

Maybe Baby

Famous for being the fluffy one, the cute one, the pink and pretty and bubbly one, Emma Bunton was the youngest and many believe most talented of the Spice Girls. Now, at 27 and with a successful solo career, the Artist Formerly Known as Baby is all grown-up... and, as she tells Sarah Drew Jones, ready to shock

Interviewing Emma Bunton is a strange experience, albeit a pleasant one. It's downright odd to come face to face with someone who not only was a multi-millionaire by the time she turned 21, but had held hands with Nelson Mandela, kissed Prince Charles, toured the world several times over and, perhaps most importantly, worn the highest platform trainers known to woman.

You'd be forgiven for thinking that all of this could turn a girl's head (not to mention her ankle – she famously fell off those platforms and made the front pages of every tabloid this side of China).

But Emma Bunton has to be one of the nicest, friendliest, altogether sanest celebrities I've ever met. And I'm not alone in thinking that, as Emma says, "Actually people do come up to me quite a lot in the street, which is nice and it's great that I'm seen as approachable."

What is it that keeps her so grounded? After all, it must be difficult to lead a normal life when your face is so well known that only your nickname is needed to identify you. It was only a few years ago that you couldn't buy a soft drink, a mobile phone, pencil or even a packet of crisps without being assaulted by the Spice faces grinning out at you.

"Ah, the fame thing!", she says with a sigh. "Most of it goes over my head to be honest, and my friends' heads, which I totally love. Even my brother will keep me grounded and say things like, 'Oh shut up, you silly girl' and that kind of thing."

These days, of course, Emma's moved on from the heady heyday of the most famous girl band of all time. Her solo career seems miraculously to have avoided many of the pitfalls and obstacles of her fellow Spices.

While Victoria Beckham braves the criticism of the world's media in the search of that elusive solo hit, Mel B attempts to kick start her acting career in Hollywood, Mel C suffers disappointing sales of her latest album and Geri lurches from one publicity stunt to another, Emma has quietly gone about building a solid and credible singing career of her own.

Typically, she's humble about her success. "I've been really lucky because my first album was all about me growing, trying new and different things. I mean, What Took You So Long [her first purely solo single] was a huge number one, and my others were top ten, but it was all me learning and trying things and seeing what happened. But now, I know where I'm at."



interview

She does indeed. Bunton's new single, *Maybe*, released next week, is by far her strongest to date and heralds an all-new confident Emma. It's also one of those almost infuriatingly catchy songs that lodges itself in your mind after only the first hearing.

Emma says she worked hard to get the single just right. "I've grown so much, and I've learnt a lot, but I'm so proud of this work. I've been through the stage where I just got up there and had a ball and didn't really know what I was doing, but had a laugh!"

"So, now, I love coming up with melodies, I love writing lyrics, I do feel very passionate now when I hear all my tracks. Because they're my songs and I do sing every line and now I feel very much like I'm giving it my all... and having fun with it as well."

Maybe is Emma's second single under the wing of music guru Simon Fuller – her first, *Free Me*, in June this year, reached the top five.

Fuller, once the Spice Girls' manager unceremoniously sacked by the five in 1997, made a reappearance in her career in 2002, after Emma parted company with record company Virgin.

Now signed to Universal, Emma has undergone something of a reinvention over the past year. Having shed over a stone (through sensible eating and three punishing workouts a week in the gym), Emma is enjoying renewed success in the charts because, as she says, this time she's the one in control.

"At first, with producers, I found it quite difficult to get across what I wanted – you know, we've got to bring this back and get a live sound – and then once a couple of producers I worked with got it, it worked really well."

Both her singles this year have been taken from Emma's forthcoming album, which will be released early in the New Year. It's the result of a laborious learning curve, during which the former stage school pupil taught herself the rigours of creating music that was 100% her own.

"Sometimes I get angry with myself because I don't play any instruments so I have to sing my melodies to someone, but my producers got it straight away: lots of strings and strong melodies. It was nice to work with different producers, and we worked for days, just coming up with different ideas."

"It's important to work with the right people, with people who get me, absolutely. And I think you know that in the first day. There were a few producers we tried and it just wasn't working, but it came together quite nicely."

The video for *Maybe* is a high-spirited and infectious homage to the classic Bob Fosse musicals of the 50s and 60s, and is slick and stylised, with 20 suited and booted dancers lending it a distinct Austin Powers feel.

