

Waiting To Exhale

Her vocal range and songwriting talent made her a star. Her troubled love life, weight issues, and public breakdown made her a tabloid target. But Mariah Carey is still here—and she’s not finished yet. By Brooke Hauser

In the house of Mariah Carey, dreams really do come true. The fantasy begins as soon as you step into her TriBeCa triplex and a housekeeper brings a bottle of Fiji water and a small linen napkin with the word “Poetic” embroidered on it in silver thread.

After refreshing yourself in the sitting room, where Marilyn Monroe’s white piano lives, you are escorted up the stairs—past the Creamsicle-colored walls and glass sconces—to the rooftop lounge, where your hostess makes her grand entrance in a flurry of pink, trailing puffs of perfume and a hyper Jack Russell terrier named J. J.

Looking back, you don’t know how or when the Mariahfication occurred. Most likely, it was before she sprayed you with her signature scent (M by Mariah Carey, which contains top notes of toasted marshmallow) and after the shots of butterscotch schnapps mixed with Baileys, chased with red wine. But over the next few hours, you will find that you are no longer quite yourself.

By the end of the night, you will somehow end up wearing your hostess’ fluffy pink bathrobe, gazing at the Empire State Building from the roof deck, and feeling like a diva. That is, until you see your reflection and realize your mistake: Only Mariah Carey can get away with being Mariah Carey.

Imagine if Aladdin, Tinkerbell, and Liberace threw a slumber party in Barbie’s Dream House. That’s what

it feels like to be inside Carey’s penthouse, only with an open bar. “Do you want anything to drink?” Carey asks from the hallway, once I am settled in her Moroccan Lounge, a pillow-strewn lair inspired by her trip to Marrakech. “I’ll tell you if we have anything extra festive!”

Moments later, teetering on the pink pom-pommed heels that she calls “my little house shoes,” the singer returns from the bar carrying two ornate glasses filled with the butterscotch schnapps and calls for backup—requesting some

off the record. It’s likely that her latest CD, due in stores this month, will bring Carey within a hair’s breadth of smashing the world record for the most number-one songs, ever. Currently, she is tied with Elvis Presley for second place, after the Beatles, with 17 chart-topping hits already to her credit.

Among her other distinctions: At 38, Carey is the best-selling female artist of all time. She is said to have hit one of the highest notes ever produced by a human, while singing “Emotions” at the 1991 Video Music Awards. She has

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red wine as well as the company of her choreographer and close friend, Rachel.

“Let’s show our cheer!” Carey suggests once Rachel arrives with the wine. In perfect synchronicity, they raise their goblets with outstretched pinkies—“One, two, three, pose!”—and vogue like practiced pinup girls.

Carey has good reason to celebrate. After eight months of work, she is almost finished recording her new album, *E=MC²*, a mix of breezy ballads, club anthems, and sexy R&B tracks with such fearlessly inviting titles as “Touch My Body,” her first single

shared a stage with Pavarotti and Sean “Diddy” Combs. And it’s possible that she boasts the largest Hello Kitty collection on earth.

It’s hard to reconcile the phenomenon that is Mariah, the seriously talented singer-songwriter with the reported seven-octave range, with her alter ego, Mimi, the bouncy bombshell who, on this day, is busting out of a skimpy pink T-shirt that says “Pussycat Lounge.”

“It’s a dichotomy, I understand,” Carey purrs, sounding sleepy and warm. “I understand that people think I am a ditzy moron.”



Black chiffon dress from Dior by John Galliano. Butterfly ring, Carey's own. These pages: Hair, Ken O'Rourke; makeup, Brigitte Reiss-Andersen; manicure, Elissa Ferri. Prop stylist: Tom Bell. Fashion editor: Paul Cavaco. Details, see Credits page.

She smiles and shrugs. She has enough on her mind, thanks to her forthcoming album. The hallmarks of a singer who is determined to be the best are everywhere, from the home recording studio where she's been pulling rowdy late-night sessions with her frequent collaborator and good friend Jermaine Dupri to the well-used bottle of Mouth Kote Oral Moisturizer that she has left behind on a table in the Moroccan Lounge.

To keep her vocal cords sufficiently lubricated, Carey sometimes sleeps in her steam room, complete with a water bed, dressed in terry cloth. And because the late Luther Vandross once told her that humidity is good for the voice, she has been trying to record only in

rors, she corrals a few stubborn frizzies into place with the rest of her relaxed blonde waves. "I mean, I have three personal assistants just to keep up with my schedule."

