

BILLIE THE KID

A pop star at 14, married to Chris Evans at 19, single again at 21 and now starring as Dr Who's assistant – Billie Piper's growing up has been fast, painful and public

INTERVIEW: GARRY JENKINS PORTRAIT COLIN BELL



Billie Piper's life has refused to conform to normal conventions of time and space. It's as if everything around her has been speeded up, allowing her to condense a lifetime's worth of experiences into her first 22 years on Earth. By the age of 11, she had left home in Swindon for drama school in London. At 14, she was Britain's answer to Britney Spears, a perfectly packaged piece of pop merchandise. By 19, she had

turned her back on music and tumbled into tabloid notoriety by marrying the unruly Chris Evans. At 21, she was single again and reinvented as a serious actress, winning plaudits for her performance in, of all things, a new version of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

All of which, as she admits, makes her latest screen role as companion to the new Dr Who seem ludicrously made-to-measure. "I know, I don't know if it's art imitating life or life imitating art. I've led quite a strange and fantastic life for seven or eight years."

On a snowy Monday morning, Piper is – for once – at rest. Tomorrow, she'll be back in Cardiff, on the set of the new, 13-part version of British television's iconic show, alongside Christopher Eccleston as the Tardis-dwelling Time Lord. But on a rare day off, she is camped in a corner of a Soho hotel, sipping Diet Coke, drawing on a cigarette and recharging her batteries. "It is a load of fun. Kind of what you'd wish for as a kid. But it's knackered," she says of the six-month-long shoot. "It's also quite weird, getting up for work in the morning and thinking, here we go, off to save the world again."

Piper has grown out of the blonde-bobbed, slightly chubby, ingénue look of her pop star days. Today, her hair is shaggy, and she is dressed in boots, black skirt and jumper. Her only protection from the cold is a voluminous black shawl that she keeps wrapped around her shoulders. Yet she is a decidedly sunny presence, often self-deprecating, bright, articulate and eager to please. The BBC's decision to cast her in the role of Rose Tyler, the Doctor's companion, is a canny one on several levels. First off, whatever its tweedy, scarf-wearing older devotees may think, the regenerated Doctor will live or die by his ability to attract young audiences. Billie is a name to draw in millions who, like her, aren't steeped in the show's history.

"I didn't grow up with it," she says. "But it's not just about pleasing the old fans, it's about bringing a new group to the table. I don't think we have to be too hung up on that. The show keeps the essence of *Dr Who*, but it's a different time. People have changed."

On another level, executive producer Russell T. Davies and the team have understood that Billie Piper and Rose – a down-to-earth girl in a dead-end job who runs off to subvert the laws of the universe – are a perfect acting fit. "I can definitely relate to that feeling of being trapped and wanting to go out there to see more of the world and what it has to offer," Piper agrees, with a megawatt grin.

In *Dr Who*, Rose flits through time, visiting Victorian Cardiff, London in the Blitz and the edge of the universe. Along the way, she falls foul of a ghoul's gallery of aliens, from mannequin-like Autons and reptilian Slitheens, to ghostly Gelth and, of course, Daleks. The journey Piper has undertaken over the past 11 years is only slightly less far-fetched. And it has had its share of villains and heroes.

Even at the age of ten, she was restless to break free from what she describes as a happy life in Swindon. "I don't know where it >>

came from. I've got no tragic tale. My parents are solid, lovely people, but I just wanted more all the time." Her mother planted the seed, it seems. "She kicked off all the creativity, because I think she wanted secretly to be a dancer and singer. She can do everything I can do - probably much better if she was given the opportunity."

By the time she reached secondary-school age, Piper had won a place at the Sylvia Young Theatre School in London. So she left Swindon to live with a great-aunt and uncle. "I was so desperate to be an adult. I just wanted to do stuff on my own, to see things, to get out of Swindon and get to London and to school and act every day, not just once a week at an after-school class." She was 14 when she was spotted by music producer Hugh Goldsmith. "I didn't even want to be a singer. I never thought about it. I did some commercials for *Smash Hits* and ended up on the front cover of *Music Week* as the new *Smash Hits* girl. Hugh Goldsmith saw me and at the time he was starting up his own sister label to Virgin. And he wanted to sign a really young female soloist. He came to my school and hunted me down. He asked me if I could sing and I just went, 'Yeah, I'll do it.'"

