



# All about my mother

**Singer Martha Wainwright  
on anger, ageing and  
losing a parent**



**Celebrity Watch:**  
**'Everything Tom Cruise does comes with a glaze of weird'**  
**page 2**

**Richard Morrison:**  
**'1970s leftovers like me go to the opera in jeans'**  
**page 3**

**Can Emma Watson shake off the dreaded Hermione Granger?**  
**Kate Muir, page 6**

**Barbra Streisand:**  
**the lost songs reviewed**  
**Will Hodgkinson, page 8**

**Daniel Finkelstein:**  
**jumps aboard the Magical Mystery Tour**  
**page 9**

**Dominic Maxwell sees a soldier's tale relived on the West End stage**  
**page 10**

In the New York wine bar where she's performing her set, Martha Wainwright introduces her driest tones, her song *Radio Star* by saying: "It's obviously not about me." We return to her lack of fame the next day when we meet at the homey, hippyish brownstone in Brooklyn where she lives with her husband, the musician Brad Alibetta, and their almost three-year-old son Arcangelo. Wainwright's brother Rufus amasses headlines and passionate fans; Wainwright's mother Kate McGarrigle, who died of cancer in 2010, and father Loudon are firmly placed in the folk-rock pantheon.

Wainwright sings impressively—she can do folk-rock, romantic ballads, even a melodiously meticulous take on Edith Piaf—but she hasn't, as a friend says as we listen to her, "made it like Rufus".

The witty, slightly ethereal Wainwright is feeling tender—"Too much wine, I might indeed be a wine bottle"—after the gig. I suddenly notice a springy crop of hair under her arm. "Sometimes I shave, sometimes I don't. It's not a statement," she laughs, "but I don't keep myself clean-shaven, especially after marriage. And," she adds with the same laconic tone she uses on stage, "unlike some women who want their bodies to look like when they were 21, I don't need to see my vagina either."

I expect to hear a musical version of that argument soon.

Meanwhile, there is much life on display in her living room in the many pictures of the Wainwright family, including Rufus with his daughter Viva, whom he had with Lorca Cohen, Leonard's daughter. The Wainwrights keep it in the family: they sing songs (not always nice ones) about one another: McGarrigle wrote *Go Leave* after Loudon left her for another woman; Rufus' *Dinner at Eight* about a tense dinner with Loudon ("I'm gonna break you down/ And see what you're worth"). Wainwright once wrote one about Loudon called *Bloody Mother F\*\*\*ing Asshole*. "It upset him, but it's one of my best," she says. Today, though, she emphasises how "wonderful" he is as a grandfather.

Wainwright's third studio album, *Come Home to Mama*, while not dedicated to McGarrigle, is about "loss, anger, death and ageing in general" and includes the last song McGarrigle wrote, *Proserpina*, based on the myth of Persephone. About a mother wanting her daughter to come home, it has an extra emotional edge because Wainwright made it home to Montreal to see her mother just before McGarrigle died.

Now 36, Wainwright "never thought about death", but the birth of Arcangelo and McGarrigle's death made her aware "that everything speeds up. That and being a woman in the music industry," she adds, where there's "so much ageism". Her style of music inoculates her against the madder beauty-related demands on female celebrities: "It's about rawness and exposure, wearing my heart on my sleeve, confessional, ugly. I'm really self-obsessed. My work has allowed me to be so self-involved and navel-gazing it gets exhausting." Motherhood has been a "really great experience", forcing her to "care about someone else more than yourself".

And her lesser fame, compared to Rufus? "He worked a lot harder to be where he is than I did. He deserves every lick of success. He's also visually striking. I wish I was better known, but it's sort of my fault because I do things that don't sound commercial. I don't behave in a



# 'I'm fine, I cry a lot'

**Her mother was dying, her newborn baby was sick, but she 'could not fall apart'. Martha Wainwright tells Tim Teeman about her changing family**

manner that will necessarily be sellable. It's fine to be on the B-list, a perfectly nice place to be. I have a lot of freedom." Wainwright takes "a lot of cues" from Rufus: "I wasn't a good singer in many ways; he taught me." But he wrote a song, *Martha*, about you not being in touch with him enough. "Such a beautiful song," Wainwright says. "I am a bit of a bad sister. Rufus is really good being available. I pushed people away. I pushed my mother away, which is my biggest regret."

They didn't have a "bad relationship", Wainwright clarifies. McGarrigle would offer advice about singing and her daughter wouldn't listen. She wishes she had followed her mother's advice and finished university ("studied Greek mythology or liberal arts"), but she moved to New York to become a musician.

"Everyone around me was a singer," Wainwright says. "I wanted to be a singer, but the only one. I tried to separate myself from family members and everyone else. I was mean to my mother as only

children can be. She'd call me and I wouldn't pick up. I didn't want her to tell me what to do, but when I didn't know what to do she was the only one who could tell me and now that's gone."

The shock of immediate, "sheer, grotesque" grief now passed, Wainwright is adjusting to being a "motherless mother". She shows me a picture of a very ill McGarrigle holding Arcangelo, who was born two and a half months prematurely, in London.

"You feel a failure when you have a premature child because you're not giving him a good start," she says. "I had to be positive. I said to Brad: 'We need to get behind this, bring this baby into a place of joy and light.' My mother was dying and my baby was sick but I could not fall apart. That was not an option."

McGarrigle died two months after Arcangelo's birth, "so she wouldn't have met him had he not been born early. Look, they're both hooked up to tubes." Wainwright begins to cry, talking about how happy McGarrigle was to hold her grandson. "I'm fine, I cry a lot," she says.

She last saw her mother—surrounded by family, friends and music—at the family home in Montreal, but had to fly back immediately to Arcangelo in London. McGarrigle died while her daughter was in the air.

Wainwright intends to move back to Montreal, to ensure her son has a French-language education and

Martha Wainwright at home in New York and, below, with her late mother, the singer Kate McGarrigle



www.zegna.com

A New Scent for a New Day

**Zegna**

**Ermengildo Zegna**

Available at all branches of The Perfume Shop, selected Boots, Debenhams and independent stores.