

# LILY OUTLOUD

That mouthy Lily Allen is back and already clocking up controversies with a contentious video and ‘misconstrued’ quotes. She has a cup of tea and a chat with **Jessica Pan**

When Lily Allen makes her way across the lobby at Claridge’s Hotel in London, she goes unnoticed by everyone, at first – including me. I’d been expecting a brash demeanour and the ultra high ponytail, heavy fringe and cat-eye makeup she’s been donning on evening chat shows and in music videos. But in broad daylight, wearing jeans, the pop star slips under the radar as she walks through the fancy tearoom and past its posh patrons. Perhaps no one told them Lily’s back. Since she burst onto the music scene in 2006 – propelled by demos of ‘LDN’ and ‘Smile’, which she posted to her MySpace page – the pop star has gained a reputation as a wild child whose soft, lilting voice skewers bad lovers and politicians, while revealing intimate glimpses of the songwriter’s fraught relationships. From cursing out Elton John onstage at an awards show (“F\*\*k off, Elton. I’m 40 years younger than you. I’ve have my whole life ahead of me”) to publicly arguing with Cheryl Cole (“I may not be as pretty as you, but at least I write and sing my own songs without the aid of Auto-tune”), Allen never shied away when provoked.

Then, in 2010, she retired. She moved to the countryside, married a builder, took her husband’s name to become Lily Rose Cooper, had kids, and disappeared from the spotlight.

“I’d been on the road for four years. I’d just met someone I fell head over heels in love with. I wanted to get married and have children. And I was kind of sick of being famous,” she tells me, pouring a cup of tea as we sit in a booth tucked at the back of the Claridge’s restaurant.

Though she today underplays the toll fame had taken on her, she left her career after releasing two hit albums, touring the world, struggling with an eating disorder, and suffering two miscarriages. In a documentary filmed on

the cusp of her departure from the limelight, she said, “People who are famous and successful and live in this mad world tend to die really early, or kill themselves, or die in a drugs overdose. I’d rather not, so I figure I’ll go...”

Four months after the documentary aired, another young, famous and untamed singer-songwriter from London died from alcohol poisoning. When the news broke about Amy Winehouse’s death, Lily’s friends sent her texts saying they were glad she hadn’t suffered the same fate. At the time, Lily said she counted her lucky stars she had been strong enough to walk away.

That was nearly three years ago. Two babies later (and with her surname reinstated), Allen came out of hibernation when she sang the vocals for a tender Christmas advert for the UK department store John Lewis. Two days later, she released the in-your-face single ‘Hard Out Here’, in which she confronts sexism, the societal pressures on women to be thin and, more than anything, the difficulties of being a “bitch” (she sings the word nearly 50 times in less than four minutes). Both songs, soft and hard, were top-10 hits in the UK in the same week.

And so, after a four-year hiatus, Allen was storming the charts again. But why the return?

**“I WOULD DO IT DIFFERENTLY BECAUSE I’M NOW AWARE OF HOW PEOPLE INTERPRET THINGS. I WASN’T AWARE OF THAT BEFORE.”**

“I really, honestly thought I was going to be the type of mum that wants to stay home all day and look after my children,” she says. “I just couldn’t do that. I just felt like I needed to get out of the house for a few hours a day and connect with myself again and all I know how to do is write stupid pop songs.”

It’s been a less-than-smooth re-entry into the public eye. Allen immediately faced a backlash for the music video for ‘Hard Out Here’. Attempting to make a statement about the objectification of women, Lily was instead criticised for the video’s perceived racist undertones. The video features scantily clad black female dancers pouring champagne over each other’s bodies, while Lily – centre stage – looks on, amused and fully-clothed.

The feminist blogosphere exploded when the video was released. Website Jezebel was baffled at what to do

with a “feminist pop anthem you can blast at parties” that was accompanied by a music video that was not satire on sexism but “reinforcement of racism”. Dozens of other blogs echoed similar sentiments, accusing the singer of blatant racial appropriation. The negative reaction shocked her.

“I would do it differently because I’m now aware of how people interpret things. I wasn’t aware of that before – and you can call that my white privilege or whatever, but I never strive to offend anybody. I was alarmed by the response from that video.”

