest release is the EP *Kismet*.



Belinda Carlisle: “Being sexualised is not going to lead to longevity.” NICK SPANOS

POLITICS

How have the sexual politics of the music industry changed in your time? Well, when I started out with the Go-Go’s, we were really lucky that we didn’t have any of that BS. Men were really intimidated by us; we were like a five-headed monster. It wasn’t until I went solo that things were said that were really uncool.

What did people say? I was told by one really big manager, “You could be a really big star if you just showed your tits and sang songs [with lyrics] like, ‘Stick it in me ...’”

What? “Stick it in me”! Literally! I’m not kidding. He was disgusting. I just said, “I don’t do that, and I won’t do that.” That was just before *Heaven [Is a Place on Earth]* came out, so I was on the verge, on the cusp, and it could’ve gone either way.

Being on the cusp of success can be a very vulnerable moment in your career. I imagine some people would be like, “I’ll do whatever to get to the next level.” But it sounds like you were quite self-possessed. I’ve always had a good sense of who I am. And I pride myself on having a bit of dignity – which artists can lose sight of for fame. But about five years ago, the Go-Go’s were performing at the Billboard Awards in Las Vegas. We’ve seen it all. We’ve done it all. Nothing is shocking. But it was shocking to see – up close – how sexualised the music industry had become. Humping on dancers; humping on guitars; young

girls wearing nothing. I thought, “We’ve gone backwards ...” And the industry is still run by men.

MONEY

You didn’t grow up with much money, did you? My parents were very poor. My mom had me when she was 18. I grew up eating oatmeal for dinner. My father left my mom and three of us kids when I was five and we went from house to house until my mom could find her way.

Did you know you were poor? No, I never felt poor until my mom remarried. I went to a grammar school and had two dresses to wear for the whole school year. I remember a girl named Sandy said, “You only have *two* dresses?” I was really embarrassed. I thought, “One day, I’m going to have a whole roomful.”

You loved music from an early age. At what point did you think, “I can make money from this?” I never thought I could make money from it until the Go-Go’s formed. The only thing I ever wanted to do when I was growing up was to see the world. I thought being a travel agent would be a perfect way. Then I discovered [all-female rock band] the Runaways and thought, “*That’s* the perfect way to see the world. To be in a band.”

At what point did you think, “I’ve made it. I’m rich”? The *Heaven* single – and the album it came off [*Heaven on Earth*] – changed my life completely. That’s when I thought, “Wow!” I still had a little bit of imposter syndrome, but it was the first time I could afford my own house – a beautiful house. It was the first time I felt I’d actually made it and was successful.

What’s your definition of money well spent now? Travel.

What do other people spend money on that you can’t understand or abide? Planes and boats. They just eat up money. It’s like, why not rent one?

DEATH

How have you staved off career death? Part of it’s luck, but part of it is that I have a really good sense of myself. I might not have the best voice, but I have a distinctive voice, and that’s carried me through the years.

Any advice for younger women in the industry? First of all, being sexualised is not going to lead to longevity. You may get attention, but that’s not the same as respect and longevity. It’s just a cheap way to go and, unfortunately for women, it’s the obvious way to go. Don’t do the obvious. But it’s funny that we’re talking about death. I spend every day studying death, actually ...

Really? What do you mean? I listen to a lot of Hermetic teaching. I’m not a religious

person, but I don't believe that death is the end; energy just keeps on going. I start my day with a meditation practice. It takes about an hour and a half, but I do it every day. I'm more worried about people around me dying than dying myself.

What losses have hit you the hardest? I lost my mom about eight months ago.

Oh gee, Belinda – that's quite raw. I'm so sorry. Actually, I was relieved for her. She'd been sick a long time. But losing your mother is weird; there's a metaphysical connection. The other day, I went to call her and realised, "My mom isn't here." But, actually, my mom is here. Part of my practice is that when somebody passes on, I chant for 17 days to help the soul go on. I was chanting for my mom and my friend said, "Just ask for a sign." I thought of Hershey's Kisses, but there are no Hershey's Kisses in Mexico. Then I finish my meditation, go into my room to grab my purse, reach inside and pull out a Hershey's Kiss. Now it's on the side of my bed.

Finally, you've told us that heaven is a place on earth. But where, Belinda, WHERE? In Mexico City, where I live! I'm not kidding. I wake up every morning in such gratitude. I love it so much.

Belinda Carlisle will be touring Australia from September 18 to October 6.

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