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ALANIS MORISSETTE

Stepping out of her comfort zone

+ SOCCER IN TOKYO | YACHTING IN THE CARIBBEAN | SCRABBLE IN POLAND



FOR THE WOMAN behind the best-selling album ever recorded by a female, Alanis Morissette remains a mystery. In the six years since *Jagged Little Pill* was released, it has sold 28 million copies, and she has become the archetypal angry young female, the kooky songstress, the world-conquering rock star and the mad hippy. She was even God, for a time, in Kevin Smith's movie *Dogma*. It's taken until this year for her finally to feel happy just being her.

"You know, I'm comfortable in my own skin now," 28-year-old Morissette says softly, calmly, today tucked away in a dressing room of a London TV studio. She has just performed two tracks for the audience of a teen music show, and still wears heavy make-up, but has changed from her stage outfit into a red sweatshirt,

faded jeans ripped away at the calves and pointy, laced boots. She's small, extremely slender and far prettier than she will appear on this or any other TV show.

"I grew up in a very patriarchal environment and went to the other extreme, where I thought I had to be masculine, but I feel more feminine now than I have ever felt in my whole life. It was so frustrating during *Jagged Little Pill*. I felt misunderstood all the time and felt really urgently like I wanted to say, 'No! This is who I am! I'm not just angry!'" She twiddles the end of the long, trademark hair she later calls "my security blanket" and, for a moment, looks hurt at the mere memory. "But, then, some time after *Jagged Little Pill*, I just went, 'Ah, who cares? It doesn't matter.' I was talking to a dear friend about it recently, about how great it is to

be misunderstood and be okay with it. That's a big thing."

Contentment has been a long time coming for Alanis Morissette. Though her success seemed overnight, she actually released her first self-penned single at the age of nine. A year later, she starred in a children's TV show and at 16, she was Canada's teen queen, a Britney Spears-style pop phenomenon.

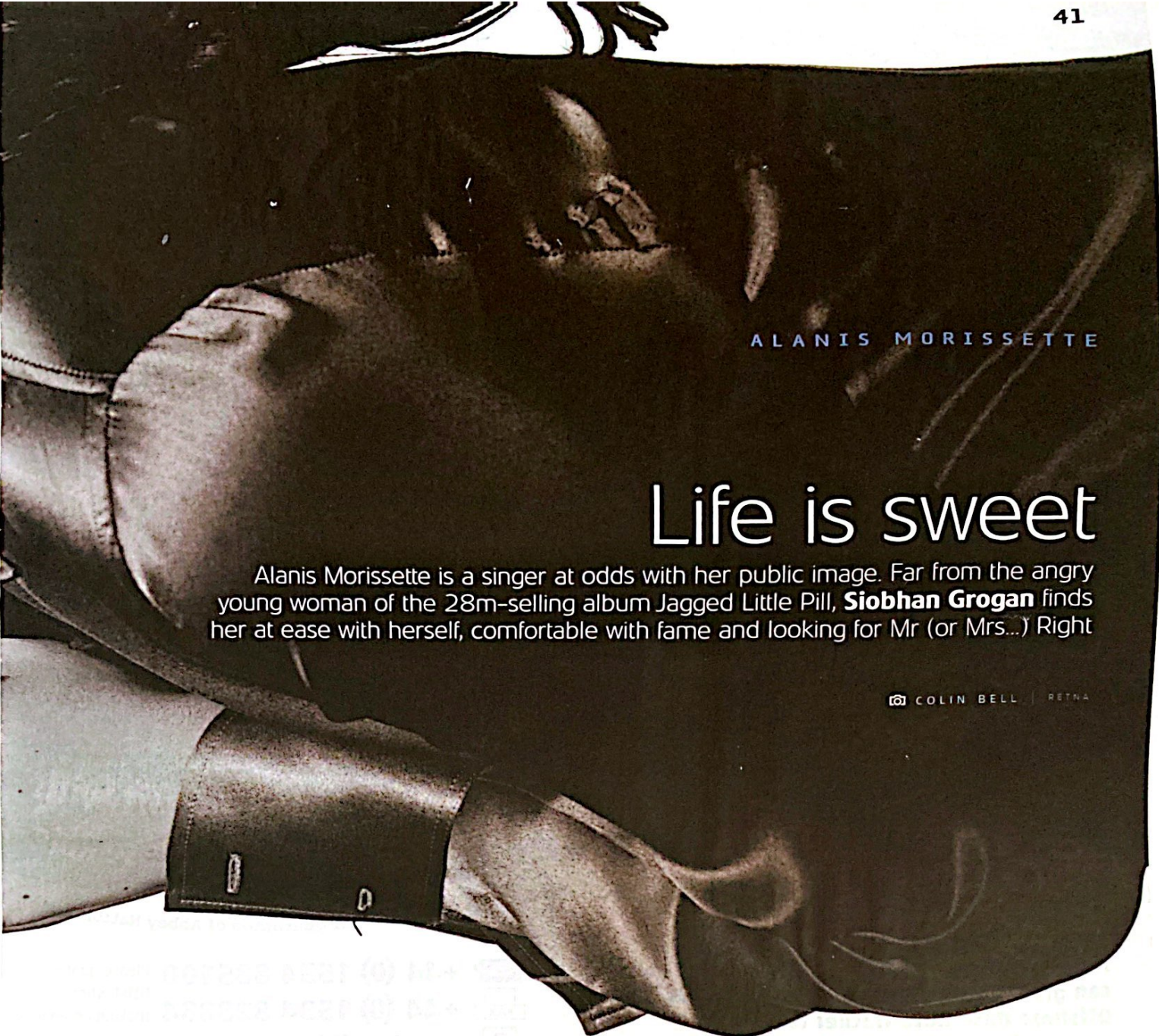
"It feels like another lifetime," Morissette admits of the dubious past she has somehow remarkably transcended. "I can really look at her – or that part of me – and have such clear objectivity because of how far I am from that now."

