

'Did I fancy Travolta? Of course. He was cute. Who wouldn't?'

Since starring in *Grease*, Olivia Newton-John has experienced divorce, cancer, an anorexic child and an ex-lover's disappearance, she tells Tim Teeman



Olivia Newton-John with John Travolta in *Grease*, left, and their reunion last year

I'm not trying to do the last scene of *Grease*," she assures me. Olivia Newton-John is dressed in black, but she is wearing biker boots not red mules and her tight trousers are not quite as stitched-on as the pair she wore in the final scene of the 1978 film. Then virgin-cum-vixen Sandy turned John Travolta's Danny to putty with a bubble perm and wicked leer. Now 64, she is still slight and blonde, although her tousled hair now betrays white roots — "Thanks, you're the first person to have noticed," she says wryly — and her facial features look sculpted. She insists that she hasn't resorted to plastic surgery, "I'm a little scared of all that stuff", and when I persist with the line of inquiry by asking about Botox and fillers, she taps my arm. "That's a personal question. Maybe I have," she says, laughing. "Ageing", she adds with an expression lacking conviction, "is an interesting process. I'm trying to do it as gracefully as I can."

Newton-John hasn't visited Britain for 30 years but will be touring here in March. The gigs are a follow-up to her twangy Christmas single with Travolta, *I Think You Might Like It*, which was variously described as "cringeworthy", "odd" and, by this paper's critic, "less greased lightning and more a gentle ramble in the grounds of the retirement home before medication time". "I learnt not to read critics," she says. "That was a good song. Some people are going to like you, some not. When I was younger it affected me too much. Thirty years later, people still seem excited to see us. I can see the other side too: somebody said, 'Leave us with the memories.'" She laughs. "That was funny. But I have more important things in my life to worry about than that."

She is referring to the Olivia Newton-John Cancer and Wellness Centre in Melbourne, which opened last year. The Christmas single and album were released with the purest intentions, she claims, to benefit both the centre, which marries conventional treatment and complementary therapies, and the Jett Travolta Foundation, which was created in memory of Travolta's autistic son who died in 2009 after a seizure. "He and [his wife] Kelly [Preston] are doing amazingly positive things in a terrible situation," she says sympathetically. "You'll never heal from that totally. It will always be there."

Positivity is Newton-John's mantra. When she had breast cancer diagnosed in 1992 she told a friend over the phone. The friend cried. Now, long recovered, she advises those who have recently been diagnosed to choose a loved one to relay the grim news, "because you need positivity coming back to you, not people's upset and emotional freak-outs".

Newton-John was diagnosed with cancer the same weekend that her father died of the disease. She was about to embark on a world tour. Waiting for the test results, she recalls, was very frightening. After surgery, one breast was reconstructed "right away. I'm not a large-breasted person so it wasn't something I focused on". Deepak Chopra composed special meditations for her, she did yoga, visualisation, listened to motivational author Louise Hay tapes every night, had homeopathy and took herbal treatments. And although she was "very, very fearful" of chemotherapy, she had it as a precaution. It wiped her out, "but if I hadn't had it, I wouldn't know what people go through. My whole cancer journey was so I could help people. I don't regret it. I see the experience of going through it and coming out of it as a gift. I feel very grateful and lucky. I don't say that glibly. It taught me so much about human behaviour, compassion and myself."

The hospital in her name took ten years and \$AUS 200 million to build. "The power of healing is within us," she claims. "One day these therapies will be accepted in all realms of medicine. I don't call it 'new age', which sounds culty. Patients are lining up for it." She owns the award-winning Gaia Retreat and Spa near Byron Bay, which offers visitors the chance "to regain balance and ground in your own space and time". She and her husband, John Easterling, with another company, have also opened a "wellness centre" in Arizona. She says that before they met, Easterling was a "treasure hunter searching for the Lost City of Gold". They fell in love in the rainforest ("he wanted to introduce me to a healer because he said I was one"), and when Newton-John fell ill and he nursed her to health: "There was a moment he held me and it was like, 'Yes, he's the one'. He's incredible, I love him. I know from being around people who are dying, love is all there is in the end." She takes many exotic-sounding pills that he imports from Peru, such as those with the kamu kamu berry and uña de gato (cat's claw).



