



30 YEARS AFTER HER LAST LP,
IT'S THE SECOND COMING OF
BETTY BOO. BACK WITH AN ALBUM
OF BANGERS AS GLORIOUSLY
FLOOR-FILLING AS ANYTHING IN
HER HIP-HOP HEYDAY, SHE TELLS
CLASSIC POP ABOUT WHY NOW
WAS THE RIGHT TIME TO RETURN AND
TAKES US INSIDE HER STAR-LADEN
NEW RECORD, *BOOMERANG*.

STEVE O'BRIEN

Betty Boop:
Bouncing back
after three
decades on
hiatus – and
all with a little
help from
Classic Pop!

56 CLASSIC POP

BOO TWO

Thirty years is a long time in pop culture. In 1992, Liz Truss was an anti-monarchist teenager, Donald Trump was just a businessman with a funny haircut and Harry Styles hadn't even been born. Few of us had heard of the internet, while Napster, Spotify and iTunes had yet to be invented. It was, in every sense, a different world when Alison Clarkson, aka Betty Boo, released her last record, *GRRR! It's Betty Boo*.

The last time we spoke to Bet... – oh, let's just call her Alison – was back in the summer of 2019 when, in answer to our question about new material, she told us: "I feel like it's the right time, because even people that were before me, like Bananarama, they keep making records and I'm thinking, I've gotta do it! What's stopping me?"

"I was approaching the big Five-O and was like, 'I don't know where that time has gone!'" Alison tells us three years on from her home in Wiltshire. "I knew one day I'd make a record, I just didn't know when it was going to be."

What spurred this comeback was actually a feature in the magazine you're currently reading. Alison's last hook-up with *Classic Pop* was in Issue 54 and there, on page 68, was an interview with producer Andy Wright (Simply Red, Simple Minds). "I was reading about his creative process and how he works with artists and just thought he'd be perfect!" she beams. "So it was all down to *Classic Pop!*"

For Clarkson, doin' the do again after all this time is little bit dizzying. Though she was still performing occasional live shows, for much of the last three decades she's been living the quietest of lives in the quaint market town of Malmesbury (with a population just over 5,000). "I'm used to being in my tennis clothes every day," she smiles. "I look like a PE teacher most of the time, so having to get my Boo on, putting a bit of slap on and doing my hair, it's nice. It's been really good to have the excuse to get glamorous."

Not that she's in her gym threads today. Looking every inch the glammed-up pop star, she's talking to us against a background of pink and silver glitter curtains and a mirrorball to her right. She may live in the kind of Wiltshire town where crinkle cut crisps are considered *outré* but there's a little bit of Studio 54 tucked away there at chez Clarkson. "It's my little corner of the bedroom," she teases.

So, let's rewind to 2020, just as Covid-19 was first raising its ugly head. Having touched base with Wright, he and Alison had started working on songs together. "We just hit it off," she says excitedly, "But then the pandemic happened and it was like, 'We've got to finish this, we've got to do the album.'"

Alison and Andy had only managed to work on one track in the studio before lockdown kicked off. After Boris'



directive to "stay at home", that meant the rest of *Boomerang* (the album was meant to have been titled *Storm Betty*, only "there have been a lot of storms recently") was penned 100 miles from London, sometimes at the house that Clarkson shares with her documentary-producer husband Paul Toogood, but also in, ahem, various supermarket car parks. "Many of the vocal parts were written in Sainsbury's and the Waitrose in Malmesbury car parks on my iPhone," she laughs.

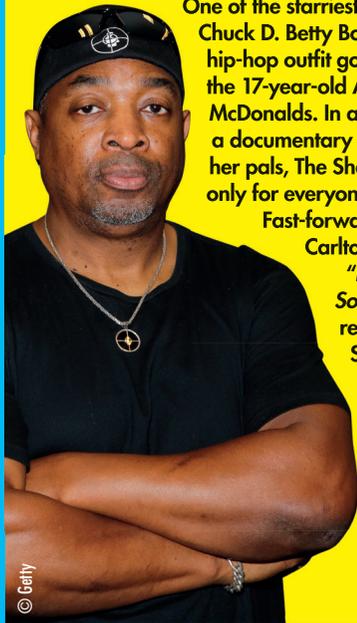
Not that you'd ever guess it. There's no track on *Boomerang* extolling the virtues of Sainsbury's Taste The

Difference range or Waitrose's own-brand sesame oil. Instead, it's a faultless collection of feelgood party bangers which seems to pick up exactly where *GRRR!* left off 30 years ago.