Admirably, she also refuses to succumb to any embarrassment over the bubble-gum choruses and bad dance routines of old. "I have

ALANIS MORISSETTE

Life is sweet

Alanis Morissette is a singer at odds with her public image. Far from the angry young woman of the 28m-selling album *Jagged Little Pill*, **Siobhan Grogan** finds her at ease with herself, comfortable with fame and looking for Mr (or Mrs...) Right


 COLIN BELL | RETNA

no regrets at all. I hear those songs once in a while, and they sound earnest. It's almost like looking at a photo of yourself when you were ten. People don't go, 'Oh, I shouldn't have worn that purple shirt'. It's just, well," she shrugs, "I did and I was. Everything I've ever done I see in that sort of a way. Like a photo."

By the age of 21, Morissette had achieved the unthinkable. She had neatly packed away her pop past, and released her debut international album, *Jagged Little Pill*, on Madonna's record label, Maverick. The awkward fury and stadium grunge of anthems like *You Oughta Know* and *Ironic* touched a nerve and the sales, awards (seven Grammys) and tours (twice around the world) quickly followed. Morissette had become a very rich, very famous rock star without even stopping to think if that was what she wanted to be.

"It was part of my purpose of being on this earth just to express myself and define myself and I certainly was motivated by ego, too," she explains, verging on a typically Morissette ramble. Sometimes, she seems to begin a sentence with no real idea where she plans to end it, throwing in phrases that have previously never existed beyond a self-help textbook but with a conviction that makes cynicism difficult. "There's a part of me when I was younger that thought, this is what I've been taught my whole life to do. To, quote unquote, achieve."

Her 'sudden' worldwide success came as a shock, then, as if Morissette had thus far been operating on autopilot. She smiles steadily at the memory of the craziness, and the bewilderment that followed. "After *Jagged Little Pill*, I had what I felt was a conceptual death. None of it seemed

worth it to me. It was like I felt that I don't barely want to be alive right now, let alone go back into that. I mean, I love money. Money's fun. But fame? I had a real problem with it. An inner conflict with it for a long while."

She resolved this, in part, by going off to 'find herself' in Asia. On her return, she released the all-important follow-up album, *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*. The furious rants about ex-boyfriends had been replaced by musical monologues on religion, fame, India, gender; the stand-out singalong choruses were abandoned for songs with the same verbose, exploring spirit Morissette has when she speaks. It was brave, challenging, laughable in parts and ultimately too strange for most to get their head round.

"I wrote a lot of songs with no regard to

structure or anything," she nods, twiddling the hair again. "That was a rebellion of sorts to all the craziness that happened with *Jagged Little Pill* and the ensuing pressure I was placed upon."

It was an album that was very difficult to listen to. "I knew that. I knew when I was writing it that there were less accessible songs. It felt the brunt of the expectation, and it got its ass kicked in that sense."

Was the pressure to repeat the debut album's success daunting?

