

"We Can Change"

FROM THE GROUNDBREAKING GO-GO'S TO A GLOBALLY SUCCESSFUL SOLO CAREER, BELINDA CARLISLE HAS LIVED LIFE IN THE FAST LANE AND OVERCOME SUBSTANCE ABUSE WITH MEDITATION, MANTRAS AND YOGA. CLASSIC POP MEETS THE ICONIC CALIFORNIAN SINGER AS SHE MARKS THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF HER *HEAVEN ON EARTH* LP AND RELEASES HER FIRST NEW ALBUM IN A DECADE

STEVE HARNELL

"I may not look like it, but I have a punk rock heart. I always give Iggy Pop total credit for who I am. When I saw the cover of *Raw Power* – that completely changed my life."

So, for Belinda Carlisle it all starts with the eyelinered visage of James Newell Osterberg Jr glaring menacingly out from The Stooges 1973 landmark album. Perhaps we can see more synchronicity, too. Like the iconic frontman, Carlisle has struggled to conform to music biz stereotypes, battled various addictions and now emerged in later years as someone far more at peace with themselves.

When I meet the star in a swanky London hotel, she's simultaneously looking back at her storied career and to the future. A 30th anniversary reissue of Belinda's much-loved LP *Heaven on Earth* is being released the same day as her first new solo record in a decade, *Wilder Shores*, a chant album linked to her 20-year practice of Kundalini yoga.

But first, let's hit the rewind button. Everything for Carlisle begins with punk, and in the nascent gritty Los Angeles scene to be exact. Belinda was a major player in the compact yet bijou LA punk landscape of the late-70s. After running away from home in her teens and dabbling in drugs, she found a focus in the burgeoning punk scene at clubs like the Whisky A Go Go and The Masque. Casting herself as Dottie Danger, she flirted with playing drums in The Germs

alongside Pat Smear (ex-Nirvana and now plying his trade in the Foo Fighters) but left the band due to ill health without making a significant contribution. Is there an alternative universe where Carlisle is still playing spit and sawdust club gigs in a punk outfit?

"Oh my God, that's my core. I'm contrary by nature," she explains. "That's just who I am. It's funny that when I was in the LA punk scene we used to see the white Sikhs with their turbans and think that was totally punk rock – and that's kinda where I've now ended up."

TEENAGE KICKS

Despite seeming like a typical teenage act of rebellion, Belinda was actually drawn into the scene by the music rather than the parent-baiting lifestyle.

"When I was in high school we'd go to the record store on the Boulevard and wait for the twice-monthly *NME* and *Melody Maker* to see pictures of the Sex Pistols and the whole scene in London. That record store changed my life. I grew up with Californian radio and then it really changed – it started playing The Doobie Brothers, Seals and Crofts and the Eagles – I love them now but didn't have an appreciation for them then – it was a drag. Then Roxy Music arrived – I saw pretty much everyone who came through LA in those days when I was in my late teens.

"The LA punk scene was just 50 kids or so. When The Police – who were punk back then – came to town

Belinda Carlisle has two reasons to celebrate – the 30th anniversary of *Heaven on Earth* plus her first new album for 10 years, *Wilder Shores*





An early incarnation of The Go-Go's. From left: Charlotte Caffey, Margot Olavarria, Belinda Carlisle, Jane Wiedlin and Elissa Bello

POP_UP The Go-Go's sold more than seven million records in their career. Though their 2016 performances were billed as a farewell tour, they still haven't officially called time on the band



there was hardly anybody there. Nobody knew about that kind of music at all. It grew really quickly with places like The Masque and other little clubs. Then the Whisky started booking punk bands.

"That was at the time when Van Halen was playing the Whisky. I remember Eddie Van Halen and his brother Alex crashing punk shows and jumping on stage yelling: 'Fuck you! You're all a bunch of losers!' and we were shouting 'Fuck you!' back at them. They were saying our music was shit etc..."

"The LA punk scene was more about art – it was a bit lighter than in New York. New York is a tough place, it certainly was in the late-70s. There was a certain degree of anger there but it wasn't of a political kind. We were trying to be English with this faux anger.

"There was nothing to be angry about in California in the late-70s except if you came from a dysfunctional family."

Ahh, that word 'dysfunctional'. Carlisle's family life was indeed far from idyllic and her teenage decision to leave home left her searching for a new direction. After that brief dalliance with The Germs, she was to find her calling by forming a band with Jane Wiedlin on guitar, bassist Margot Olavarria and Elissa Bello behind the drum kit.

