



GOODBYE, OPRAH

HELLO, CHELSEA

HOW AMERICA FELL FOR AN UNLIKELY NEW CHAT SHOW QUEEN

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Chelsea Handler, the star of late-night talk show *Chelsea Lately*

At a recording of Chelsea Handler's late-night talk show, my view is blocked by a tall man gesturing frantically to the audience how we should respond to events on stage. He tells us when to "Ohh" at a revelation or "Eww" at something bitchy, when to laugh, how loudly and when to stop, when to clap and when to stop (my clapping is judged not enthusiastic enough, "European" indeed, the worst insult in LA). He is so demented it is impossible to respond naturally to Handler or her guests (three fellow comedians and actress Busy Philipps), which is strange because if there were ever a comedian less in need of this ludicrous, off-camera popinjay, it's Handler, whose show, *Chelsea Lately*, on TV channel E!, has become a hit. She is loudly and lewdly funny, intelligent, sharp, a gaspingly candid blabbermouth and is fast becoming one of American television's biggest stars.

On *Chelsea Lately*, which has just under one million viewers, she snarkily deconstructs the celebrity gossip and pop-cultural detritus of the day while playing host to guests such as Jennifer Aniston and Brooke Shields. We meet three hours before the show is taped, in an office that doubles as a wardrobe and make-up room (there are racks of high heels and a mirror ringed with bulbs). Handler stays at her desk, tip-tapping away at her computer (she apologises for being "distracted") while ruminating on why having children is a no-no, and the likelihood of mainstream success. "It will happen," she says, with certainty rather than arrogance.

Handler's achievement is startling, especially in light of American TV's conservatism. She isn't mumsy: "I would rescue a baby if I saw it on the street, but I don't want to have any. I don't think it's a good use of my time." She's no caring, sharing Oprah. She doesn't play to Middle America. She is gleefully coarse: "School was becoming a nuisance," she says of being 9. "It was nearly impossible to go eight hours without jerking off."

She is 35, pretty but not glamazon-beautiful, and jokes that, contrary to what's the norm these days on the West Coast, people think she looks older than she is (she blames it on the studio lighting). She is open about her determination to front a late-night chat show on a mainstream network, to take her place alongside David Letterman and Leno, to whom she was playfully rude when she appeared on his show (he still gave her a horse as a gift).

In her three books – all *New York Times* bestsellers (*My Horizontal Life: A Collection of One-Night Stands, Are You There, Vodka? It's Me, Chelsea* and the recently published *Chelsea Chelsea Bang Bang*) – we read of Handler's love of dwarves (her screen sidekick, Chuy, is one), her spell in jail, her boozing and her



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"f***ed-up relationship" with her "mentally retarded" father. The books have turned into a publishing sensation, sitting at the top of the bestseller charts for months.

Handler's crudeness isn't unique, of course. Joan Rivers, who also had a late-night chat show, set a confrontational standard; *30 Rock* creator Tina Fey and Sarah Silverman are similarly unfettered by niceties. Handler, though, makes it very personal. She has appeared (non-nude) on the cover of *Playboy*. A sex tape, that contemporary badge of celebrity, emerged earlier this year, which Handler characteristically made a joke out of by saying the revelation had ruined a planned Christmas surprise for her staff. She sighs. "It's so absurd – it was a joke, not a sex tape. I knew it was going to surface at some point. I'd rather it not have happened, but I'm not going to cry about it. Honestly, if I had it in my possession, I'd play it on my show."

From the get-go she has done it in her

Chelsea Handler preparing for her show, and with her dog, Chunk

own, uniquely rampaging way. Her mother, Sylvia, was Mormon, her father, Melvin, Jewish. Growing up in New Jersey, the youngest of six children, Handler was a "compulsive liar" – and some of these lies are very funny, such as telling her school peers she had a part in a movie alongside Goldie Hawn – but she claims the stories she tells in her books are all true. That includes being chased by her naked father after she tried to photograph him having sex with her mother, and smuggling a black man in and out of the house under the nose of her racist father.

Is anything off-limits? "Ugly babies I don't talk about on-air, but I will in private. And people dying of cancer. That's not funny. I try to make fun of everything, though." Her brothers and sisters are mocked mercilessly. "What a bunch of assholes," reads the dedication to her siblings in her new book. "We're very close. We all have the same sarcastic sensibility," she says.

Her father seems like an antagonistic codger, more endured than loved. Handler says he and her mother "were total opposites". They had a whirlwind romance and married, she says, "and had all these kids and then you

grow old and realise you don't f***ing like the person you're with. She must have been frustrated." Now that his daughter is a household name, her father "thinks he's a celebrity. He tells me he can't go to the market any more, that people are coming up and approaching him, and I'm like, 'Well, how are you introducing yourself? Nobody cares about you.'" Handler says Melvin tried to charge her \$25,000 to use the rights to a story about him for her latest book. "I said, 'All the rights are mine because you're my father and it happened and my brothers and sisters will corroborate the story,' and he said, 'Well, I could sue you if you publish something about my private life without my permission.' I said, 'Well, fine, then sue me, because you'd have to borrow money from me to sue me and I'm not going to give you that.'"