Then, in the week prior to our meeting, Allen drew more negative attention when men’s magazine *ShortList* quoted her as saying, “Feminism shouldn’t be a thing any more,” a line she says was misconstrued.

“What I was saying was that we are in 2014 and I would really love for us to be at a point where I wouldn’t have to talk about feminism because men and women are equal. Unfortunately, we’re not there, which is why the word ‘feminism’ is always being spoken about, because it’s very apparent that sexism and misogyny still exist,” she says, long acrylic nails resting under her chin. She seems weary.

Before the contentious ‘feminism’ interview was printed, Allen hosted a three-hour show on BBC radio,

during which she interviewed feminist icon and author Caitlin Moran. In a prescient moment, Moran told Allen, “We often think that there’s going to be one kind of feminist superhero who will come along and unite all the ladies like Jesus, and everything she will say will be perfect and we can just learn everything she does and be perfect feminists.”

If there’s been a pop star who has faced unrealistic expectations about embodying feminism, it’s Allen. With lyrics like “there’s a glass ceiling to break” and “if I told you about my sex life you’d call me a slut / but when boys be talkin’ about their bitches, no one’s making a fuss,” ‘Hard Out Here’ was initially pegged as a feminist anthem – but with every misstep or isolated quote, she’s criticised for letting women down. And if Moran’s “unite all the ladies like Jesus” metaphor wasn’t already topical, consider Allen’s forthcoming album’s title: *Sheezus*, a play on the “female Jesus” as well as



Lily Allen on stage during the Big Day Out at Auckland’s Mt Smart Stadium in 2010.

a nod to Kanye West's most recent album, *Yeezus*.

It's a heavy burden to carry alone. In a time when Lady Gaga and Taylor Swift still deny being feminists, Allen replies to the question with an emphatic, "Of course I'm a feminist!"

It's an issue that also divides female pop stars: recently, Katy Perry finally aligned herself with the term, because: "I used to not really understand what that word meant, and now that I do, it just means that I love myself as a female and I also love men" – a decidedly muted reply when compared to Allen, who recently called out the music industry for having too few female executives. "I am signed to Warners and have been into many different record company buildings, but am astonished by the lack of female executives. I cannot understand it or fathom it," she told Britain's *The Sun* newspaper. "You will also notice, of the big successful female artists, there is always a 'man behind the woman' piece. If it's Beyoncé, it's Jay Z. If it's Adele, it's Paul Epworth. Me? It was Mark Ronson and the same with Amy Winehouse. You never get that with men."

Allen is surprisingly approachable in person. She's friendly and engaged, nearly every sentence punctuated by a deep laugh and a sly raise of her eyebrows when she's saying something cheeky. She's poised, too, hair swept up and a long Chanel chain around her neck. But despite the exterior polish, her honesty is as disarming in person as it is when channelled through the media, including the social sort.

Allen is active on Twitter and Instagram, her feeds cluttered with her latest nail designs (today's are monochrome white and black), recent additions to her shoe collections (Laboutins are regulars), and celebrity encounters (Pharrell Williams, One Direction), interspersed with candid tweets about her domestic life: "Sometimes I wish I had better things to do with my time than change nappies, cook dinner, watch s\*\*\* telly and respond to Internet trolls. #bored #needtogetoutmore."

This signature frankness carries over into *Sheezus*, an album that broaches subjects as varied as her fear of returning to the spotlight, boredom with domestic life, mocking internet trolls, and her husband's virility ("My lover, my lover / shoots and scores like he's Maradona / under cover, under the covers/ my man is a bad motherf\*\*\*\*\*").

Even so, the album has more light, bubblegum pop



## FIRE AWAY

Some of our favourite Allenisms...

**Pubic hair:** "Let's talk about pubic hair for a second. I just remember as a teenager being endlessly confused, from one boyfriend to the next – they wanted completely different things. Those guys probably didn't know what they liked; they had probably seen something in some porno."

**Weight:** "I hang out with models, the biggest pop stars and, you know, really and honestly, I hate saying this, but none of them are achieving those body shapes by being healthy."

**Politics:** "I'd like to dedicate this next song ('F\*\*\* You') to someone: David Cameron."

**Justin Bieber:** "I had no idea who this #justinbieber person was, just found out he's that kid that's always on the TV when I'm in the gym. He's about five, right?"