On this night, Carey has just returned from vacationing in Aspen, where she indulged in sleigh rides, hot-tub parties, and ice-cream-sundae sessions in the company of her closest friends. It's all part of her plan to make room in her life for more downtime and less drama.

"You get one vacation a year, and if that's going to be filled with weird moments, or not being happy, we don't want that!" Carey says, raising her wine glass for another toast. "We want festive moments of ting, ting, ting—yay!"

Carey was born to be a singer, but she wanted to be a star. She found her voice at four and, around the same time,

whom she was rumored to be engaged in 2005. She says she would like to marry someday, but it won't be until she finds "someone who I would know, 'OK, they're going to take care of me emotionally, they're going to understand who I am....' That's a big deal for me: feeling like somebody else can't fully understand me because they're not in show business. It shouldn't matter, but it does, because the energy it takes to be 'on' is a lot."

But despite her share of boyfriends, Carey claims to be "a freakin' prude" who has never had a one-night stand. ("I'm Mary Poppins: I'm what the buttoned-up girls are supposed to be," she says with a laugh.) Even as a teenager, she was wary of being sidetracked by sex when her first commitment was to her career and to herself, an ever-evolving work in progress.

In the eleventh grade, Carey enrolled in beauty school because, as she puts it, "I wanted to be the pretty girl, so I thought, Let me get my act together and figure out what to do with my hair." Although her career as a beautician got intercepted, she is the one friends call when they need a facial. She even has her own lancet for popping pimples.

Not to mention a fully equipped beauty salon. It's one place where Carey can exercise total image control, after years of listening to industry types and image shapers scrutinize her appearance. Especially in the beginning of her career, she received advice that just inflamed her insecurities. Among other critiques, a product manager told Carey that she should only let the right side of her face be photographed. More recently, she has put up with the media's endless speculation about her fluctuating weight.

"I don't know why everyone thinks I lost 30 pounds," says Carey, who is noticeably slimmer these days after bringing back a personal trainer she liked from St. Barts. "This trainer has actually helped me reshape my arms. That's where I gained most of my weight: upper body. That's just one thing you have to lose weight for. With this whole steroid crap, that's crazy. I'm almost on the verge where I'd be too muscular if I was going to do a thing like that."

"My hair is blown out today—does that mean I look white or black?"

places with moist climates, such as the Caribbean island of Anguilla.

While she is a singer first, Carey has earned a reputation as one of the hardest-working women in show business, promoting her records, fragrances, and films. In addition to her latest CD, she recently launched her second perfume, M by Mariah Gold. She'll play an aspiring singer in the drama *Tennessee*, from the producer of *Monster's Ball*. Carey is also attached to a film adaptation of the gritty novel *Push*.

Only in recent years has the star forced herself to slow down. The lesson came at an expensive and embarrassing price when she experienced a very public meltdown following the untimely release of *Glitter*, the box-office dud loosely based on her life story, right after September 11, 2001.

"It's not that difficult to become exhausted," Carey says in her own defense. Checking her reflection in one of the Moroccan Lounge's many mir-

rors drew a revealing self-portrait that now hangs in her apartment—there is a hall of fame where she displays her countless awards and photos of herself with her idols, including Barbra Streisand, Patti LaBelle, and Aretha Franklin.

To judge by the early portrait, Carey always had a sense of self and a penchant for glamour. The drawing depicts a sticklike figure with thick eyelashes and a pronounced beauty mark next to a floating pack of cigarettes. It's labeled in a childish scrawl: "Me I Am Mariah."

Over the years, Carey has become a bit more existential about her identity. "I've always had really low self-esteem, and I still do," she says. "What's weird about that is being onstage, and the love that you get, and the adoration that you feel from your real fans. It's hard for a partner to compete—just imagine."

Carey has been romantically linked with Yankees slugger Derek Jeter, Latin crooner Luis Miguel, rapper Eminem, and music executive Mark Sudack, to

Mariah Carey with her dog, J. J. White silk-and-lace slip by Carine Gilson. Details, see Credits page.



Carey's obsession with her image isn't purely cosmetic. The singer has been examining her ancestral roots to understand who Mariah is. On a tour of one of her "serious rooms," a quiet den where she has created a family tree of photographs, she pauses before a snapshot of a lean preteen girl with tawny skin and untamed hair, wearing a marigold bikini. "See," she says, "this was before I developed a complete complex about the way I looked."

As a biracial child growing up on Long Island, Carey struggled to fit in with other kids her age (she is the youngest daughter of a part-Venezuelan, part-African-American father and a white Irish-American mother; they divorced when she was three). "People still get confused about my ethnicity," she says, twirling one of her long blonde locks. "OK, so my hair is blown out

today—does that mean I look more white or more black? I don't know. I feel like a lot of people think, Oh, she had this easy fairy tale—princess life," Carey continues, fidgeting with her diamond-studded butterfly ring. "Not to quote *Swingers*, but 'we all have stories.' I got a freakin' miniseries in me."