Emma laughs, "Shooting the video was ridiculous, because it was in a warehouse in London – which was funny in itself because we shot my last one in Brazil! – and it was in the height of the heatwave this summer. My dancers were great though, because they all usually work in musicals, so they're all trained and I've never seen anyone work so hard in all my life."

"We were dripping. I actually had hairpieces in that day and because it was so hot they kept falling out. But it was brilliant, the director was great and we got exactly the kind of video that I wanted."

All those Spice Girl dance routines came in handy, too. "It was really nerve-wracking. I thought I might end up looking like a twit with all those professional dancers! But it was nice to get back into it, actually, because I trained when I was younger and to be honest I think if my cards hadn't fallen right into place, that's something I would have liked to have done – musicals and stage stuff. It was really fantastic to do."

A big fan of all things 60s, Emma says the idea for the striking video "came from the album, actually. It

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has a real, 60s, live feel, just taking everything back a bit – even in melodies and lyrics I wanted to get a laidback, Burt Bacharach, Stevie Wonder feel.”

This album is the first that Emma has been totally involved with, from start to finish. She seems almost surprised at how much she enjoyed the process, and it seems that her one-fifth, backing-and-occasional-lead role in the Spices may have masked a genuine, and instinctive, songwriting talent.

“When I’m writing songs, it’s kind of a feeling – you know, I have days where it’s just not happening and you might as well go home – sometimes I’ll just have a lyric and it starts from there, building a track. Sometimes we record a song live, which I absolutely love, just jamming, that’s the best part.

“Other times you can think it’s not working, but we’ll go with it anyway because songs can turn around and end up fantastic, but you do get a feeling halfway through when everything’s absolutely right.”

Her own musical tastes are wide ranging, and she admits to being “a big radio fan, totally! At the moment, I love Heart FM, I just love the up-to-date stuff, then it’s old stuff, then a disco classic – and that’s me really. The album that’s never off my stereo at the moment though is Norah Jones. People miss it but there’s lots of sexy jazz stuff alongside the dreamy songs too, and you just think ‘wow!’ I just bought the best of George Benson and Luther Vandross, too. They’re the ones I’m listening to at the moment.”

Going back to the soul-and-strings feel of her own music, Emma claims, “The main thing that really influenced me is Motown, purely because it was real, there was no production stuff all over it, it was natural. People like Dusty Springfield, they were really feeling it, and I love that.”

But with the likes of Springfield, Phil Spector and Dionne Warwick as her idols, what on earth does this girlband pioneer feel about the proliferation of ‘Spice-alikes’ today?

“I love Girls Aloud and Atomic Kitten. I do like their stuff, but girl bands today have to work so hard and they expect to get a top-five single, they expect to do well and all that, whereas we just got on with it and had fun. It’s very different now.

“People work very differently these days, too. When I was with the girls, we actually had a lot of fun. We always say that we were in the middle of the storm and everyone who was going mad was outside of it. And it was mad! It was all, ‘we’re off to MTV, we’re off to Top of the Pops’ but we always enjoyed it.

“We always wore what we wanted to wear, for example, just going on and making fools of ourselves sometimes, but having a laugh. With some of the bands now, I think that that’s gone a bit.”

What an incredible collection of memories the Spices must have. But surely it wasn’t all Brit Awards, Royal Command Performances and private jets?

“Oh, some days I’m in fits of laughter thinking back to those days!” she says. “Just the other day I watched Spice Girls on Tour [in America, 1998] and it was just incredible how much we laughed, just at silly things. Like Mel B would fall on the floor and pretend to look up my skirt!”

“It was all very off-the-cuff and

hilarious, and we’d come off stage and have pizza – people didn’t see us afterwards, when we’d get on the bus with the dancers, travel eight hours to the next place and get off in our pyjamas and hop into McDonalds. We had realness there and there was always a fun part to it all.”

Does she miss those days? “Well, sometimes, but I do have keepsakes... but Mel B’s got all the pictures so I steal them off her! We had a book, Mel B’s got it, and every time we arrived somewhere we’d write in it, just silly things like ‘Oh my god, where are we now, we’re just so knackered! What IS this place?!’”

Amid the relentless schedule and insanity of constant touring, Emma says there was still time to touch base and see family, however fleeting.