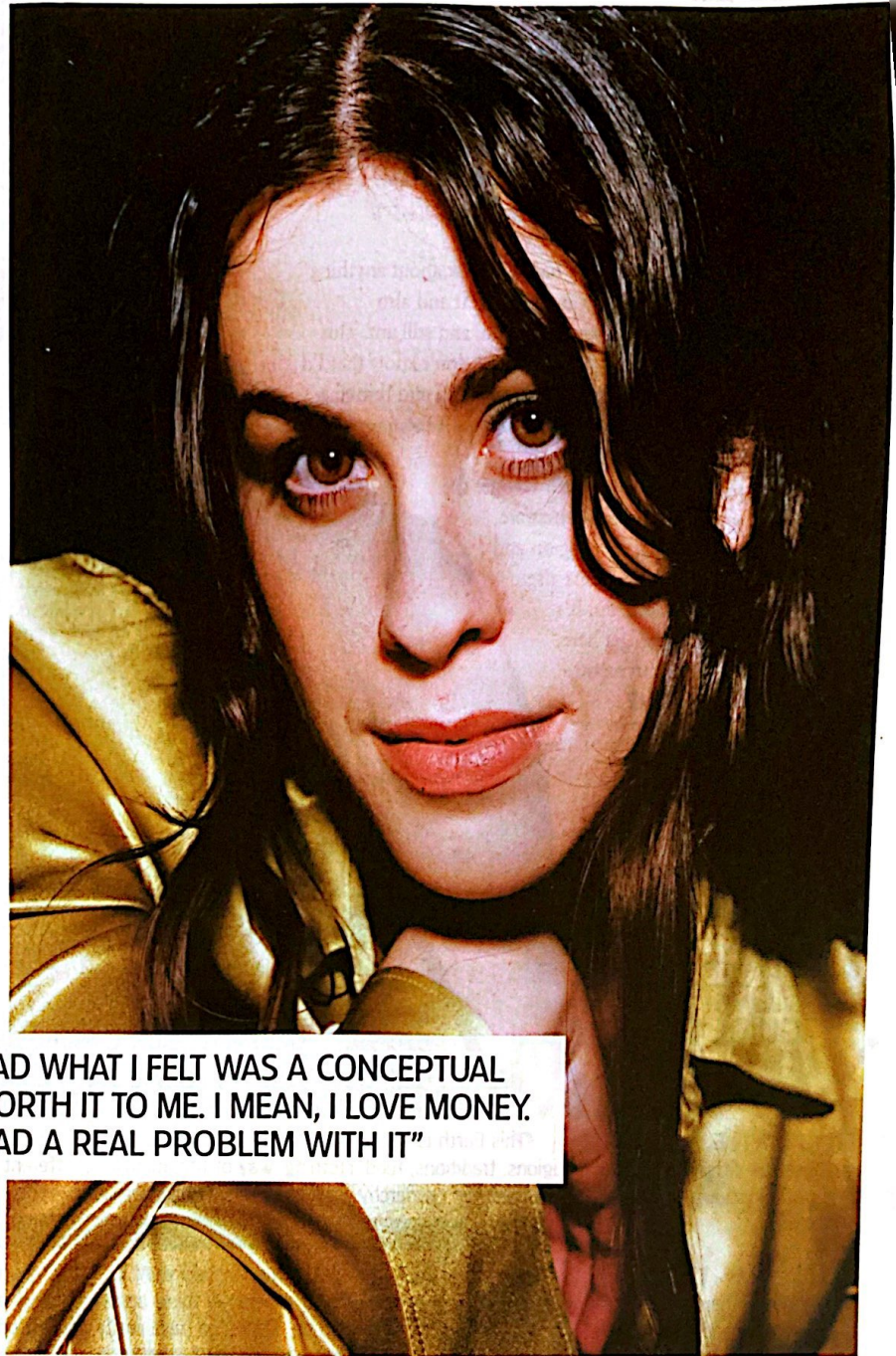
"I don't use that as a template to go by. Every song I've ever written has come from the same place and it's had the same non-existent level of expectation on my part. But, certainly, people around me... there's only so much I can do to counter their expectations. Me being one individual. And I cry about it sometimes because I don't have any expectations. I love what I do and I love to communicate with as many people as I possibly can but, at the end of the day, the act of defining myself and expressing myself is all that it's about to me."

The past three years have finally given Morissette some space to realise exactly who she is. The extremes that have thus far characterised her personality, music, career highs and lows, even her dress sense have given way to a woman who finally seems in control of her own destiny. She's spent her time away buying and decorating an apartment in her hometown of Ottawa, practising yoga, watching movies, reading constantly and travelling the world.

