

True to her colours

Fame, when it arrived in the 1980s, did not sit well with Cyndi Lauper. Mistakes were made and her star faded. But three decades on the singer-songwriter finally has the career she always wanted, writes Paul Kirkley

Maybe I'll dye my hair, maybe I'll move somewhere,' sings Cyndi Lauper. 'Maybe I'll get a car, maybe I'll drive so far, they'll lose all track. Me, I'll bounce right back.'

The song, *Hard Candy Christmas*, which is on her latest album, was originally written for a Dolly Parton movie, but it could just as easily be about Cynthia Ann Stephanie Lauper who, aged 17, left her home in Queens, New York, armed only with a toothbrush, a change of underwear and a copy of Yoko Ono's book *Grapefruit*. She was moving somewhere - anywhere - to escape her violent, predatory stepfather, and pursue her dream of being a performance artist.

'That song could be about anyone,' says Lauper. 'That's what's so great about it. There's a commonality, a human experience for women. That's the goal for any singer, because it enables you to sing a real story that will touch people.'

Perhaps, but it seems particularly relevant to Lauper, whose troubled adolescence was followed by a long, dispiriting period singing in bars and failing to make it with her band Blue Angel. Then, in 1983, her 'do-or-die' album *She's So Unusual* turned her into an overnight sensation, selling 22 million copies and becoming the first debut by a female artist to spawn four top-five US hits.

Over the next couple of years, Lauper's rainbow-dyed hair and kooky, thrift-store chic brought a riot of colour to magazine covers from *Rolling Stone* to *Time*, while *Girls Just Want to Have Fun* - her subversive, feminist rewrite of Robert Hazard's queasily non-PC 1979 single - became one of the decade's defining anthems.

But, having worked so long to get noticed, Lauper found superstardom sat uneasily with her; a succession of producers trying to mould her idiosyncratic style to their own vision, coupled with no longer being able to walk down the street, left her feeling 'like a bird trapped in a cage'.

'I used to walk a lot and sing to myself, that's how I wrote,' she says. 'Once I became famous, I couldn't do that, because people would jump out of corners or pull over their cars. It was scary.'

At her lowest point, she wrote in her 2012 autobiography, 'the only thing that prevented me from suicide is I never wanted to read a headline, *Girl Who Wanted To Have Fun Just Didn't*'. Then, following the perceived failure of her third album, 1989's *A Night to Remember*, Lauper set out to reclaim control of her career, writing and self-producing increasingly personal, political records. She also co-founded the True Colors Fund, which works to end homelessness among young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people - part of a lifelong commitment to LGBT rights activism.

All this brought mixed commercial fortunes, but Lauper insists she's happier that way. 'I don't think I'm famous any more...' she begins, until *Weekend* protests.

'No, I know, I know,' she says. 'But it's not crazy famous. I just couldn't take the craziness.'

'A woman told me once: you're going to have many different chapters in your life. And that's what you've got to remember, and not get hung up on one thing. When the super-fame left, at first I didn't understand why. But you don't understand fame when it happens, either. There's no book that tells you that if you behave badly, sometimes people aren't even going to tell you, because of who you are.'

In 2010, Lauper released *Memphis Blues*, a collection of cover songs by the likes of Muddy Waters, Albert King and Robert Johnson. It was the biggest-selling blues album of the year. Now she's turned her attention to a similar period in country and rockabilly.

Recorded in Nashville, *Detour* finds Lauper bringing her four-octave range to back-porch classics by Patsy Cline, Loretta Lynn, Wanda Jackson and more, with help from such rhinestone royalty as Emmylou Harris, Willie Nelson and Alison Krauss. The project was suggested to Lauper by legendary producer Seymour Stein, and marks their first collaboration.

Part of the appeal, she says, is they're the songs 'my Aunt Gracie was playing while I was riding my pony stick around her kitchen - they were part of the background of my life'.

Stein, of course, was the man who signed Madonna, Lauper's great rival - according to the press at least - for pop's mid-80s crown.

'It was sad that they would pit us against each other because I always thought sisterhood is powerful,' says Lauper. 'When *Like A Virgin* came out, I went right up to her at this awards show and said, "That track is skinnin' - it's so good." And she had a lot to do with it all - she's not a sit-by-kind-of-gal, I love her.'

Now 62, Lauper is still kicking down walls and chalking up new victories, her songs for the Broadway and West End musical smash *Kinky Boots* making her the first female solo

composer to win a Tony. Thanks to a well-received role on the sitcom *Mad About You* that puts her in the rarefied position of being a GET (Grammy, Emmy, Tony) winner. She's also been immortalised in plastic as a Barbie doll, and in yellow on *The Simpsons*, and is cited as an influence by everyone from Britney Spears to Lady Gaga.

Factor in a happy domestic life - she's been married to the actor David Thornton since 1991, and they have an 18-year-old son Declan - and you feel the woman who once declared she was 'always searching' must be closer to finding what she's looking for.

'It's been an interesting career,' she reflects. 'Every step you take gets you to where you are. Did I go the long way round? I probably did. Have I made mistakes? Yeah. But what's that song Dolly Parton wrote?' She starts singing: 'My mistakes are no worse than yours, just because I'm a woman...'

And that's a good mantra for life?

'Yeah, kinda.'

Detour is released on 6 May. Cyndi Lauper tours the UK in June. *Kinky Boots* is currently at the Adelphi Theatre, London

Interview