The story of Carey's rise from beauty-school dropout to the best-selling female artist of all time is certainly the stuff of melodrama and, at times, tragicomedy. But, despite some painful memories, she is surprisingly unguarded and funny when discussing certain episodes in her past that never made it into *Glitter*.

For instance, there was her legendary and unhappy four-year marriage to Tommy Mottola, the Sony record executive 20 years her senior, who signed Carey when she was 18 after receiving her demo tape at a party and wed her in a star-studded ceremony a few years later.

The years she spent at "Sing Sing," her nickname for the \$10 million

Bedford, New York, mansion where she felt so imprisoned, now seem like a lifetime ago. But the act of leaving the man who jump-started her career marked her indelibly. "I had to make a decision: either lose myself completely or learn to stand up for myself," Carey says. "You have to be very courageous to do that."

Reclaiming her sense of self is a powerful, recurring theme for the star, who has survived her share of bad splits in her professional and personal life. After parting ways with Mottola and Sony, she signed with Virgin Records, only to have her contract bought out after *Glitter* and its sound track tanked. Also, she was hospitalized for exhaustion amid swirling rumors that she had tried to commit suicide.

"I spent seven hours one time reading all the press just to see what they were saying," Carey says, rolling her eyes at the memory. "We were going to Puerto Rico, and they'd be like, 'She's in the hospital in England.' Literally, we'd



▲ AT A FRESH AIR FUND BENEFIT, FISHKILL, NY "This is for the camp that I have, Camp Mariah. They come from all different boroughs, underprivileged kids. What am I doing—two braids?"



◀ AT THE OPENING OF THE GIORGIO ARMANI STORE, NEW YORK CITY "This isn't the most flattering dress I've ever seen, even though it is Armani. It's hard to wear wide stripes. It is festive, though."

▼ WITH LUCIANO PAVAROTTI AT A CHARITY CONCERT, MODENA, ITALY "Pavarotti, may he rest in peace. I brought my mother. I knew that was something she was really supposed to be at. I loved him. He was a special person. Not only his talent, but he was just a good guy. You know when you look somebody in the eye and you can just see it? He was one of those people."



▲ WITH CHRIS O'DONNELL IN THE BACHELOR "I did this little cameo because we had the same manager at the time. There's the big, teased, curly hair because this girl's an opera singer."

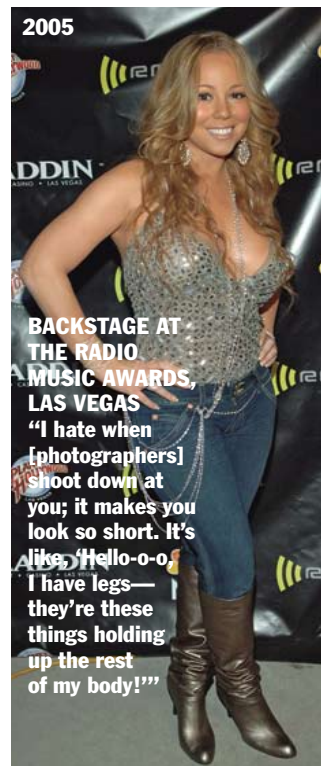


▲ WITH NICOLE RICHIE AND PARIS HILTON AT SEAN "DIDDY" COMBS'S BIRTHDAY PARTY, NEW YORK CITY "They were sweet. I know it's like, 'Whatever—sweet?' But they were nice. I can tell when I'm actually having a good time and when I'm just giving a pose. I'm looking at my eyes, and I think it's not an insincere look. This was a cute moment."



WITH JUSTIN TIMBERLAKE AT THE ROCK AND ROLL HALL OF FAME CEREMONY, NEW YORK CITY "I'm carrying a bag, which is a rarity. I have a bag that my security holds, so I try to make it androgynous for them to blend in."

▼ WITH TERENCE HOWARD AT THE VIBE AWARDS, CULVER CITY, CA "I love him. We're both biracial. That's a big deal for me because most people can't understand what that feels like. More people are more confused when they look at me than when they look at him."



2005
BACKSTAGE AT THE RADIO MUSIC AWARDS, LAS VEGAS "I hate when [photographers] shoot down at you; it makes you look so short. It's like, 'Hello-o-o.' I have legs—they're these things holding up the rest of my body!"

be sitting there on a catamaran.”