"I love pop music," Clarkson enthuses, "and I listen to a lot of modern pop. What I'm really proud of is that, because we've been putting a few tracks out there as teasers, the song *Boomerang* ended up on the official Spotify playlist for new acts! So I'm in the middle of all these 18-year-olds. They probably had no idea that I'm 52. But I was really flattered by that, because I wanted to make a modern-sounding record that still had that 90s flavour."

The first taste that any of us had of *Boomerang* the album was back in January when Clarkson dropped *Get Me To The Weekend*, her first single since 1993's *Catch Me* (if you ignore her 2006 venture with Blur's Alex James as WigWam, and her 2007 buddy-up with Digital Dog, *Take Off*). An effervescent ode to the joys of unwinding, *Get Me To The Weekend*'s only concession to middle age is that it

Night of the living Booheads



One of the starriest names guesting on *Boomerang* is Public Enemy's Chuck D. Betty Boo's relationship with Chuck and the New York hip-hop outfit goes back 35 years when, after a PE gig in Hammersmith, the 17-year-old Alison Clarkson bumped into the band in a nearby McDonalds. In a priceless bit of video footage (Public Enemy were filming a documentary at the time and so had cameras with them) Clarkson and her pals, The She-Rockers, freestyled a rap (check it out on YouTube), only for everyone to get thrown out of the eatery soon after.

Fast-forward to 2022 and Alison reached out to Chuck (real name: Carlton Ridenhour) to cameo on her album.

"My husband and I had made a documentary, *The Great Songwriters*, with Chuck and I asked him, 'If I ever make a record, would you be on it?' and he said, 'Yeah, definitely.' So we got in touch and he said, 'Okay, send the track.'

Next thing I know, he's gone into the studio and recorded my rap. I got the stems through here and it was such a buzz. Here I was in the middle of nowhere listening to Chuck D's voice rapping my words. I don't think he's ever done that before. The song, *Miracle*, does have a very positive message and I think that's one of the reasons why he did it. It's not a frivolous tune, it's quite serious. He sounds like a preacher on it!"

"I wanted to make a modern-sounding record which had that 90s flavour"

wasn't about getting smashed on tequila at your nearest nitery, but "Forget[ting] about work and bills/ Take a drive up to the hills."

"We were just coming out of lockdown and weren't able to enjoy the weekend," she says of the track's origin. "I mean, weekends never felt like weekends." Together, they finished the demo, but felt it needed something extra, some little sonic push. Enter The Human League.

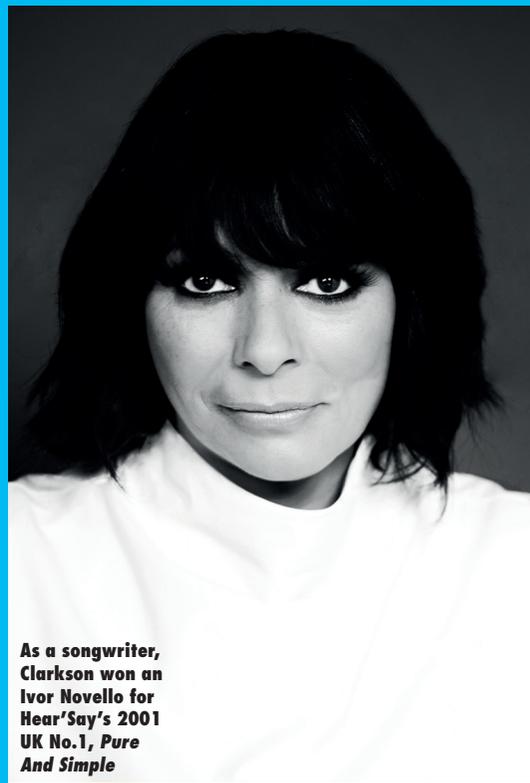
Betty Boo in 1990, the year of her breakthrough debut LP, *Boomania*

"Andy and I just thought *Love Action* would sound awesome on it," she says. "So we went back into the studio, put the bassline on, tweaked it a bit and it just set it on fire."

