

Time to move on

Pop star ... celebrity marriage ... *Doctor Who* ... but now the much-travelled **Billie Piper** is ready for new challenges, as she tells Andrew Duncan

Billie Piper is a mistress of immaculate timing, even though she's still only 23. She was, at 15, the youngest British pop singer to have a debut number-one hit; quit singing just before it destroyed her; married Chris Evans to their mutual advantage and, perhaps, sanity; separated before they became bitter; and next week leaves *Doctor Who*, acclaimed as the Doctor's assistant

filmed in Wales for nine months and I didn't like being away from home [in north London]. I enjoy being domesticated, washing-up and cooking dinner for my boyfriend [a 28-year-old law student, Amadu Sowe.] I'd love to have kids, but don't know how people manage with a job like this. It's the one thing you really can't afford to f*** up. So many people have kids willy-nilly." She saw enough of that growing up in

obsessed with acting from the age of seven, not because I'm running away from myself – I'm happy in my own skin. I like being other people as well."

Acting was put on hold when, aged 14, she was spotted by a music producer, changed her name from Leian Paul Piper to be packaged as "Billie", and had a hit with *Because We Want To*, followed by three more hits before she was 18. "Weird. But I wasn't surprised. At first I didn't change. I was a little girl from Swindon, but managers and others work you to death, and you become exhausted and bitter. I was young, green and taken advantage of. There was a massive financial rip-off and, although I was working twice as hard as I am now, I was left with hardly any money.

"I'm not moaning because I chose to do it, but it was my downfall. I was high-maintenance – not demanding, because >

"The longer I stayed in *Doctor Who*, the more scared I'd be of leaving"

Rose Tyler, in "a stunning exit", according to executive producer Russell T Davies. As she'll admit later, she's also ecdemomaniac (a person who has an abnormal compulsion to travel).

We meet in Liverpool where she's been up until four in the morning filming writer Philip Pullman's Victorian thriller *The Ruby in the Smoke* for BBC1, but now, at lunchtime, she's bright-eyed, fresh-faced, eager and articulate, eating crisps and a Boots' prawn mayonnaise sandwich. She's unmade up, fairly scruffy. "When I was younger I was obsessed with how I looked, trying to appeal to everyone. Now I'm over being vain." Although she says her early career made her "thick-skinned and cynical", there's no hint of either today.

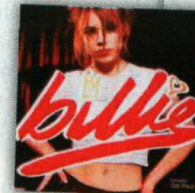
The *Doctor Who* decision was taken a year ago, but remained secret until recently. "The longer I stayed the more scared I'd be of leaving because it's so comfortable and nice. I'm utterly grateful for the whole experience, but you have to take care of yourself and do what you feel is right. We

Swindon, where her father was a builder and her mother an aspiring singer ["She's likeable, beautiful, talented, but softer than me, so I don't know if she could hack it"]. "I always wanted to leave that small-town mentality, and saw a lot of things I didn't want to repeat – major drug abuse, living off the dole, wives beaten up by husbands. I felt very frustrated, easily bored. I wasn't starved of being a child. I was desperate to be adult, to work. I was focused and precocious. My dad's a real grafter who instilled a great work ethic in me and my two younger sisters and brother."

At 12, Billie left home to live in London with relatives while studying at acting school. "My parents knew it was best for me, and trusted me because I wasn't that naughty. I was

WHO'S THAT GIRL?

Billie as a 15-year-old pop star (right), and as Sally Lockhart (far right) in an on-set shot from *Ruby in the Smoke*



<I didn't have the balls, but stropky, and drinking too much. I never thought it was a problem – it's only with hindsight you realise you were a bit out of control. I still turned up for work – even though I had a face like a slapped a**e. My eyes were vague and dead, and my mouth was smiling without feeling in a false pose I'd become accustomed to."

Russell T Davies says he would be on cocaine in the gutter now if he'd had her early life, and there were lurid headlines – 'Facing burnout at 17?' – and tales of drug taking. "I tried all those things, but it never became a problem. I was so green and that's what saved me – otherwise I may have got into it more because everyone else was and it seemed like fun. I can't remember much – is that good or bad? I had a very dark moment at 16 when I didn't want to be here any more, but I did nothing about it, thank God. I had my head in the clouds, was mad, neurotic and self-destructive, a very different character to the one you see today. I was saved mostly by my parents, friends and boyfriends, but it could have gone either way. The stories didn't worry me because I didn't read them, but they upset my poor mum."