The Misfits, soon became The Go-Go's and the story of the most influential girl band of all time was off and running.

GOING TO A GO-GO

Support for the band as a live act was instantaneous but securing a record deal was far trickier; Belinda experiencing for the first time an ingrained sexism and conservatism in the US record industry that was hard to shake off.

"We had no idea what to do, how to even plug our guitars into amps. We started from nothing," Carlisle adds with a shrug. "We rehearsed at The Masque and shared a rehearsal room with The Motels. All the bands would give us lessons: 'Oh those poor pathetic little Go-Go's'. We rehearsed every evening after work. The first show we did, we played three songs – the first song twice. We never had any problem right from the beginning. There was always an audience, I guess because we were a curiosity, we had a big following. Nobody would sign us although you couldn't get a ticket to a Go-Go's show.

"Early on, we toured in the UK with Madness and The Specials. Then we went back to the States all of a sudden because Madness insisted on Stiff Records releasing *We Got The Beat*. The label didn't want to – they hated The Go-Go's. They only did it because Madness kinda forced them to. Then it became an import dance hit and that changed everything. And still nobody would sign us – they'd say there's been no track record of an all-female band that has been successful. We love you, but sorry..."

"Those first UK shows were scary. It was really violent at times. We had no money and were eating leftovers from other bands and lived on £3 a day. If we wanted to get high we'd drink cough syrup as we couldn't afford beer. Then we'd go on stage and open for these bands in front of a bunch of scary skinheads gobbing on us. Of course, being the frontperson I was covered in all this gob. We paid our dues! We worked really hard.

"There was lots of racial tension, lots of fight, lots of blood. I remember this really violent gig in Coventry. Really bad. The racial thing over here [in the UK] was scary. Back home, the tension came from the establishment not understanding what the kids were doing."

THE **Secret Weapon**



An under-the-radar songwriter of the highest order, Rick Nowels has been the man who has supplied pop nous to some of the world's most

acclaimed stars. After producing *Heaven on Earth* and co-writing two of its biggest songs (the title track and *Circle in the Sand*), Nowels went on to man the mixing desk on both the *Runaway Horses* and *Live Your Life Be Free* albums as well as contributing writing credits.

He's since gone on to a hugely successful career working with Madonna, Adele, CeeLo Green, Brandon Flowers, Tupac Shakur and Rod Stewart. Nowels won the 2004 Ivor Novello Award for International Hit of the Year after co-writing Dido's *White Flag*. He's also had a hand in The New Radicals' earworm *You Get What You Give* and Lana Del Ray's *Lust For Life*. Nowels co-wrote Geri Halliwell's *Scream If You Wanna Go Faster*, too, but nobody's perfect, are they?

