



The ORIGINAL

Marisa Berenson was the It girl of her generation – she worked with Kubrick, meditated with the Beatles and partied with Warhol. Tim Teeman meets the world's first supermodel

PORTRAITS Mike McGregor



MARISA BERENSON

Of course Marisa Berenson was there the night Bianca Jagger rode the white horse into New York's legendary club Studio 54 to mark her 32nd birthday in 1977. "There were so many nights like that," says Berenson laughing, at 63 her auburn hair still a ringleted, tumbling riot. "There was nothing special about it for me, and it's funny to think of what it's become in people's minds. It was just another night at Studio 54, which I loved. We danced and danced and danced. There were people flying from the ceiling naked."

Before Kate Moss, before Naomi (she knows both of them, even performing at Campbell's Haiti fundraiser earlier this year), Berenson was the It girl of her time, a beauty shot by Bailey, Avedon and Penn, romanced by a Rothschild and other playboy heirs, who partied with Warhol, meditated with the Beatles on an Indian ashram, and generally looked fabulous on magazine covers and in snatched paparazzi shots outside nightclubs. "They used to chase me everywhere," she says, rolling her eyes.

Yves Saint Laurent called Berenson "the girl of the Seventies". At one point, she was one of the highest paid models in the world. And she's still got it. Today, in a downtown New York studio with industrial fans warding off the wilting heat, she's sylph-like and dressed in simple black top and vintage white Ralph Lauren peasant skirt. There's not a strand of grey in her hair (she claims not to dye it) or line on her forehead. Her skin looks, well, taut is the polite way of putting it, though again, she denies having had plastic surgery or using Botox ("The idea of my face paralysed terrifies me").

Getting ready to be shot, she seems unhappy with the style of that famous hair and impatient for the fussing to end. Then – ta-dah! – in front of the camera she looks beautiful: engaged, mischievous. She has that transformative quality that the best models have. After the main part of her modelling career came to an end, she made a name for herself as an actress, specialising in icy, aristocratic beauties. She starred in *Cabaret* opposite her great friend Liza Minnelli (for which she was nominated for two Golden Globes and a Bafta), in Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice* and Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*. This year, she was in the melodrama *I Am Love* opposite Tilda Swinton.



Previous spread, inset: a 1967 Vogue shoot. Left: with her late sister, Berry, in 1986. Right: wearing a cobraskin jacket from Fleming-Joffe in a 1966 Vogue spread

'I remember, as a teenager, having my heart broken; Peter Sellers came over with Southern Comfort and a tub of caviar. We finished the lot'

It sounds like a charmed, glamorous life and, yes, Berenson agrees it has been, but, in an interview that begins in a cab at the end of the photoshoot and ends five hours later in a smart but far from chi-chi Upper East Side restaurant, she also talks about the downside: two failed marriages, a serious car crash, a privileged but tricky upbringing exacerbated by the early death of her father and then, on September 11, 2001, the death of her sister Berry, who was a passenger on the first plane flown by the terrorist hijackers into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre.

She knew her *Death in Venice* co-star Dirk Bogarde from when she was a little girl, she says, "like so many of the people I would work with later – there's been a lot of destiny in my career". Born in New York, her family then moved to Europe, where she was sent to a succession of boarding schools. Berenson's father, Robert, was the president of Aristotle Onassis's shipping company and her mother, Gogo Schiaparelli (the daughter of the famed couturier Elsa), a socialite.

Bogarde used to come to their Christmas parties in Klosters. At Christmas, Klosters was like a little Hollywood: Greta Garbo was there with writer Salka Viertel (Berenson assumed at the time she was Garbo's partner), along with Deborah Kerr and Audrey Hepburn.

"I grew up with them, not realising they were amazing stars; they were just friends." Gene Kelly would take her on sleigh rides in the snow and sing carols. Marisa and Berry would perform a number each for the guests: the vivacious, outgoing Berry something inspired by Jerry Lee Lewis, and behind her, "traumatised in my tutu", little Marisa. If Hepburn was her inspiration ("So gracious and such a gentle soul"), Peter Sellers supplied the laughs. "I remember once, as a teenager, having my heart broken and he came over with a bottle of Southern Comfort and a big tub of caviar. We finished the lot – he made me laugh so much my heartbreak healed completely."