Goldsmith packaged her as "Billie", playing on her effervescent, pubescent appeal and arming her with anodyne, catchy hits. At 15, she became the youngest female artist to reach No 1 in 40 years with *Because We Want To*. Three years later, with record sales at 1.3 million, she had become the closest thing to a British Britney Spears.

Few teenagers could have failed to appreciate the experience. "There's nothing like being on stage in front of a live audience. The response and that buzz. I loved all that," she says. But inevitably the dysfunctionality of the life took its toll on her - and those around her. "Only now can I understand some of the bad times. It must have been so hard for my parents to accept the fact that their child was no longer at home. My mother missed that teenage life with me." By her own admission, she didn't make matters any easier. "I was quite demanding," she says. "It was ignorance. My parents were the only people who would say no to me. That used to wind me up."

By the time she celebrated her 18th birthday, however, it was the life she led that was driving her to distraction. "Every day you are just getting up, your schedule has been organised and you get in a car and have someone drive you to meetings and video recordings and performances. I loved being on stage and making videos, but the other stuff I found tedious. I missed my home. It started sending me a bit crazy, I think." She was on a downward spiral. "Towards the end, I was so tired. I stopped caring. You start beating yourself down and you don't have the energy. Everything suffers."

The low point came while she was touring America. "I was in Chicago, and it suddenly dawned on me that I didn't want to be there doing this. It petrified me. I thought, what else am I going to do? And I thought, I'm going to have to let some people down. I'm a massive people-pleaser and didn't want to hurt anyone." She was also guilt-ridden. "I used to think: 'I know so many kids at stage school who are desperate to be pop stars. And here I am thinking I don't want to do this.'"

Her saviour arrived in the unlikelyst of guises. In 2000, after appearing on his radio show, she fell for Chris Evans, the *enfant terrible* of British radio and television. Sixteen years her senior and at the peak of his maverick powers, Evans offered the advice her father would have given if she'd been willing to listen to it. It was Evans who gave her strength to pull the plug on her music career. "I met Chris and he said, 'You don't have to do this if you don't want to do it: it's your prerogative to take time out and get back into acting.' I couldn't have done it on my own. Sometimes you're so



'CHRIS SAVED ME FROM A LOT AND I HOPE I HELPED HIM. HE'S AN AMAZING MAN'

involved you can't see the wood for the trees. You need somebody to pick you up and shake you around to give you time to breathe."

The split with Virgin was rancorous. And when her relationship with Evans became public knowledge, her story - from the outside, at least - began to take on the familiar look of crash-and-burn celebrity. Billie's love of all-night benders in Soho seemed as great as that of the legendarily boozy Evans. The tabloids gorged themselves on pictures of them with a supermarket trolley piled with booze, or partying in London. Their age difference - and the fact she was just 19 - provoked mutterings about cradle-snatching and bad influences. The happy couple simply stuck two fingers up and carried on.

"We fell so madly in love that it didn't bother me what anybody else thought," she says. To the amazement of those who had predicted the relationship's rapid demise, they married in Las Vegas in May, 2001. Two months later, however, Evans was sacked by Virgin Radio, the company he had bought from Richard Branson for £85 million, then sold for £225 million in 2000. He'd been seen out drinking with Billie when he'd told the station he was too ill to work. It marked a downturn in his career. As their stars waned, Mr and

Mrs Evans began to look like a couple in mutual freefall. Her body language becomes defensive at mention of the headlines that swirled around her.

"There was so much bullshit written about me and it upset my family so much that I reached a point where I thought, 'I can't take it any more.' I had to stop reading what everybody wrote."

In the end, she and Evans headed into the sunset - or a series of them, travelling the world for two years. It was during a three-month stay in Los Angeles that Billie rediscovered her direction. "We went to LA. He wanted to write, we wanted to chill and I wanted to study again. I needed to be anonymous, I wanted to approach it as any other student would." She studied at the Larry Moss school at weekends. "Sharpening up what I learnt at Sylvia Young. Classes in emotional memory. All the stuff that sometimes bordered on a crazy kind



Billie Piper celebrates her 18th birthday with her parents (top); with Chris Evans (above)