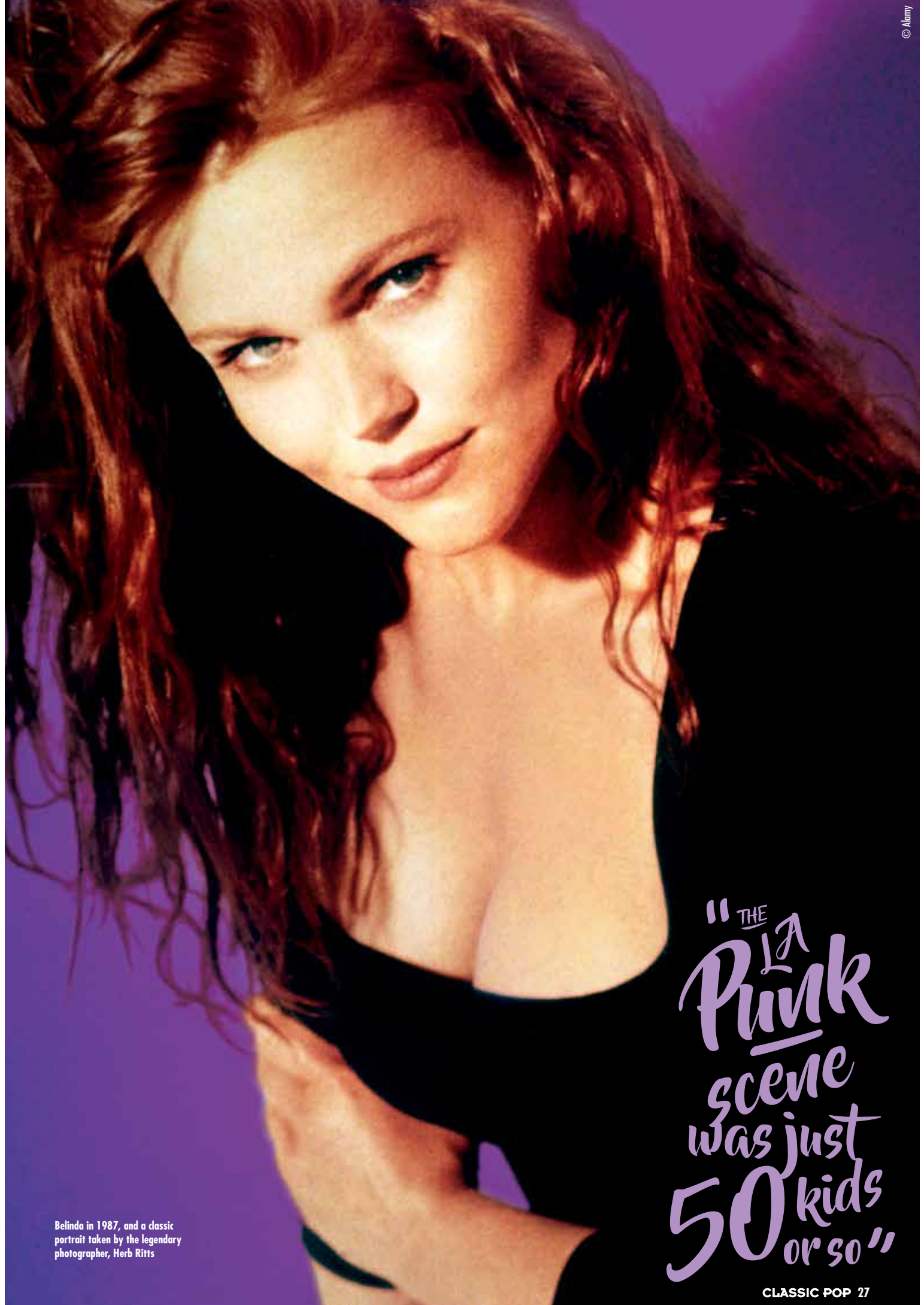
MILES AHEAD

Enter Miles Copeland (father to tubthumping Police member Stewart). Copeland's IRS Records brought to the world the likes of R.E.M, The Bangles, Berlin, The Cramps, The Dead Kennedys, his son's band (naturally) and The Go-Go's.

"Miles saw the potential. We had all these dreams of being on CBS or EMI but no, it was on IRS. It actually turned out to be a great thing. They weren't expecting us to sell so many records.

"We had to settle an agreement for our royalties as they couldn't handle it, it was such an explosion. It was all good in the end but there was a lawsuit.

"It was kind of a blur. We didn't have any time off. We didn't know we could say no to things and were on the road for two-and-a-half years



Belinda in 1987, and a classic portrait taken by the legendary photographer, Herb Ritts

"^{THE} ^{LA} **Punk** scene was just 50 kids or so"

"I was asking 'Am I really worthy of this?'"

POP_UP A young Carlisle rented an apartment off the Sunset Strip soon dubbed 'Disgraceland' and described as 'like Animal House without John Belushi... a floor filled with petticoats, spike heels, fishnets, underwear, beer cans. It looked like a landfill.'



straight. We were here for like three months in the UK on that original tour. Then we went back to New York to record *Beauty and the Beat*."

AND THE BEAT GOES ON

One of the most successful debut albums of all time, *Beauty and the Beat* topped the US charts for six weeks in 1981, shifting an impressive two million copies in the process. Classic hits came thick and fast including *We Got The Beat* and a co-write with Terry Hall on *Our Lips Are Sealed*. The darkness begins to descend as chaos ensues. The Go-Go's soon racked up a dubious reputation as out-of-control party animals, more than holding their own against male contemporaries on the drink and drugs front. Carlisle was an unapologetic ringleader.

Despite inter-band squabbling and substance abuse taking its toll, a fractious follow-up *Vacation* arrived a year later but by 1984's *Talk Show* album, the wheels had well and truly come off. "The band started falling apart after Jane decided to leave. She was one of the founding members and main songwriters. There was no Go-Go's without Jane," adds Carlisle. "There were lots of drugs around which is well documented. Lots of publishing issues and splits within the band, too. We tried to replace Jane but it didn't work so we split up."

Part of the original acrimony in the band was the amount of attention Carlisle received as frontperson. After a show at the Rock in Rio festival in 1985, Carlisle and guitarist Charlotte Caffey decided to call time on the band. Naturally, the world was waiting for Belinda to go



© Sheila Rock

it alone. Just over a year later, the stylists were wheeled in and a freshly-minted pop-friendly solo artist was born.