If it sounds too perfectly gilded to be true, Berenson was an introspective, sensitive child who grew up into a melancholy adult. "I have lived all my life with the very early tension of wanting to live as a nun in a monastery, and that set against living the life I've had," she says gravely. She was close to her father, but not her mother, who would say that while Berry looked "like a female figure out of a Renoir painting", Marisa looked "like something out of a Modigliani". She decorated her room with images of Ava Gardner and others, and dreamt of a glamorous life. Her classmates called her Olive Oyl. "I was gawky-skinny; it was only when I went to school in Milan and ate pasta

1966

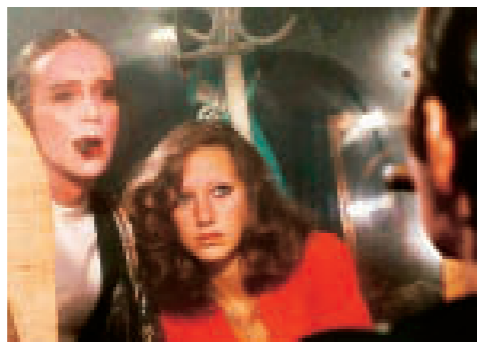


every day that I filled out." She felt "completely abandoned" at school and "misunderstood – although I was probably quite a handful". She liked art, philosophy, literature and designing her own clothes, but left school at 15 to come to New York to model. Ironically, she was rejected by the leading agency owner, Eileen Ford, who told her she would never make it.

Her break came when her father introduced her to Diana Vreeland, the legendary Editor-in-Chief of *American Vogue*. "She was a friend of my grandmother's and took me under her wing. She had an amazing eye and celebrated distinctiveness over conventional beauty," Berenson recalls. Wasn't she terrifying? "Not to me. She cooked weekend suppers and taught me about discipline. She nicknamed Berry and me the Mauretania and Berengaria, after the two ocean liners."

Her career began after her father's death from leukaemia when she was 16. "They didn't tell me what was going on, so I didn't have a proper chance to talk to or be with him," she says. "I wish I had been there when he passed on. Thank goodness we don't treat children like that today. It has been devastating for my entire lifetime and I've had to work very hard to get past it." She says she broke from her family after his death. "Everyone thinks I inherited money, or just had it, but I have worked for every penny I have."

First Vreeland got *Vogue* to photograph Berenson at a debutantes' ball. Berenson remembers Vreeland would send commanding memos to *Vogue* colleagues about her young charge: "Marisa's neck has grown two inches this year [this when Berenson turned 17]. Please emphasise the shape of her neck and face." Her grandmother, Elsa Schiaparelli, was a far more terrifying prospect. "She wasn't supportive in the slightest," says Berenson. "She thought that girls from good families shouldn't be models. She wanted me to marry a nice man and settle down." Did she call her grandma? "No," splutters Berenson. "She hated that. Always 'Schiap.' Schiaparelli's antipathy was unusual, notes Berenson: she too had left behind a restrictive family. She had blazed a trail for female fashion designers and striven to be independent just like her granddaughter. "Diana thought she was jealous. That she couldn't cope with another member of the family making it in fashion." As children,



Berenson with co-star Joel Grey in Bob Fosse's Oscar-winning *Cabaret*

Classmates called her Olive Oyl. 'I was gawky-skinny; it was only when I went to school in Milan and ate pasta every day that I filled out'

Marisa and Berry had been photographed in Schiaparelli dresses (ruby red with hot pink sashes), but as a young woman, living in her grandmother's Paris home, Berenson came to hate having to talk to her. "I knew the minute I'd see her, she'd look at what I was wearing, scowl and say, 'You're not going out the door looking like that. You look like a whore.'"

Berenson never thought she was pretty. She recalls going to black salons in New York in the Sixties in an attempt to straighten her natural curls. She and her good friend, the designer Diane von Furstenberg, would try to iron their hair: the resulting frizz and damage nullified any benefit, so she let the curls curl away.