MAIN IMAGE, MICHELLE DAY; KOBAL COLLECTION; SCOPE FEATURES

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Easterling is Newton-John's second spouse. She met her first husband, actor Matt Lattanzi, on the set of *Xanadu*, the 1980 film that inspired John I. B. Wilson to create the Golden Raspberry Awards (the film was nominated for seven Razzies at the inaugural

ceremony). They were married for nine years, and she has one daughter from the relationship: Chloe, 27, a singer-songwriter, who is still trying to figure out what she wants to do, according to Newton-John. "It's hard for children of famous people. They think they should live up to their parents." Chloe suffered from anorexia when younger. "She's through that now, but obviously it was very difficult as a parent to watch."

After her divorce from Lattanzi, Newton-John had a nine-year relationship with Patrick McDermott, a light technician. Months after their relationship ended in 2005, he disappeared while on a fishing trip (the US Coast Guard concluded that he most likely died at sea). "Of course I still think about him," she says. Newton-John says that she took antidepressants for three months after his disappearance. "It was a difficult time and got me out of a hole. I took them until I could see the light again and never did them again. I didn't want to become dependent on them: that's why I stopped."

Did she have therapy? "This feels like therapy," she laughs. "Yes, a few times: once when I had cancer, another when he disappeared and also during my divorce. I needed it. It gives you the tools to help you heal and deal with things."

The youngest of three children, Newton-John remembers coping with her parents' "very difficult" separation when she was 10 years old, by bringing home stray "cats, dogs, whatever was around", and setting her heart on becoming a vet. "But I wasn't very good at maths. I wasn't good at school. I think I lost my focus with my parents' divorce."

Newton-John's father Brinley (Bryn) had been one of the code-breakers at Bletchley Park during the Second World War; her mother, Irene, was German, and the daughter of a Nobel prize-winning physicist, Max Born, who fled persecution from the Nazis in 1933. Bryn, who is credited with responsibility for the capture of Rudolf Hess during the war, spoke fluent German, so interrogated prisoners of war: "Sometimes he would go out for dinner with them with a pistol in his pocket."

She says that her mother felt ostracised by people in Britain, and the

“Sometimes my father would go out with a pistol in his pocket”

marriage fell apart after the family moved to Melbourne. Newton-John returned to England five years later, after winning a singing contest. She had some success as a country singer, but some early films flopped. She saw Richard Gere play Danny in the stage production of *Grease*, "but was unsure about the movie. I was 29 and worried I couldn't play 18." Travolta "was very handsome, sweet and charming". She fancied him? "Of course. He was cute. Who wouldn't?" But she had a boyfriend, he a girlfriend. "We had a screen test and it worked. There was an attraction that kept the chemistry going." Did they ever sleep together? "No."

Over the years there have been rumours about their sexuality. She declines to discuss Travolta but laughs about the suggestion that she could be a lesbian. "I'm so not. I'm so heterosexual." Has she ever fancied a woman? "Never, ever. I was a bit horrified when I heard it first. "What am I doing to make them think this?" I thought. Later I thought it was cool, but there's no truth in it." You're inducing mass lesbian grief. "Aww, sorry girls."

Like good-Sandy, she says she was "never wild — I was kinda boring, my life was a farm with nine horses, nine dogs, four cats". She adds that as she heads towards retirement she plans to slow down and spend time painting and riding. If she does sing in Vegas or do a country album, it will be merely to raise money for the hospital — her "real legacy". While very grateful to *Grease*, "it will be a bit weird if in 20 years' time people are still talking about it," she says, although she and Travolta "may" work together again. "It took us 30 years to do this. We don't want to rush anything."

As for bad-Sandy, she smiles at the memory of the director doing a double-take at her transformation but says her skin-tight leggings are now "hanging in mothballs". We haven't seen the last of them, she says — "I hope to auction them for the hospital."

Olivia Newton-John's UK tour begins in Cardiff on March 10. For details visit olivianewton-john.com

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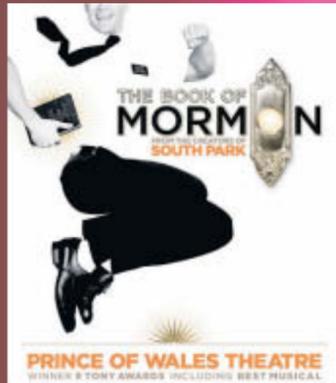
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