"It was very intimidating going solo. I had to really find my feet. It took a long time, now it's like riding a bike, I can switch gears and just do it – it's a blast. I was really insecure about being out there as the complete focus. I couldn't bounce things off of other people on stage."

Carlisle's opening gambit as a solo artist was her 1986 debut *Belinda*. The record, buoyed by the Top Three success of *Mad About You* featured a collaboration with Fleetwood Mac's Lindsey Buckingham on *Since You've Gone* and a continued relationship with Charlotte Caffey. "She's an amazing songwriter and was a great support to me when the band broke up. We were always close friends and also bonded in early sobriety. I was trying to get sober and so was she.

"There were a lot of different reasons why it made sense to work together. We get each other. We were both born and raised in California so we have that same sensibility. We have the same musical tastes and our relationship is really intuitive. We've known each other for 40 years now."

If *Belinda* was a manageable taste of solo success

THE **Albums**



A STELLAR BACK CATALOGUE THAT TAKES IN EIGHT STUDIO LPS OF POP ROCK, FEELGOOD 90S ANTHEMS, FRENCH LANGUAGE LOVE SONGS AND AN EXPERIMENT IN MANTRA-LED MUSIC



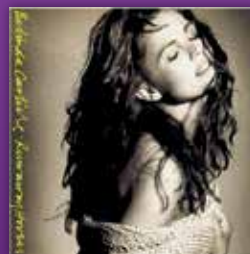
BELINDA
1986

The opening gambit. Hit single *Mad About You* proved to the singer that there was life after the demise of The Go-Go's. Includes a cover of Split Enz' *Stuff and Nonsense* from their 1979 album *Frenzy*. Carlisle's long-standing collaboration with former bandmate Charlotte Caffey started here on five tracks including *I Feel The Magic*.



HEAVEN ON EARTH
1987

Carlisle goes supernova. An 80s behemoth, the near title track *Heaven is a Place on Earth* becomes her signature song. Also includes the classics *Circle in the Sand*, *I Get Weak* and *World Without You*. A fine take on Cream's *I Feel Free* shows Belinda hasn't lost touch with her rocky roots.



RUNAWAY HORSES
1989

Another consistently fine collection. Six singles were culled from Belinda's third album and you can instantly see why. *Vision of You*, the title track, *Leave A Light On* and *La Luna* have 'hit' written all over them. And in *Summer Rain*, Carlisle tweaked the pop rock formula for one of her most intriguing arrangements. A runaway success.

then it was its follow-up, 1987's *Heaven on Earth* that fired Carlisle into the pop stratosphere where she began going toe-to-toe with the likes of Madonna and Whitney Houston as one of the 80s biggest female solo stars. The stardom was magnified, but the self-doubt remained. Belinda was still struggling with addictions and added body image issues to her other demons.

"It was really complex but I was asking 'Am I really worthy of this?'. I felt like an imposter for years particularly on my first few solo albums," Carlisle explains. "I remember doing a show in Manchester on the Heaven on Earth Tour and looking out the window of the arena and thinking 'why the fuck are they here to see me?'. I still have the potential to do that to myself but not as much as I used to. I'll still do a show and focus on the one person that isn't having a good time, though. In the past 15 years I've finally felt, 'yep, this is what I'm meant to be doing!'"

A CHANGE IS GONNA COME

Carlisle's imperial pop phase saw continued success with 1989's *Runaway Horses* and fourth solo album *Live Your Life Be Free* two years later. But struggling to live up to the California beach babe stereotype imposed on her by the record industry and media, the pop game was beginning to lose its lustre for Carlisle.

"Right after *A Woman and a Man* (her album from 1996), I was dropped from my record company. It was on my 40th birthday! It was the best thing that could have happened to me, though. I'd been on that treadmill since I was 18 years old. I was in the throes of addiction, too. That last album is terrible – I can't even listen to it. I think there's a couple of decent songs but for the most part it's not very good. I was going through a lot of personal stuff so I had to sort that out first.

"My family and I moved to France in 1994. My son was born on the day of the LA Riots in 1992 and that planted a seed. My idea of having a successful life has never been driving a Mercedes or living in a big house – I have zero desire for that. I think my husband is on the same track. It's more about freedom than anything else. My husband works at [Hollywood talent agency] William Morris and we went to the 40th anniversary of the top guy in the company at some country club and I

thought to myself 'Is this where it's all going to end?' – that's really depressing. We were reading a lot of Peter Mayle books [The Brit author behind *A Year in Provence*] and watching *To Catch A Thief* over and over again – so we thought South of France! We gave it six months and ended up staying for 22 years.