“It was mad with the Spice Girls, but even then we had time to be normal. I’d go home and mum would do my washing and I’d watch telly with my brother. But now I’m 27, and I’ve got great friends and family around me, so obviously I feel in a better place now.”

But does ‘better place’ mean she wasn’t sad to say goodbye to the intense glare of the media spotlight? Emma remains great friends with Victoria Beckham and husband David, but says she isn’t even a tiny bit envious of their huge global fame.

“The kind of fame that Victoria and David have is hard work, but when I speak to Victoria she’s just like ‘the kids are great and they’re getting so big, and we’re off out for dinner’ and you don’t see the stuff that you get in the press.

“The Victoria and David I know are husband and wife, a mum and dad, but I must admit I don’t know if I’d want that level of fame. It’s so difficult, you know, it’s every time they go out, they’re looked at and everything, it’s very, very difficult for them.”

Emma herself is no stranger to the tabloids, of course. A high profile relationship with Damage singer Jade Jones finally ended last year after much-publicised to-ing and fro-ing.

She’s now single (“and very happy with that”). Then, earlier this year, her friendship with US singing sensation and Britney-ex Justin Timberlake came under the microscope, after she was spotted in several London clubs with him. (“But we’re just friends! Have been for years!” she insists now).

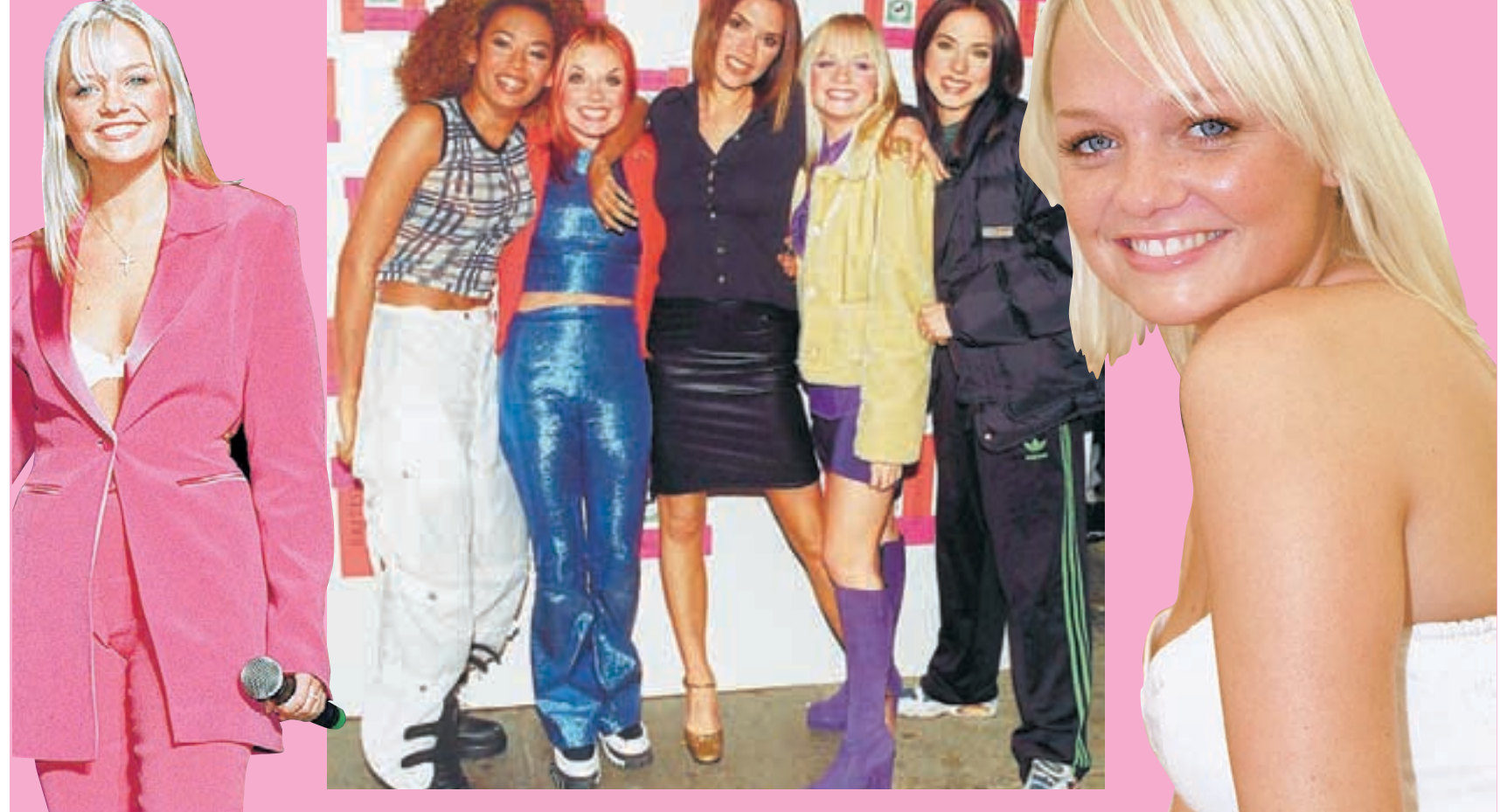
How does she cope with the press intrusion into her life? “Well, you know, if there’s a bad picture of me in the paper, it can bring you down to earth, but I try to remember that people aren’t just looking at a picture of me today. There are much more interesting things to look at.

