



“I WON’T
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Seems Danni Minogue has grown up before our very eyes. Still single, and soon to hit Australian TV screens again, the 35-year-old’s now dressing – and acting – her age. Joanne Hawkins meets her in her hometown



It's easy to think you know Dannii Minogue. She's the lesser talented Minogue sister, right? The one who has coasted along on Kylie's designer coat tails for years, releasing a collection of so-so singles that never do as well as her big sister's.

Then there's her chequered love-life: her failed marriage to former PM's son Julian McMahon and an equally unsuccessful engagement to Formula One driver Jacques Villeneuve. Throw in her appearance in Australian *Playboy* and all that reputed plastic surgery, and we all think we've got her sussed. But don't be so sure.

I've always felt a bit sorry for her, actually. She's obviously talented – otherwise she wouldn't still be making a living from “showbiz” after 28 years – but whatever Minogue does now, whatever she achieves, is usually derided by a hostile press; dismissed as another shameless attempt to compete with her sister. Even her last single, “So Under Pressure” – with its deeply personal lyrics reflecting how she coped during Kylie's breast-cancer battle – was slammed by one newspaper as “cashing in” on her sister's illness. Admittedly, the video did feature her writhing around with a white python, but still, she can't seem to catch a break.

You almost wouldn't be surprised if she declared “sod this for a game of soldiers” and opened a knitting commune out of the limelight. Or ended up in a rehab clinic, battling “emotional stress and exhaustion” brought on by the constant personal

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attacks. Then again, this is a woman who says, “I love what I do. I'm not going to make everyone happy all the time, but as long as I can do what I like, I'm happy, and people can go and... you know.”

But it's still a surprise to meet the friendly woman with the easy laugh sitting in front of me. Despite battling the flu, Minogue is laid-back, good-natured and open. She must have been interviewed a thousand times, yet doesn't give the impression she's saying less than she feels. Then again, as countless colleagues and friends will attest, she's a professional.

She's back in Melbourne to watch Kylie's rearranged *Showgirl* concerts and also to film a promo for *Australia's Got Talent*, the Seven Network's upcoming talent show for which the London-based Minogue has been lured home to appear as a judge. It's been 17 years since she last appeared on Australian TV – as “punk tearaway” Emma Jackson in Seven's *Home and Away* – although she worked as a presenter on British TV in the mid-'90s.

Minogue says she was a fan of the US version of the show – created by *American Idol*'s Simon Cowell – and is thrilled to be appearing on the Aussie incarnation – especially as it means three months with the folks in Melbourne. (Despite owning a flash apartment on Melbourne's famous St Kilda Road, she really does stay with Ron and Carol, aka Ma and Pa Minogue, although, she insists she does her own washing.)

She's also excited about her career coming full circle. “As in, me starting off having auditioned for *Young Talent Time*, and now thinking, ‘I'm all grown up and I'm in the judge's seat.’ It's a nice feeling.”

So, why the move back into TV? Could the less-than-stellar success of her recent greatest-hits album *The Hits & Beyond* (which reached 67 in Australia, although it fared better in the UK) have anything to do with it?

“I've always been one to grasp a new opportunity,” she says. “TV is exploding around the world at the moment. It's exciting – there are so many new shows out there that are drawing in people who'd normally be doing other things.”

And as for that album's performance? “I've always accepted it is what it is,” she says. “Once you've done the work, you just have to put it out there and see what happens.”

Minogue is also relishing the chance to wear more clothes on *Australia's Got Talent*. Yes, the woman who stripped for Australian *Playboy* in 1995 after her break-up with McMahon, posed nude apart from a red ribbon to promote World Aids Day in 2004, and has worn all manner of skimpy clothes for her pop career, has decided it's time to cover up.

“I've been having conversations with the [show's] stylists and I've been saying it's really important for me to appear as who I feel I am, which is a woman in her mid-30s, and I want to dress my age,” she explains. “This is the first opportunity in ages I've had [to do that] because the music industry is so different. I'm so looking forward to it; there are some fantastic designers here.”

She tells me about some Paspaley pearls she's spotted, before quickly adding, “I'm not going to

walk on dressed as a nanna, but it's like, ‘Hallelujah!’ I'm so excited I don't have to do all of the music s**t.”

Subconsciously, she smoothes down her electric-blue chiffon skirt, which she's teamed with an ever-so-demure high-necked black blouse and high-heeled Mary Jane shoes. Her dark hair is softly tousled, and her face, although thickly made up from shooting that Seven Network promo, is pretty and, well, normal – far from the plasticity that some photos suggest.

Now 35, Minogue says she's feeling good about growing up. “I wish time would slow down so I'd have a chance to take it all in. The last 17 years have gone so fast, but I feel good. I like getting older. I'm one of the few people who likes and celebrates it.”

When I look sceptical, she cries, “I don't know why other women don't like it! I just think it's such a great time. You feel more like you're in your own skin, you know what you want, what you don't want.”

She takes a sip of peppermint tea, before continuing. “When you're a teenager and the world is offered to you and people say, ‘Come here, come there and do this, that and the other,’ you're like, ‘Yeah, great.’ But now I don't want to do that. People have this image of me as party Dannii, but I really like not going out. I work hard, so just being able to chill out at home is good. I have my apartment [in London] that I love. I've just redecorated and I feel comfortable there. I've always been a homebody.”