In London, she became friends with Ossie Clark ("So whimsical") and Zandra Rhodes and then, at 19, was shooting a spread for *Vogue* in India when she decided to go to the ashram of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi "for a few months". She says she had been "searching for answers" since she was little, "wondering what God was, what my place in the world was, my mission, destiny, why I was here". When she arrived, there were other guests: Ringo Starr, George Harrison and the Beach Boys. "All day long we did transcendental meditation and then at night we sat on George's floor playing the guitar."

This is ridiculous, I say. Your life was full of famous people yet you seem so blasé about it.

"I didn't realise," Berenson says laughing. "It was just the most normal thing. I know now it was also amazing."

She says she has never taken drugs: "I went through the whole Sixties on orange juice and meditation, which is probably why I survived. Everyone around me was flying on LSD. The idea of losing my head, of losing control, seemed crazy." Come on, you must have slipped at some point? "OK, once, I had a puff of something and for about 12 hours thought I was going to die. It was the worst experience of my life. But I was never an addict of anything. I had the occasional vodka." Warhol must have tried giving you something at Studio 54, surely? She laughs. "Peter Sellers gave me some honey once, although later I found out the bees had been pollinating some kind of hashish because I had half a spoonful and for about three days I locked myself in my room where I hallucinated and felt, again, I was going to die. The point is, I'm very esoteric. I don't need any help going to another plane."

She says there was no competitiveness or bitchiness with the other supermodels of the time, Twiggy, Veruschka and the Shrimp, who were all friends. Berenson claims she never saw models being abused or exploited: "It was a different world to the one today." She was photographed by all the greats of the time. ➤

2010



David Bailey took her to Paris, aged 17, to model clothes from the collections. He never made a move on her, which only “momentarily devastated” her, she says now. “Dick” (Richard Avedon’s studio was full of music, but Irving Penn fascinated her most. “From the minute you walked into his studio, it was sacred, dead-quiet, like a church, so disciplined.” Warhol, was quiet, introverted: “He always thought he wasn’t good-looking but was fascinated by good-looking people. He’d always be clicking away, recording everything.”

When in 1976 she married for the first time, to rivet manufacturer James H. Randall, the wedding gown was designed by her good friend Valentino, who ironed it by hand in her Beverly Hills bathroom. It was ridiculously opulent and made the TV news. George Hamilton was Randall’s best man, Minnelli was one of Berenson’s bridesmaids. James Caan was there, along with Ryan O’Neal, Jack Nicholson and Anjelica Huston; Warhol buzzed around taking pictures. She and Randall had a daughter called Starlite, now 32, but the marriage only lasted 18 months. She married her second husband, Aaron Richard Golub, a lawyer, in 1982. They divorced in 1987.

“They are both lovely men, very smart, good-looking, passionate, funny, but they were very difficult to live with,” Berenson says. “I think I got carried away. I was young, romantic, idealistic and completely idiotically carried away with passion. And they both pursued me, they were both so determined to marry me. I fell into the love trap, then woke up to another situation. It’s hard to find a man in this business who isn’t threatened by your success.”

She gave up her career during her first marriage, “when I was at the highest”. Then, trying to break into acting, she took a film job in Brazil and was involved in a head-on car collision. She remembers the car’s headlights coming towards her; the other driver was on the wrong side of the road and had been drinking. He and his companion were killed. “I wasn’t wearing a seatbelt – you didn’t in those days – and was thrown against the windshield. The whole side of my face was ripped open. I asked the doctors to stitch me back together as good as possible. I still finished the film.” What? “Yes, they filmed me from one side.”

Berenson is still friends with both her ex-husbands; since then, though there have been relationships, “I haven’t found the person I really want to be married to. I’m not against marriage, but if I ever did it again, it would have to be such a big plus in my life. I have a wonderful child, good friends, and I’m not going to put the energy into any relationship that isn’t right – it’s destructive.” Berenson’s ideal man would be “strong, spiritual and sensitive”. She has her own routines: lying in bed watching TV, with her books around her

eating coconut rice ice cream. “So he has to be able to cuddle me under these conditions and be able to make me laugh. Of course I want to find love again. He’s out there somewhere; I haven’t lost hope. There’s nothing like sharing life with someone else.”