FULL OF EASTERN PROMISE

Belinda now calls Bangkok home. "It's like Disneyland meets the Wild West! Really mental," she says. "It's a weird city because it's a throbbing metropolis but also Buddhist and really chilled out. There's none of the aggression and aggravation or that city 'anger' thing. We have the benefit of both worlds. I love Asia. It's exciting and I love the energy there."

Ditching the pop world – at least in the studio, Carlisle still plays her back catalogue of hits for fans at live shows around the world – meant a change in musical direction. After 11 years away came *Voilà*, a French language album which saw her reinterpret classic songs from her adopted country.

After living in the South of France for more than 20 years, Belinda and her family now call Thailand their home



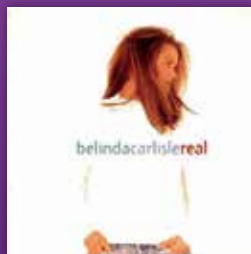
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LIVE YOUR LIFE BE FREE

1991

The opening title track was a perfect feel-good anthem and *Do You Feel Like I Feel* packs a similar punch. And yes, you heard it right, that is a sample of John Lennon on the count-in of *You Came Out of Nowhere*. *Little Black Book* was co-written by Shakespears Sister's Marcella Detroit.



REAL

1993

A makeup-free Belinda on the cover and an edgier new direction within. The slick production was jettisoned for something more in thrall to her Go-Go's sound. There's even a burundi drummer intro for *Big Scary Animal*. Adam Ant, eat your heart out. Also features a cover of The Graces' *Lay Down Your Arms*.



A WOMAN AND A MAN

1996

A mixed bag but despite Carlisle's own misgivings on how this stands up in her back catalogue, highlights include the opening ballad *In Too Deep*, the riffy *Always Breaking My Heart* and the Brian Wilson collaboration *California* – "I want to walk away LA, from the sharks and the Chardonnay..."



VOILÀ

2007

Reflecting Belinda's 20 years spent living in France, she jettisons pop for a covers album of French classics. Unlocking her inner chanteuse, the singer slinks through songs by Serge Gainsbourg, Edith Piaf, Françoise Hardy and Jacques Brel. A turning point in Carlisle's back catalogue and traditional pop star image.



WILDER SHORES

2017

Three years in the making, Carlisle sets traditional chants linked to her practice of Kundalini yoga within a pop framework. The new album also includes a reworked version of *Heaven is a Place on Earth*. Another step away from trad pop, this very personal project from the singer will no doubt intrigue her long-term fans.

Belinda's new album
Wilder Shores is
informed by her
practice of Kundalini
yoga and chanting

"I'm a
pop
singer,
that's
all I know"

"It's 20 years since my last traditional pop album. *Voilà* made sense as I was living in France at the time and I always felt there was a little bit of a chanteuse lurking within me. Lyrically, that was like a character I was playing.

"The last 20 years of my life – and especially the last 15 – has seen me chanting and getting into a whole other genre of music. Devotional music is pretty much all I listen to now plus Maria Callas, Fleetwood Mac and some Depeche Mode. I still love them."

CHANTS IN A MILLION

Now comes *Wilder Shores*. Carlisle's most experimental work to date features seven mantras deftly moulded into traditional Western pop settings. "I tried doing this album five years ago and there was just no way it was going to work. I just wasn't ready for it because it's not just singing, it's a whole other thing. In some ways, it was even more complicated than *Voilà*. I went through Kundalini teacher training twice and learned about the effects of mantra. Then I had to find the chants that were most effective for me – it's been a three-year process.

"The type of yoga and chanting that I do is pretty complicated because there are thousands of mantras and hand and arm positions that you use in combination with the mantras and breathing techniques. It's a proven science. In pronouncing

the words correctly you activate your glandular system by hitting the meridian points on the top of your mouth.

"I could never be a traditional devotional music singer, I'm a pop singer, that's all I know. The way the album was going to work for me was to take the repetitive mantras and put them into a pop song format where there's a verse, a bridge, a chorus and sometimes a middle eight.

"I never learned to play a musical instrument and I should have. I could have written a lot of songs. I just stopped at the F chord. That was the end of me! Over the years, my contributions have been mostly lyrics – on *Wilder Shores*, though, it's all melodies.