Her English friend Nathan Smith, who also looks after Minogue's website, agrees. “Dannii's just like my London mum. We call her Nanna, because she loves to stay in and watch TV and is always clutching a cup of tea. She looks after you and >



Minogue's career has come full circle, from her start as a performer on *Young Talent Time* to being a judge on Seven's new talent show.

always gives you the most amazing advice. When you're around her, you just feel happy because she has this great energy."

Back in Melbourne, Minogue has been trying out another moniker – that of Auntie – and enjoying getting to know her 10-month-old nephew, Charles, the son of her TV cameraman brother Brendan. In an interview last year, she said she'd never been broody but the big test would come when she picked up her nephew. So?

"Well, I'm learning. I've got my L plates on," she smiles. "There's nappy changing and there are tears and there's playtime. Kylie's braved the nappy changing; I haven't," she says dramatically, screwing up her face. "I'm like, 'You're older, you go first. Show me how it's done.'"

But has it made her want her own child? "I've never thought, 'OK, I'm definitely going to have kids,' and I'd certainly never want to do it on my own. I look up to my parents – they're still together, still in love. I'd want to do it like that. But since I'm single and don't have a boyfriend, it's not even a question at the moment. If it happens, it happens, but I won't be rushing off and adopting babies. Maybe if I was with someone and couldn't have children, I don't know. But I'd just want to be with someone and do it with them, so..."

Minogue has always been perceived in the media as "unlucky in love". As well as her failed marriage and engagement to McMahon and Villeneuve respectively, there have been relationships with celebrity photographer Steve Shaw, former Bros star Craig Logan and, reportedly, a recent fling with the son of Status Quo's Rick Parfitt, Rick Jnr, to name but a few. She admits that dating in the public eye is difficult, especially as it means the other party is likely to end up in the papers simply for going out with her.

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"I don't think anybody wants to go through that. It's difficult when everyone's watching you. Is it hard? Bloody oath it is!" she exclaims, sounding as Aussie as the day she first left for London.

"I'd love to share time with someone. I'm not crazy looking but, you know, it would be nice..." And what does she look for in a man? "I've got a long list!" she screams. "Maybe that's why I haven't met him; I'm just too choosy. I'd like someone who's into daggy family time like I am. I like cooking – risotto's my speciality – so someone who likes eating. And I really do like those old-world gentlemanly qualities. When I'm at work, I'm charging around having a career and all that, and when I'm with someone, I want to be all... girly."

"Everyone who knows her would love to see Dannii settle down," says Smith. "I think the nephew has definitely got a few things going through her head. But she does travel a lot. Two months ago, she wouldn't have known she was going to be spending three months back in Australia this year, so it must be hard to keep a relationship together. She's been so focused on her career and I guess she's put her love-life on the back burner. Who knows? Maybe she'll find love back in Australia," he chuckles.

Minogue was just 22 when she married McMahon, whom she met on *Home and Away*.

She admits their divorce (after less than two years of marriage) made her wary of relationships because she thought she'd be hurt again.

"I went through a lot of pain – a lot of pain – because I thought it was [for life]," she says quietly. "But I've decided I don't want that to be the rest of my life. I probably held on for longer than was necessary, but I'm a sensitive person and, when I get hurt, it really affects me."

She says she keeps in touch with McMahon "a little bit – not a lot, but I know what's going on and he knows what's going on with me". She giggles when she recalls how his success on TV's *Nip/Tuck* meant she starting seeing a bit more of him. "I laughed when I was driving around London and I saw him up on a giant billboard. It doesn't happen to most people. 'Oh look, there's my ex-husband up there.' But it's good to see he's had that success, because I was part of helping to set that up."

And what of those comparisons with that older superstar sister of hers? Minogue laughs when I ask if there's ever been any rivalry. "She's waiting for that one juicy line that I've never said before," shrieks Minogue, turning round to the Seven PR who's been trying not to listen in on the other side of the room. "Look, I love having my sister because she's a great sister. She happens to be a superstar and that's great. There are no other juicy bits of the story. I have a great brother, too, and I'm very happy for him. It's not hard."

Her best friend, model and UK soap actor Benjamin Hart, says Minogue has never struggled with her sister's success. "There are always going to be comparisons but the thing about Dannii is that she's always had very strong ideas about what she wants to do," he says. "She's always tackled things slightly differently."

And as for that sibling rivalry? "Min [Kylie] is thick as thieves with Dan. There's no one else who understands their lives better than they do."

Anyway, Minogue's career as a dance artist has been ticking along quite nicely actually. The day after our interview, her cover of "He's The Greatest Dancer" reached number one in the UK club charts – her 11th number-one club hit there. (No other female artist has surpassed that figure.) "I don't think Dannii's ever had an easy ride," says Smith. "But in dance circles [in the UK] she's very well respected. Her singles were remixed early on by really good DJs, so it was a natural progression to go down that route."

"The thing with Dannii is that you never know what's coming next. But she always seems to be able to pull everything off. She's a fighter. She doesn't give up and she's not afraid to try something different and new."

Interview over and Minogue is off out into the 39°C heat of a Melbourne summer to do a photo shoot, rescheduled from yesterday because she was ill in bed with flu. She can't be feeling crash-hot but, in the best showbiz tradition, insists the show must go on. She laughs when she discovers the photographer once assisted her ex, Steve Shaw, on one of her shoots years ago. "See what I was saying about getting old?" she cries. "Now the assistants are shooting me!" ■

Australia's Got Talent premieres on Sunday February 18 on the Seven Network