

J-LO:

BETTER THAN EVER

WITH A NEW ALBUM, WORLD TOUR AND TOY BOY IN TOW, JENNIFER LOPEZ IS BACK WITH A VENGEANCE. BY TIFFANY BAKKER

Jennifer Lopez has quite the entourage. When I meet the singer in New York's star-infested Tribeca neighbourhood, it's immediately apparent we won't be having an intimate chat about her upcoming - and first - Australian tour. Instead, there are at least 15 other people in the small room as witness. Who the majority of them are, I have no idea (I'm not sure Lopez does, either), but they stand silently by, except in the moments when they laugh eagerly after the star says something vaguely funny.

Celebrity is an often odd existence, but Lopez has long lived an odd life, since getting her break as a dancer on US TV show *In Living Colour* in the early '90s. In the ensuing years, through her many hit albums (*On the 6*, *J.Lo*, *This Is Me... Then*), occasional hit movies (1998's *Out Of Sight* was good!) and a navel-bearing Versace dress that garnered world attention ("I just thought it was pretty"), she's become a global superstar.





“IT’S STILL ALL FRESH TO ME. I HAVEN’T BECOME JADED WITH THE STUFF THAT GOES ALONG WITH THIS BUSINESS AND BEING IN THE PUBLIC EYE”

It’s a long way from “Jenny from the Block”, who grew up in a cramped apartment in the Bronx, the middle of three sisters, and would sing and dance in the family’s lounge room. There have been lean periods, too, but in recent times, she’s prospered again. In May, *Forbes* magazine named Lopez number one on the Celebrity 100 List, anointing her the most powerful global celebrity of the past year and reporting she’d raked in \$52 million in a single year.

“I’m most proud that it’s still all new to me,” she says of her enduring career. “That it’s still fresh to me and I haven’t become jaded with all the stuff that goes along with this business and being in the public eye. I still enjoy going to a set and acting, I still enjoy going into the studio, and I get excited by a song or an idea for a film. I’m proud I’ve been able to hold on to that. That little girl inside me is still there. I know how this business can beat that out of you – I’ve seen it – but I’ve been able to keep my feet on the ground and be grateful for the things I have and not take anything for granted.”

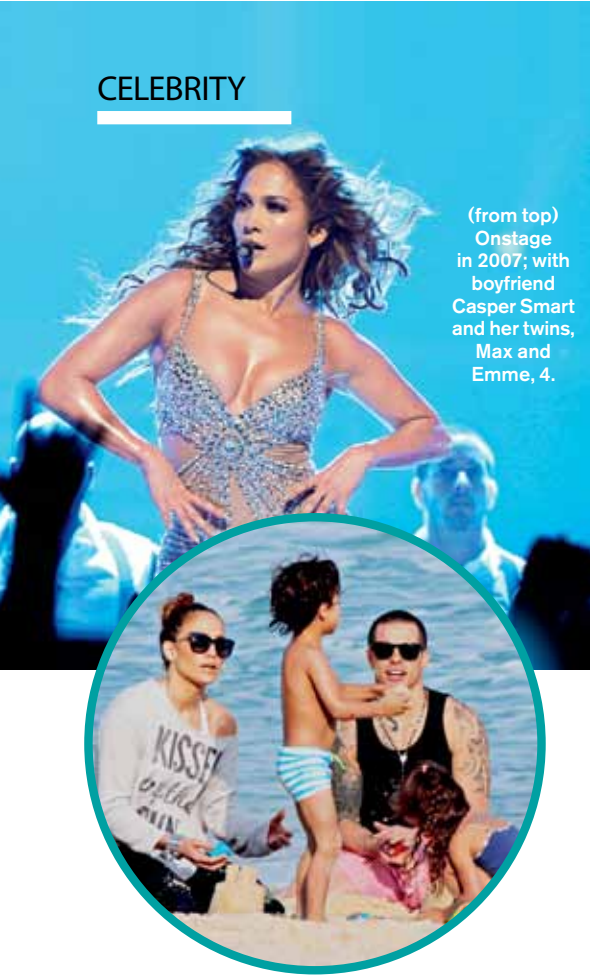
In person, Lopez is what you’d call, in that old fashioned sense of the word, a true ‘star’. She’s so utterly flawless, it’s as if she’s from another very attractive planet. In a dress that accentuates her figure, and heels so high I’m not sure how she walks in them, she’s truly stunning. It must be very strange, I venture, to walk through the world aware of your own beauty. “You haven’t seen me in the morning,” she replies with a snort. Her entourage giggles along, but still, it’s hard to imagine her looking much different in her pyjamas.

At 43, she’s enjoying something of a career revival. Her two seasons as a judge on *American Idol* (she was the nice, nurturing, constructive one) reintroduced her to the public and reinvigorated her career, which had floundered for much of the past decade.

Thanks to the show, her recording career has taken off again, too, and her 2011 single ‘On the Floor’ became her most successful in eight years. It was also the most viewed video on YouTube that year. Jenny, it seems, has her groove back.

“*American Idol* made people look at me differently, which surprised me because I always thought people knew how I was,” she explains. “I’d always get confused when the media would paint me to be different – it was so weird to me. But with reality TV, you really are exposed for who and what you are. I was lucky people saw the real me, and that changed some people’s opinion of who I was.” >

CELEBRITY



(from top)
Onstage
in 2007; with
boyfriend
Casper Smart
and her twins,
Max and
Emme, 4.