Carey feels like her situation was not as bad as the world made it out to be. “I guess people can just say what they want,” she continues, “and until you have a humongous success, they don’t believe you can be happy.”

The singer’s previous album, *The Emancipation of Mimi* has sold 10 million copies worldwide and earned her three Grammy Awards. Just don’t call it a comeback, she says, with a wry little laugh: “Yeah, I’ve been here for years.”

Her closest friends call her Tinkerbell, but Carey actually has more in common with Peter Pan: She doesn’t ever want to grow up. She loves rainbows and butterflies, riding the Tower of Terror at Disney World, swimming with dolphins. Even though she’s approaching 40, Carey likes to think of herself as “eternally 12.” So, she lives in Neverland, where lost boys and girls come to play. Tonight’s partying winds into the Mermaid Room, an aquatic-themed hangout where Lindsay

Lohan and Sean Lennon had a jam session. “He was playing my Hello Kitty guitar,” she recalls.

Next, the star makes a detour to her beauty salon, where she reapplies her lip liner and some M perfume. “This smells different on everybody,” she says, before dabbing a drop behind my ear. Carey leads me to her palatial walk-in wardrobe, which should have choral music piped into it. Racks of sparkly, flowy, colorful clothes give way to rows of shoes, an estimated 1,000 pairs in all: Manolo Blahniks, Jimmy Choos, and Diors, in every possible shade.

Carey picks up a pair of thigh-high suede boots in Christmas red. “From Louis Vuitton—so you know they’re not a joke; they’re not a game,” she says, just to make her point stiletto-sharp. “I’ve come a loooooong way.”

Yes. It took a nomadic childhood and being trapped in a golden cage called Sing Sing to teach Carey the value of having a room of one’s own. Now she

has so many that she doesn’t actually know the count. (She even has an Elf Room, which is decorated with snowflakes year-round.) It seems nothing makes her happier these days than just having room to breathe.

“Do you want to go out on the roof?” she asks, handing me her fluffy pink bathrobe. “I don’t want you to freeze.”

“This is a Jacuzzi; it’s really festive,” she says, clip-clopping across the deck in the dark. “And this is my little area where I lounge looking out. See, there’s the Empire State Building, and that’s the Chrysler Building.”

Balancing a precipitously high heel on the edge of the hot tub, she pulls you up for a better view of the endless cityscape glittering in the darkness. “It’s like its own little oasis, right?” Carey asks.

In fact, she calls it “Mimi’s Oasis.” And when she’s tired of being Mariah Carey, she comes up here to gather her thoughts, uninterrupted, just another star in the sky. ♦

▼ON THE RAINBOW ALBUM COVER “The photographer David LaChapelle actually had somebody physically spray-paint me. Until you’ve been spray-painted on a wall, you don’t know what it feels like.”



1999



2001

▲AT THE VH1/VOGUE FASHION AWARDS, NEW YORK CITY “This was a bleak moment, during the whole *Glitter* situation. The performance began with a Swarovski-studded motorcycle.”



2002

◀AT THE SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL, PARK CITY, UTAH “We went to Sundance with the movie *WiseGirls*. It got a standing ovation, so that made me feel good about the work. I’m so not cutting my bangs again.”



2003

◀ON THE STREET, NEW YORK CITY “I’m not a trench girl, but someone must have said it was a rainy day. Maybe I had to go from the studio to film something. Do I look like a flasher? Maybe if it were black it would be more svelte. But I don’t hate this.”

▼AT THE GRAMMY AWARDS, LOS ANGELES “My awards were not televised, so a lot of people thought I got shafted, but actually I won more. I was very grateful for it. But until you have this moment, people don’t think you’re actually happy again.”



2006



2006

▲WITH SEAN “DIDDY” COMBS IN CONCERT, NEW YORK CITY “We’re performing ‘Honey,’ which is a song that I did with Puffy and Q-Tip. Here, Puff just came and surprised me. I didn’t know if he was going to be there. Every now and then, we’ll call each other like, ‘Come do this.’ It’s fun to be able to have friends you can go onstage with and sing songs that you love.”

►PERFORMING ON “THE EMANCIPATION OF MIMI” TOUR, TOKYO, JAPAN “I’m heavier, but it’s OK if it’s not hanging off. I’ve lost weight since then. I’m always heavier on a scale, so I don’t want to see a scale, ever.”



2006

▼AT THE OPRAH WINFREY LEADERSHIP ACADEMY FOR GIRLS, SOUTH AFRICA “That was a great day. I love Oprah; I admire her enormously. She’s one of the few people with the power to change the world.”



2007