"Chris Evans taught me fame is a game and unimportant. At times it's a bit embarrassing"

Her mother and father were even more upset when they heard in 2001 on Virgin Radio that Billie, 18, had married Chris Evans, then 34, in Las Vegas. "I regret it in retrospect," says Billie, "and we didn't speak for a while, although they understand now that at the time I had to be selfish. I didn't want them to question it because in my head it was perfect, the first time in years I felt happy. It was simple and sweet. Chris and I found each other when it could have gone badly for both of us, and we saved each other from our worlds of madness."

They went on a two-year long "therapeutic" honeymoon. Having done that, they drifted apart and are divorcing in September, so it can be "no fault". They remain good friends. "We didn't want to accuse each other of being a***holes. I'm not taking a penny from him. I think that's disgusting."

"Chris taught me fame is a game and unimportant. At times it's a bit f***ing annoying, know what I mean? No, embarrassing. It makes me blush when

I walk down the street and there's a sea of photographers. I won't go to premieres because I hate walking up those bloody red carpets. It stresses me out massively. My hands get really clammy."

Evans encouraged her to return to acting, and she was a critical success as a singer in the BBC's 2003 update of Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*, followed by Bella in the BBC2 care-home drama *Bella and the Boys*. "I'd like to do more gritty plays like that. They teach you to be compassionate and patient."

Her next job is starring as Fanny Price in an ITV1 dramatisation of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, but, she says, surprisingly, "I don't get that many offers. It's a slow burn. When I started acting I'm sure people wouldn't go near me because I'd been a singer, and that preconceived idea you can't do more than one thing. It upset me for a while, but I'd probably be the same. Acting is so much better. The people are nicer, and I feel I'm part of the creative process. We're like gypsies, travelling from one family to the next." She remains as star-struck as the