Over the years, Lopez had developed a reputation – deserved or not – for being a demanding diva; a perception that annoys her. “It’s disappointing, because you’re a good person and you try to live a good life,” she says. “You’re working hard to create things people enjoy, and you have this counteraction of gossip and lies and negative energy. It comes with the territory and I’m not trying to complain about it. Everybody has to go through it, but it’s not nice when it’s just lies.”

She says nobody would bat an eyelid if she were a man. “Men definitely don’t go through what I have,” she adds, rolling her eyes. “It’s completely sexist. Even if men are nightmares – and I’ve worked with some actors and thought, eew – nobody hears about it, so everybody thinks they’re the nicest guys. It’s like, men are powerful, whereas I get called a b*tch.”

In the mid ’90s, Lopez suffered something of a backlash; her private life hit the headlines and the public seemed to tire of her. After a failed marriage to waiter Ojani Noa in 1997 (they divorced in 1998 and ended up in court after he tried to sell intimate details of their relationship), she dated Sean ‘Diddy’ Combs,

before marrying back-up dancer Cris Judd in 2001. They split in 2002. Then there was the engagement to Ben Affleck later that year (with whom she cavorted on a yacht for her ‘Jenny from the Block’ video and starred in two disastrous films, *Gigli* and *Jersey Girl*). Ultimately, the media saturation that went with the relationship led to their break-up.

“It was ridiculous and crazy,” she recalls. The pair remain “friendly”, with Affleck saying, “When she landed *American Idol*, I said, ‘This was really smart. Good luck.’ I touch base. I respect her. I like her. She’s put up with some stuff that was unfair in her life, and I’m really pleased to see her successful.”

Lopez then rekindled her relationship with Latino singer Marc Anthony (they dated in 1999). They wed in 2004, had twins Max and Emme in 2008, but split last year. She admits the focus on her failed romances hurts.

“Imagine going through something personal and somebody finds out and starts talking about it, and it hurts you. Now imagine a global level of people saying things about you,” she explains. “It’s awful, but you just have to know what’s real. I know what I did and I know what the true story is.”

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Not that she's given up on love. "I'm such a romantic, I've always been so in love with love," she adds. "Maybe I should've been more careful, but I don't regret what I've been through to get here."

For the past year, she's been dating her former back-up dancer Casper Smart, 25, who's now the choreographer on her Dance Again World Tour, which heads to Australia in December. "We work well together creatively. He inspires me, I inspire him, and we can do something that someone who doesn't have that kind of love for you can't."

Her greatest love, though, are her four-year-old twins. "The best thing about being a mom is the love you feel and the joy they bring to you," she says. "I'm never happier or more complete than when I'm lying in bed with my babies, watching a movie."

She believes her kids have put things into perspective when it comes to her career. "I'm better at saying no now. As long as they're all right and healthy, and I'm healthy for them, that's all that matters," she says. "It helps you go, 'Everything can wait.' Whereas before, it was more like, 'Ah, I have to do that, I have to stay up.' Now it's like, 'You know what, it'll be

there in the morning. I'm going to sleep now and I'll see you in the morning.'"

It's another reason she left *American Idol* this year (happy to let Mariah Carey and Nicki Minaj duke it out at the judge's table), despite advice it would hurt her career.

"I loved *Idol*, but I had to go with my gut that it was time to get back to doing what I do," she says. "It's fun to be a judge and it was a great thing for me. But, creatively, it wasn't fulfilling to me as a person."

And that means going back on tour, kids in tow. "They watch the show almost every night - they love it, they're excited by it." Max and Emme, it seems, are starting to show signs of their parents' talent. "We were having lunch and I started singing [hit song 'Waiting for Tonight'], 'Cause I have spent all of my life', and at the same time both of them go, 'Waiting for tonight, oh-oh'. It was hilarious.

"I could employ them as back-up singers," she adds. "They'd be cheaper." The other 15 people in the room laugh loudly, as if this is the funniest thing they've ever heard. ■

Jennifer Lopez brings her Dance Again World Tour to Australia from December 6 to 18. For more information, visit www.ticketek.com.au.

BACKSTAGE ROMANCES

LOPEZ ISN'T THE FIRST STAR TO DATE ONE OF HER BACK-UP DANCERS. HERE'S A LOOK AT OTHER SINGERS WHO FOUND LOVE ONSTAGE.

BRITNEY SPEARS

Spears hooked up with dancer Kevin Federline in 2004. They married in October of that year and Spears subsequently gave birth to two sons, Sean and Jayden, before filing for divorce in 2006.

MADONNA

Young boys seem to be a weakness for the Queen of Pop. The 54-year-old's latest squeeze, dancer Brahim Zaibat, is 25, making him 29 years her junior. They've been together for almost two years.

PRINCE

His royal purpleness first met dancer Mayte Garcia when she was 16, and she later became his onstage muse then his girlfriend. The couple married in 1996, when she was 22 and he was 37. After the tragic death of their newborn son, they drifted apart and divorced in 2000.

MEL B

The former Spice Girl married back-up dancer Jimmy Gulzar in 1998, and their daughter, Phoenix, was born in 1999. The relationship didn't last and Mel B filed for divorce in 2000 amid a highly publicised custody battle for their daughter.

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