Clarkson has previous with sampling, of course. Her first success after that *I Can't Dance To That Music You're Playin'* one-shot with Beatmasters was *Doin' The Do*, which pick'n'mixed from Reparata And The Delrons' 1968 hit *Captain Of Your Ship*, while follow-up *Where Are You Baby?* pilfered from The Velvettes' *He Was Really Sayin' Somethin'*. "I'm obsessed with sampling," Clarkson confirms.

"I used to sample a lot in the past, not so much this time round, but it gives the music a little more texture. It goes back to my hip-hop influences, so it felt really comfortable to do it with *Get Me To The Weekend*, especially because I love The Human League. That song came late in the day, but it was such an earworm, we thought we had to go with it as the single."

Though *Get Me To The Weekend* ended up being *Boomerang*'s lead-off single, the truth is that pick could have been any of this LP's 12 songs, so strong is its tracklisting. In fact, sophomore release *Shining Star* pops up on the album twice, first as the single that



As a songwriter, Clarkson won an Ivor Novello for *Hear'Say's* 2001 UK No.1, *Pure And Simple*

came out in May and second as a bonus track with guest vocals courtesy of Sophie Ellis-Bextor.

"I've known Sophie for a long time," Alison says. "We'd bump into each other and we talk on Instagram. When I wrote *Shining Star* I thought she'd be great as the queen of disco to sing a chorus on there. She's in Chiswick and the studio was only in Park Royal, so I said, 'I'll pick you up, you can sing it and you'll be back home in time for the boys coming home from school. And that's what we did.'"

Ellis-Bextor isn't the only marquee name on board for *Boomerang*. Public



Where were you baby?: Supermarket car parks to Spotify, Boomania is well and truly back!

Enemy mainman Chuck D lends his larynx to third track *Miracle* (see boxout), while *Babylon* hitmaker David Gray comes on the rapturous *Right By Your Side*.

"It was one of the first songs that Andy and I wrote and it kinda solidified our working relationship," Alison says.

"I did a rap and Andy thought it'd be good to have someone sing on it. So I sent David an email and the next thing I know he's sent the stems so we plonked it in the mix. I think his voice sounds great on it, he doesn't sound like anyone else."

Of course, one of the positives of releasing a new album after so many decades away is finally having fresh tunes to play live. As cherished as *Doin' The Do* and *Let Me Take You There* et al are to Alison, it must be a thrilling feeling to pep the set up with new material.

"The last couple of festivals that I played at I put in three new tracks and people were singing along to them!" she says, slightly incredulously.

"At festivals they're not there necessarily to see you, so you're never sure whether they're gonna walk away. But the new tracks have gone down so well. And they sound good back to back, the old stuff and the new."

Clarkson seems to be enjoying this renaissance more than she ever thought she would. She's been amazed, she says, by the outpouring of love, from old fans and new. She was surprised to learn, for instance, how *Doin' The Do* had become a 'coming out' song, as she puts it.

A lot of gay men and especially women love it," she says proudly. "Because they were girls at the time thinking, here's a woman who doesn't look like anyone else and she's

"I don't want the world and can't compete with young artists who spend millions on videos"

doin' her do. It's been lovely to hear these stories, about how it got them through being different. I had no idea at the time."

Having rediscovered her *Boo*, Alison insists there's not going to be another 30-year wait until album number four. In fact, the follow-up to *Boomerang* is already being worked on. "We started writing it at the beginning of the year," she reveals. "I've got all my books and lots of ideas. Doing this record, it's given me faith and confidence to come back and do

new stuff. I don't want the world and can't compete with new, young artists who are signed to massive labels and spend millions on their videos. I'm making this record for me and my fans and I'm having a lot of fun doing it."

Part of the reason for this flurry of quinquagenarian activity was inspired by an interview with Sananda Maitreya, where The Artist Formerly Known As Terence Trent D'Arby admitted that his main motivation to make an album was because so many of his friends from that era – Prince, Michael Jackson, George Michael – simply weren't able to.

Like many who find themselves in their sixth decade, mortality is on Clarkson's mind these days. Her dad died aged just 54, while her mum passed away at 49. "Now I'm in my fifties, I think you've really got to take life and enjoy it as you never know what's round the corner."

Amen to that. And with *Boomerang*, *Classic Pop* reader Alison Clarkson has made a record to be proud of, one that sounds as fresh and spry as anything by any artist half her age. It's 2022 and Betty Boo is back, and yes, she's still doin' the do. ■

● **Boomerang is available now via Absolute and reviewed on page 80**