This is said, like everything else, in a flat, neutral way. She could be reciting a shopping list. But she is adamant the dysfunction is all true. Handler even suggests in her latest book that he's incestuously drawn to her on occasion. "Yes, I would say that. We're close in the fact that he's my dad, but I wouldn't say I have a ton of respect for him. I wouldn't want anything

bad to happen to him – he does that on his own – but he's embarrassed us his whole life and after my mother died [of cancer, four years ago] he took it to another level." She laughs and says last year the siblings discovered they had a brother none of them knew about, the result of a relationship their father had before meeting their mother. "We're like, 'Are you serious? Are you just a complete asshole?' I've never spoken to this guy and don't want to meet him. He only called because he wanted my dad's health history. Dad's constantly disappointing us on many levels. I would never confide in him about anything, because I think he is too much of a joke of a human being. But he's still our father."

It's tricky to ascertain how affectionate this derision actually is. In the new book, the family contemplates finishing him off by euthanasia. "I'm sure I'll be sad when he dies," says Handler. "What's sadder are the memories he's left us with in the past ten years. He was such a great dad when we were growing up. He's a really bright guy, but he's a class-A narcissist. How did we end up with any moral compass at all? How do we even pay bills?"

Handler always wanted to be famous. "I wanted people to know about me. I wanted

people to hear what I had to say. I wanted to be on TV. I wasn't a happy kid, though. There was a lot of anger. I had a lot of temper tantrums. I was spoiled." The key incident of her childhood, she says, was the death of her eldest brother, Chet, when she was 9. He was 21 and died in a hiking accident in Wyoming after his graduation. "The older kids always took care of the younger kids. You canonise anyone who dies prematurely. He was like a voice of reason."

She recalls the moment she heard the news, returning with ice creams to the family's holiday home in Martha's Vineyard and seeing her mother looking stricken on the stairs. "Her look said it all: 'Throw away the ice cream.' I don't think my family thought I knew what was happening. It wasn't until much later I felt it. I didn't want my parents to see me crying. They were so upset, I wanted to be strong." His death "totally" devastated her parents, she recalls. "They woke every morning, crying. I don't think my dad was ever the same after that, and rightfully so."

But in true Handler style, she finds a wry payoff: when Chet died, her brother Roy became the eldest sibling. He works as Handler's chef. "He's definitely not the

‘eldest,’ she says, rolling her eyes. “He was a huge pothead at school. Now he’s like, ‘Chelsea, I need a plane ticket. What do I do?’”

At school she dropped acid and hated studying. “I was rebelling in different ways. I was in pain. I craved attention. I’ve always been caustic, loud and outspoken. I grew up very quickly because of my brother dying and because I was the youngest.” Her parents let her be, but at 16, one of her sisters “told me to get my s*** together, that I was really smart and had a lot to offer, that it was fine if I didn’t want to go to college, but it was time to take responsibility for my life. She was right.”

At 19, Handler went to Los Angeles – she wanted to start her showbusiness career and went to auditions while inevitably becoming a waitress. She started doing stand-up aged 21, then at 23 “really got into it” when she broke up with a boyfriend “and suddenly had a ton of material”. Her break came in a prank show called *Girls Behaving Badly*, then she became a talking head on a series of shows on E!, where she was noticed by Ted Harbert, CEO of the Comcast Entertainment Group, which oversees E! – he gave Handler her own chat show in 2007 (and became, for a while, her boyfriend).

Her compulsion to confess chimes with the times, but she doesn’t use it to demand pity or sympathy or even to get people to like her – although they do, simply because she seems so fearless and unguarded. “In time you can make almost anything funny. Plenty of my one-night stands were horrifying, but give it a couple of weeks and they become a funny story. Being in prison [very briefly, for driving under the influence of alcohol and resisting arrest] was f***ing horrible but two weeks later... That’s probably why I became a comedian. I like to tell stories. It’s easy to do this show and make fun of people because I am constantly making fun of myself.”

She says she doesn’t hold anything back, that what you see on stage is what she’s like off. “I can’t imagine keeping anything back. I’m pretty forthcoming about everything. I don’t think I have any deep dark secrets.” Serious, “sad” stories, such as Chet’s death, she can’t imagine writing about, although grieving has its own, comic absurdities. Her mother’s death sounds both awful and hilarious, with her father in denial about the gravity of the situation. “She was so weak and, in the ambulance, there was my father insisting, ‘She’s fine, just bring her home.’ Dad was such a selfish asshole. We’re like, ‘She’s DYING.’ He’s like, ‘I’ve got to go and show a car, I’ll be back in a couple of hours.’” Handler says she feels her mother’s presence. “I went house-hunting with a friend yesterday, a medium, James Van Praagh, and he said, ‘Your mother’s standing right over there and she says happy birthday.’ It was my mum’s birthday that day.”