"The mantras have a lot of power behind them and have the ability to change the atmosphere energetically – that's been proven. What I'm hoping – especially in this crazy world – is to bring more people to the practice. This is a pop album, though. I hope it tweaks peoples' curiosity. Some fans will like it, others have already said 'I hope this album will be in English'. This record is not for everybody and isn't meant to be."

MEDITATIONS ON TRUMP

Carlisle may not have lived in the States for more than two decades, but she remains a passionate and outspoken political advocate for the country. The rise of Donald Trump has been a particular cause for concern. "Having a gay son has made me a lot more socially and politically active. I don't like where the US is going. I do

Belinda's Little Black Book

AN ARRAY OF ROCK SUPERSTARS HAVE WORKED WITH CARLISLE OVER THE YEARS. WE TAKE A LOOK INSIDE HER COVETED ADDRESS BOOK OF COLLABORATORS

BRYAN ADAMS

The Canadian singer-songwriter (and actually rather good celebrity snapper) supplied backing vocals on 1989's *Whatever It Takes*.

LINDSEY BUCKINGHAM

The Fleetwood Mac multi-instrumentalist weighed in with a co-write of *Since You've Gone* from her 1986 solo debut *Belinda*.

PER GESSLE

The Roxette hit-maker wrote two tracks for *A Man and a Woman*, the rocking single *Always Breaking My Heart and Love Doesn't Live Here*.

TERRY HALL

The Specials laughter merchant helped pen key Go-Go's single *Our Lips Are Sealed* in 1981 then went on to have a hit with his own version as Fun Boy Three two years later. "That was a love letter between one of the girls in The Go-Go's and Terry. It went back and forth," Carlisle explains. "They both put it to music, but different music. So Fun Boy Three did it and The Go-Go's did it, two different songs with the same lyrics. Terry Hall is amazing."

GEORGE HARRISON

A rare collaboration by the Quiet One from the Fab Four. George played 12-string guitar, provided trademark slide solos as well as rare bass parts on tracks for *Runaway Horses*. "That was done remote. He always was my favourite Beatle since I was eight," says Belinda. "He didn't work with that many people outside of The Beatles. Apparently, he was a fan of girl groups so it made sense to him as I have that kind of voice."

SUSANNA HOFFS

Fellow LA girl group alumni, The Bangles' frontwoman co-wrote *I Need A Disguise* for the *Belinda* LP.

BRIAN WILSON

Carlisle calls working with the Beach Boy legend "the most unbelievable experience in my studio career". Belinda has sung backing vocals on Wilson's studio albums and the songwriting genius returned the compliment when he appeared on LP track *California* from *A Woman and a Man*. "When he came in to the studio he was, you know, kinda odd. He was trying to explain what he was going to do, but couldn't do it. We were worried that we'd have to tell him it just wasn't working. Then the producer, to his credit, just let Brian go into the vocal booth and do his thing. It was like him conducting a symphony inbetween belches and whatever. It was the wildest thing I've ever seen. It was emotionally exhausting but in a good way. We couldn't work after that. I mean what do you do afterwards?"

Bangles frontwoman Susanna Hoffs helped Belinda to get her solo career off and running



© Getty Images

think that *Wilder Shores* can help, I know that sounds corny, but I really think it can.

"When you sit back and take everything for granted, it's only when some monster gets into office that you realise how lucky you are and how you've got to fight to keep it. If it's made people more socially and politically aware then that's a really positive thing.

"I got back into Transcendental Meditation again after Trump won the election. I thought 'I need all the help I can get!' With the yoga and chanting it changes your perspective on things, it changes your state of mind, it puts you in the rhythm of everything around you."

As well as calming political anger, Carlisle's lifestyle changes have led her to turn her back on drink and drug addiction. The singer has been sober since the mid-Noughties. "I don't even think about it now. When I was done, I was done. I can be around people drinking or smoking pot, but I can't be around those doing coke. That makes me really uncomfortable. I don't miss it. It's so far removed from me now.

"I was heavy into the 12-Step programme, that got me sober but the yoga and chanting takes me to a whole new level. If you're always pushing against the tide, it just keeps coming back at you." ■

● **The 30th Anniversary edition of *Heaven on Earth* and *Wilder Shores* are released on 29 September on Demon Records and Edsel respectively**



POP UP Kundalini yoga is influenced by Shaktism and Tantra schools of Hinduism. It derives its name through a focus on awakening kundalini energy via meditation, pranayama (breath control), chanting mantra and yoga asana (posture)