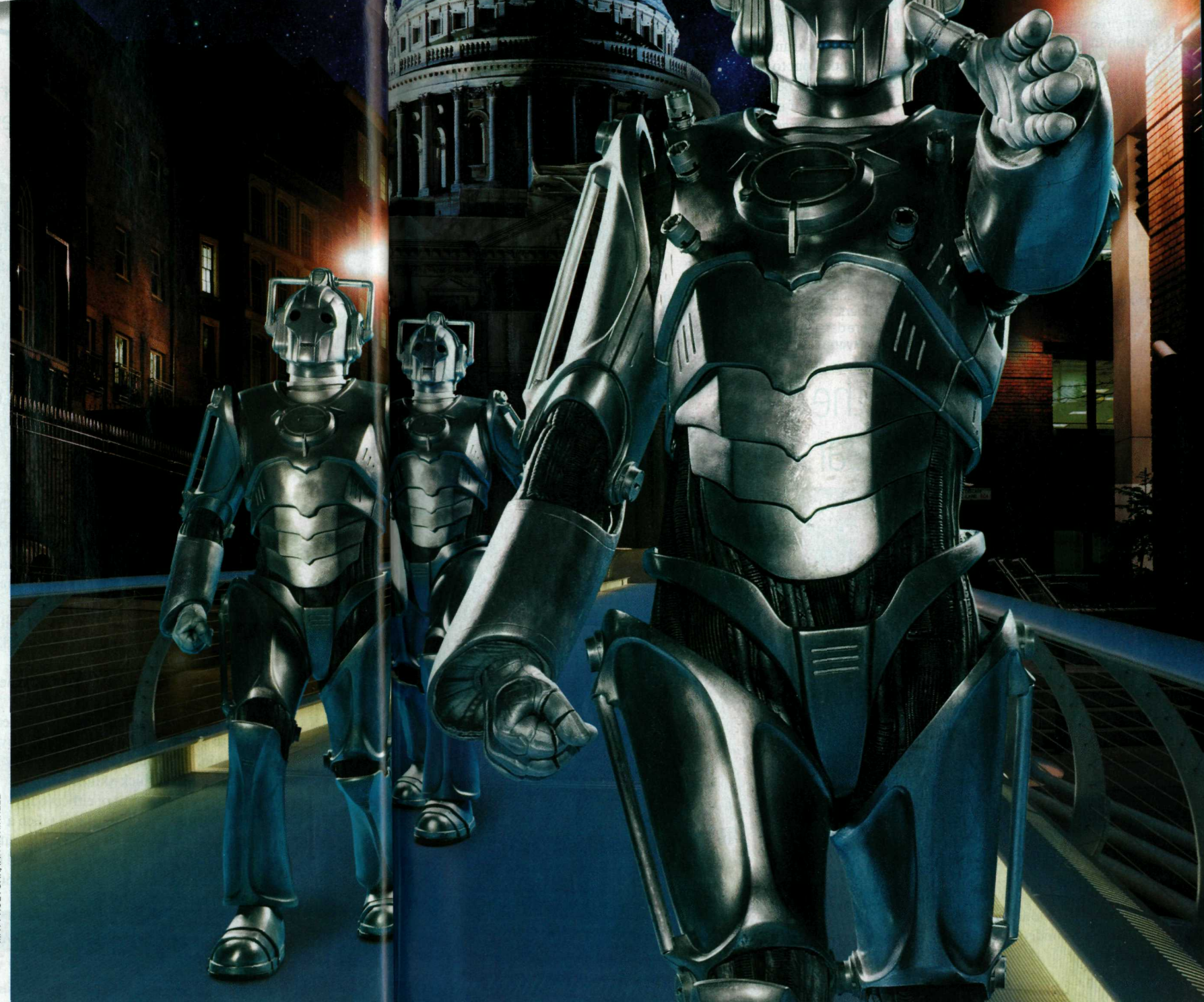
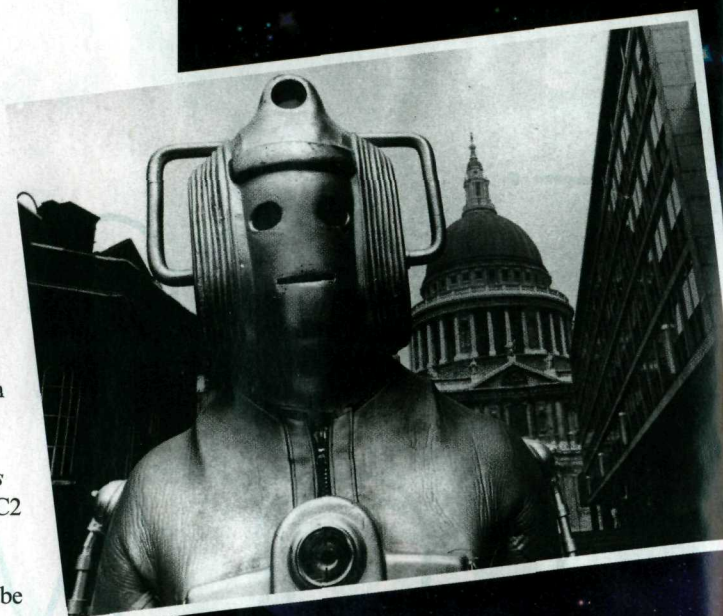
seven-year-old in Swindon. "I'm working with Julie Walters [on *The Ruby in the Smoke*] – she has no idea what she means to me, and I'm too embarrassed to tell her, which is stupid because she's so normal."

Next, she says, she'd like to backpack in India and Africa. I joke she's ecdemomaniac, and she squeals with delight. "I love new words. I must use that." Perhaps in the autobiography she's writing. "Ridiculous, I know, but someone else is writing a book about me, so I'm going to tell my own story. I hope it's an inspiration to young girls who constantly ask how I did it. I'll strip it all bare and let them decide if it's still something they want to do. My life has been a nice balance of healthy and unhealthy situations. It will be warts and all."

My ten times a night with Chris? "Much to his disappointment – no," she giggles. "Nor will it be a nasty kiss-and-tell, or 'My life in hell'. I hope it will be a bit of a laugh. It should be. Because that's what my life has been."

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PHOTO
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DOCTOR WHO
POSTER OFFER
STARTING IN
NEXT WEEK'S
RADIO TIMES

As the Cybermen return to Doctor Who this week – and in tribute to the 1968 classic *The Invasion* (inset, opposite) – Radio Times has produced an exclusive poster recreating the terrifying moment when the Cybermen marched by St Paul's Cathedral. Nowadays, the area is at one end of the Millennium Bridge.

The double-sided poster (59x84cm) is the perfect size for a bedroom wall. To order it, you'll need to collect two tokens from Radio Times and complete the order form which will be printed in the issue dated 15 July (on sale from Tuesday 11 July).

The first poster token is printed next week – don't miss it!