"AFTER JAGGED LITTLE PILL, I HAD WHAT I FELT WAS A CONCEPTUAL DEATH. NONE OF IT SEEMED WORTH IT TO ME. I MEAN, I LOVE MONEY. MONEY'S FUN. BUT FAME? I HAD A REAL PROBLEM WITH IT"

Morissette played for the Pope ("He was, uh, sweet!" she laughs), received a UN Global Tolerance Award, and toured the Middle East and Eastern Europe, documenting visits and performances in 15 countries, including Lebanon, Croatia and Turkey, on the internet. "There were all these countries I really wanted to go to," she explains. "I just wanted to meet people, and the internet and the technology itself I've embraced, but I hadn't really taken that next step of connecting with people consistently and meeting them face to face. So, basically, we got to meet a lot of young people in each city through the internet. They act as an ambassador for their city and took me around to their mosques or whatever it was so I really got a sense of the culture through someone else's eyes."

Despite all this, when Morissette looks back on her recent past, she seems to date the years in terms of relationships. Her new, and most accessible album yet, *Under Rug Swept*, is



obsessed by them, by feelings of inadequacy, pointlessness, unsuitability. It's like listening to a particularly revealing diary entry set to music and reveals the real person behind the spectacular voice better than any of her previous records. Most strikingly of all, it also indicates Morissette has had some nasty break ups recently, too.

"Before I started writing this record, I knew I had to prepare myself because a lot of clarity comes from songwriting, in my experience. I was in a relationship and knew if I started singing or writing my truths, the truth would emerge that I wasn't supposed to be with this person any more. Which can be scary. So that was why I was purposely not writing because

I didn't want to face that. It's horrifying. But then inevitably I started writing, and we started talking, and I started sharing these songs with him, and then we broke up."

With everything else in her world so idyllic, it seems Morissette's love life is the one area she feels still needs work. She claims the lowest point in her life "was two relationships ago and the end of that particular relationship". She giggles girlishly over keeping in touch with exes via e-mail ("You're not as self-conscious, and they have to listen! It's genius!") and claims she's thinking seriously about adopting a child. She says she has also contemplated, but refuses to believe, she is better off on her own. "Believe me, I've thought that every time I've broken up


with somebody! But I still persevere because it's fun and it's colourful. It's easy when I'm single and I don't like things necessarily being easy. I like being out of my comfort zone a little bit."

Her determination to find a relationship right for her has led to muttered speculation about Morissette's sexuality, especially since her brief cameo in the cult drama *Sex and the City* saw an on-screen kiss with Sarah Jessica Parker's character, Carrie Bradshaw.

Morissette grins again, surprisingly happy to talk about anything you care to throw at her. "I was having fun with it and also expressing what it was that I was exploring, too, and still am. This is the time to be experimenting with sexuality. I don't know that I'd want to be doing it if I have a family down the road and thinking, okay, now I'm 47... Although I could very well do it then, too, but I'd rather do it now, basically. It's perfect."

For now, the search goes on, though you get the feeling the strong-minded, quietly self-aware Morissette has spent so long working on and accepting her own character, anyone else will have difficulty measuring up. It's been a long, uphill battle to get here, after all, and she's not planning on changing now for anyone. ■

Under Rug Swept by Alanis Morissette is out now



ALANIS MORISSETTE'S GUIDE TO THE WORLD

ON PLANET EARTH | "This Earth is such a fascinating thing and people on it just kill me. Just the different cultures, religions, traditions, food, clothing, way of life, mindsets, different levels of consciousness and different levels of patriarchy - it's just mind-boggling to me."

ON CAPE TOWN | "I brought my parents along with me, and we went to Table Mountain and took some photos there. It's surprising most of all. There's definitely an energy there post-apartheid, and you can feel that in the air, no question. But it's not like I'd imagined it to be. They also have really great food."

ON FIJI | "Wow, amazing place! I love Fiji, but not on the main island. On any other island. Again, when I went, I brought my parents and my brother and his girlfriend. It was great. My twin brother and I did yoga together every day. He's cool. Flying family around is my favourite way to spend money. I also recently sent my mum, my grandma and my aunt to Budapest - to go back to the streets where they grew up. It's just such an awesome thing to travel."

ON SYDNEY | "There's something similar about Australians and Canadians. The sense of humour is similar, I think. The best thing about Sydney was just running around the Opera House. I have all these memories of my assistant and me getting up at, like, one in the morning and going running. We'd go across the Harbour Bridge and around the Opera House; I have some really fun memories from there."

ON JAPAN | "I love anywhere in Japan, as long as I'm on the trains, those bullet trains. I love Japan so much. Just the people, the food, their technology, the way the trains run and the way that they operate. There's an underbelly of it that I could talk for hours about not liking... but those are the things that I like. I would recommend that anyone who went there should go to the outside of the cities and check out the villages, the way they live there."