**Guilt:** "I think of myself as quite a confused kind of person, because I think there are so many great things about the world, but there are so many awful things, too. I feel very guilty a lot of the time about enjoying my life so much, when there are people living in such misery."

**Drugs:** "I was a drug dealer in Ibiza at 15. I did not excel in drug dealing – I was terrible at it. Golden rule with drug dealing: don't get too enthusiastic with your own merchandise."

**Songwriting:** "I've actually broken up with boyfriends for inspiration. When I hit a period of not being able to write music, I get up and I walk away. It's pretty mean, but it's true."

than her previous releases. Although infectious, 'Air Balloon' has nonsensical lyrics and lacks the signature Allen combination of honesty, social commentary and wit. But she knows this already. When a fan on Twitter called her latest releases "docile pop rubbish", Allen responded directly: "What you've heard so far, yes. All I can do is do my best, the labels and the radio stations won't play the better stuff."

It's the title track on *Sheezus* that hits all of Allen's sweet spots. Immediately enticing, it reveals both her vulnerability and feisty spirit, cleverly name-checking nearly every pop star under the sun, and then doing what no popstar has dared do before – sing about her period. "At the heart of a lot of what I do is, 'Hey, this happens to all of us and we shouldn't feel like we can't talk about it or be ashamed of it,'" she says. "If you're gay, you're gay. If you're a woman, you get periods – it doesn't f\*\*\*\*\* matter! I think the more we talk openly about these things, then the more comfortable we'll become with them," she adds, briefly inhaling from an e-cigarette and then putting it down.

She's finally quit smoking and is trying to get serious about fitness, but this time it's for her health and her children, rather than to fit a body ideal. "I definitely look at myself in the mirror and think, give yourself a break, you know?" she says. "It still hurts when someone puts an unflattering picture of me online and then you read the comments underneath it. I'm not going to say that I'm immune to it, because I'm not. But I don't think I feel pressure to look a certain way any more."

This particular pressure has haunted Allen since her early singing days and possibly goes back even further, to her tumultuous adolescence. Her parents both work in the entertainment industry – her mother is a film producer and her father is TV presenter Keith Allen, who left the family when she was four. After bouncing around between 13 different schools, Allen finally dropped out altogether at age 15, and has spoken openly about being dragged around to London parties when young.

Will her children have a similar upbringing? I ask. She shakes her head firmly. No. "That's why we're hidden away in the countryside," she says, and laughs.

Of course, any discussion about fame and youth these days invariably includes Lorde. "I wasn't as young as that, but I got a reputation very quickly for being... a bit of a train wreck, and that was difficult – being young and living that out publicly. But she seems to have her head screwed on," Lily says. "I like her. I love her music." Lorde even gets a nod on *Sheezus*.





Allen in performance in Buenos Aires in 2007 (left) and presenting an award in London earlier this year

This time around, Allen seems calmer and more self-assured, but of course she is – she’s out of the fumbling phase of her mid-twenties. She has two daughters. Next year, she’ll be 30.

What lies in store for Lily Allen? She can’t say for sure. “I move all the time and change my mind,” she says, snapping her fingers. “I move houses and change this room and I need to be on the move. I’m a very restless person. I can’t tell you what the next five to 10 years is going to be like because it’s guaranteed to change.”

What she does know is that she plans to tour for the next two years, while trying to make sure she sees her children as much as possible. She’s been here before – the media circus, the fame, the criticism – but now she knows she can duck out, should she need to.

Just this month, MTV announced that Allen’s latest music video ‘Our Time’ was banned from daytime broadcast due to scenes of antisocial behaviour and drinking. (The footage in question shows the star dressed as a drunken hotdog, having a fight with herself.) “Age of Beige” she tweeted curtly in response.

MTV suggested she release an edited video version with the footage removed. She refused.

Nearly a decade after she first emerged as a household name, it’s clear Allen is still feisty and opinionated, with a taste for pushing the boundaries through music. It’s also clear she still says the ‘wrong things’, despite her best intentions to live up to every expectation imposed on her.

After we say goodbye, Allen calls out after me. “They really were misconstrued – those feminism quotes!” The *Sheezus* singer just wants to get it right. ●



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