Perhaps the biggest aberration she suffered was the death of Berry – a photographer and model, and widow of *Psycho* actor Anthony Perkins – on 9/11. “We were always close and always supported each other. She was more happy-go-lucky, I was introspective. She protected me when I was a child. She gave up her career to be married and be a mother, and I think she missed it, but I would look at her and think, ‘God, I wish I had built more of her kind of family environment.’” The day she died, Berry was flying to LA to watch her musician son Elvis Perkins perform in one of his first concerts. Berenson was also in the air, returning to the US, and was diverted to Newfoundland, where a frantic Starlite – worried her mother had been caught up in the attacks directly – relayed the news of Berry’s death.

you get closer to your own divine energy. But I’ve learnt to keep my feet on the ground,” she says. “I know people may look at me and think she exists on lettuce and lotus leaf and that I’ve got some crazy beliefs. They’re not, but they are strong and unwavering and I have done everything to stay true to them. I believe in the Virgin Mary, in angels and spirit guides. I feel very accompanied in my life; they keep me moving forward. If they hadn’t, I’d be dead.”

Berenson’s spiritual beliefs mean a lot to her, however kooky they may sound. She has never had therapy, instead believing in a “universal energy and strength”. She swims and she dances with Minnelli at classes run by jazz dancer Luigi Facciuto. She will shoot a new movie soon, then do a “challenging” play in Paris next year. She “may not do the acting thing for ever” and would like to design a ceramics or jewellery or clothing line – or all of them.

Berenson loves fashion still, wearing Dolce & Gabbana, Galliano, Lanvin, Donna Karan and Rochas. A few years ago, most of her vintage clothes – by Saint Laurent, Valentino

‘Of course I want to find love again. He’s out there somewhere; I haven’t lost hope. There’s nothing like sharing life with someone else’

“I collapsed in a heap,” remembers Berenson. “I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. A friend who happened to be on the flight made sure I was OK and they gave me a room to make calls from. A priest, also on the plane, took me to a tiny chapel where he said Mass and we sang songs.” Since, she says, she has felt her sister “go into the light” and has communicated with her in her dreams. “I know she is at peace,” she says. “I cannot hate the terrorists. It would serve no purpose. I pray for her every day. I get signs from her which tell me she is happy wherever she is. I don’t know if she knew what was happening that day. She must have known the plane had been hijacked, but I pray she didn’t know what their plan was.” Amazingly, the ring Berry had been wearing was found in the ruins of the World Trade Centre; her children have it. “Out of something so dark I took that as a sign; I wanted to find some light,” says Berenson. “As with my father, at some point you need to let their souls rest in peace, so both you and they can be at peace.” She and her mother (aged 90 and living in Paris), after years of fractiousness, are now also “at peace”, she adds.

Berenson is aware of her own mortality. Every day, she says, she prepares for it. She believes in reincarnation and “tries to better my own life, because every time you’re reborn

and Schiaparelli among others – went missing from storage. There are items (two Schiaparelli evening jackets, especially) she prizes, but she says that she doesn’t value “material things”. She still models occasionally (for Galliano at Dior, for example), doesn’t worry about ageing – “What can you do?” Berenson laughs. “Sure, I wish I was young and pretty but I am ageing gracefully” – and is currently compiling the story of her modelling life in pictures for a glossy coffee-table book due next year.

Berenson scoffs when I ask what it’s like to be considered an icon. “For me, an icon is a relic you pray to; I feel the most normal person in the world. I don’t have airs and graces and find it very obnoxious in people who do.” When I ask about regrets, Berenson’s fixed desire to be positive asserts itself – “The philosophical side of me says everything is growth” – but then she adds, quietly, “My heart and soul feel as if they have broken many times, losing my father, losing my sister, and I was thrown into this world of glamour which seemed superficial, but wasn’t.”

In some ways, Berenson’s life has been an absurd collision of character and circumstance. Still, she’s rousing old-school: she pours scorn on today’s confessional culture. “If you are going to be sad and cry,” she says, “stay indoors. When you are out, put your best face on.” ■