“Anyone else on holiday can pick out the bad pictures of themselves in their bikinis, but I can’t. I might have a day in the house, and be a bit down, but you have to bounce back. My friends wouldn’t let me anyway – they always say, for God’s sake Emma, come on, we’re going out!”

Like many female celebrities, Emma’s had her fair share of criticism in the press for her looks, and is well aware that one unflattering paparazzi picture can spark a national debate on her image.



BABY FACES: Emma Bunton's spicy styles to date



Spices.

“The buzz you get from a huge crowd is incredible, but it’s also very surreal. Sometimes it feels a little like it’s someone else, not actually me.

“I remember when the Spice Girls’d be waiting to go on stage and the doors would open and I’d get a tingle that started at my toes and ran all the way up my body. There’s nothing like that feeling at all.”

Despite the failure of many British acts to break America recently (Robbie Williams is still licking his wounds, apparently), Emma’s set her sights on the States.

“The States is absolutely on my agenda. It’s just when. I was told recently that of all the Spice Girls, my doll was the biggest selling in America!”

“My face is known in the States which is half the battle, and the other thing is that they’re so positive and loyal, which is lovely. It’s hard for British artists to go over there. You have to have something different to what they’ve already got, or they’ll just be loyal to their own stars. Coldplay have done really well, but they’re very different to what else there is in the States.”

It’s getting the public to consign Baby Spice to the past and accept Emma Bunton, solo artist, that is Emma’s continuing battle.

“People have always straightaway categorised me as Baby. Even when we all went solo, people were shocked, but it was just that we were all growing – if I asked anyone, would you like to stay in one place, one position, all your life, of course they wouldn’t want to. Everyone needs to grow up.”

Does that mean that, contrary to

rumours, there will be no Spice reunion?

“We haven’t spoken about a reunion at all,” Emma claims. “I always talk to the girls, and we say ‘Oh, wouldn’t it be great to do this, or funny to do that,’ but we’re all doing our own thing, and I don’t know when, or if, that time would come when we’re not all doing stuff at different times. But I think generally all of us would go, ‘That’d be great in a few years’ time,’ but at the moment, no.”

This ambitious woman, who says she relaxes by “driving around London!”, is now focusing all her energy on the new single and album.

With conviction, she says, “I want the album to be big. I want it to do well because I’ve worked so hard, too. But I think it will do well – everyone I play it to seems to like it.”

“Cathy Dennis [accomplished songwriter who’s had hits with Kylie and Liberty X] is a good friend and she loves the single, so I think we’re on the right track. I think it will shock a lot of people.”

Finally, Emma has to leave to dash to MTV. Idly chatting about Wales, I discover she’s a huge fan of the Principality’s favourite designer, Julien Macdonald, and is off to his London Fashion Week show the following day.

“I’m so excited! He’s a friend and is just so sweet. I don’t know how on earth he gets things done because he is so nice. He’s like, ‘Would you mind just putting this over there for me?’. He doesn’t shout or swear, it’s so funny. I don’t know what to wear – something a bit naughty maybe. That’d be fun...”

Hmm, fun, nice, sweet, likes to shock, always gets things done... it’s no wonder Emma and our Julien are firm friends...

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