Everything is parlayed into a story to tell, if

not a joke. For example, her book about one-night stands may lead you to think she’s had lots of them. Not so, says Handler. “I’ve never been shy talking about sex, but just talking about it insinuates you’re having a lot of it, so people think you’re promiscuous. In the one-night stands book, only about eight come to fruition. I wish I had a sex drive right now because honestly I have not. I have none, probably because my last relationship was so annoying, it took it out of me. It was like you know you have to break up with them, then you hope it’s going to work out and then you know it won’t. His [Harbert’s] personality is the complete opposite of mine – he’s very high-strung, very maniacal, very controlling.”

The first two years of the relationship were

‘People always think I’m older than I am. When I was 20, people thought I was 30. I’m not lying about my age’

great, she says. “Then he would call me by my first and last name in front of people, and I’d be like, ‘I’m your girlfriend, not your TV show.’ I need a boyfriend, I don’t need an agent. I have 80 agents.” Handler says the fighting got exhausting; he’d promise to change and didn’t. Six months ago she moved out, taking her beloved dog Chunk (who appears on *Chelsea Lately* and has his own Twitter account), “and never went back.”

She hasn’t seen Harbert since, although he’s still the head of E! and, she assumes, watches the show every day. But she has forbidden him from communicating with her. She recently announced that she is seeing Animal Planet presenter Dave Salmoni; when he appeared on her show, she flirted with and disparaged him at the same time as he tried to drape a snake around her neck. “We’re dating,” Handler told Jay Leno on his show. “He’s really cute. It’s nice to date somebody who can protect you from a bear or a lion.”

Not surprisingly, given her blunt individuality, Handler doesn’t see herself as a trailblazer, despite late-night TV remaining such a male preserve. “Comedy is more a man’s thing than a woman’s,” she says. “Stand-up, living on the road in awful hotels, is more palatable to men than women. It’s a hard life. You don’t make any money for the first five years. You pay money to supplement it.” Has she broken the glass ceiling, originally pretty well chipped by Joan Rivers, for women

comedians on TV? “That’s not really for me to say, but if people want to say that about me, that’s very nice. I’m not trying to break taboos – if you do, it looks forced and transparent. I’m just being myself.”

Refreshingly, Handler loves her stardom and the trappings of fame: being able to lavish gifts and holidays on family and friends; setting up college funds for her nine nieces and nephews; checking herself that, yes, Morgan Freeman and news anchor Katie Couric (“a lot of fun, you’d be surprised to hear”) really were in her SUV the other night. She and Jennifer Aniston are rumoured to be friends. “But I don’t go to places and hang out with Paris Hilton or anything ridiculous like that.” She is slim (“I work out, I don’t want to be a mess”) but not skinny, and anti-plastic surgery: “I’m a comedian, not an actress, I’m not going to get a facelift. People always think I’m older than I am. When I was 20, people thought I was 30. I’m not lying about my age. I haven’t got wrinkles. People always ask about my ‘attitude’. I’m 35, I should have this attitude. I should be confident. They’re like, ‘You’re too confident.’ But by 35, you should have your s*** together, don’t you think?”

Handler’s so in control, tip-tapping away behind that desk while firing off deeply personal confessions in the manner of a speak-your-weight machine, that you wonder about the things she hasn’t been in control of: in her books and on her show, she bangs on about her love of vodka, for example. “I wasn’t in control of it when I was younger,” she says. “I am now. I don’t really get drunk because I have such a high tolerance.” She says she demands loyalty from her friends, “and if they’re not, they’re out”, and she prefers doing the TV show to writing the bestselling books because it takes less time. “They’re trying to get me to do another one,” she says of her publishers, “but I don’t like making decisions based solely on financial gain, so I will probably hold off.” Besides her multimedia conquering of the mainstream, she plans to do the odd film (next, opposite Russell Brand). Her other ambition is to buy a dolphin: “Don’t expect that any time soon. Dolphins don’t like to be contained.”

She’ll do it all, you don’t doubt, although the child’s rampaging desire to be noticed has solidified into a desire to be noticed for doing something she can be proud of. Handler doesn’t get down (“That’s a male comic thing, I had therapy once after a relationship break-up, but it wasn’t useful,”) and seems determinedly independent. She stops tip-tapping, looks at me and says very seriously: “You know, I think I felt my independence was being taken away from me for a minute there.” And now? Handler’s smile returns and widens wickedly. “Oh, no one’s going to f*** with me now.” ■

Chelsea Lately is on E! week nights at 10.30pm