

saturday

The Drums Arts, page 6
Will Hodgkinson hits Texas with the hottest band of 2010



Culture club Ideas, page 4

The three culture supremos battle it out in our arts quiz



review

arts
books
& ideas

‘Brother, I enjoy every inch of me’

In her first interview since winning an Oscar, Mo’Nique reveals how she overcame child abuse to become America’s most outspoken star. She talks about open marriages, hairy legs and Hollywood racism with *Tim Teeman*

M

o’Nique, sitting in an airless anteroom of a TV studio in Atlanta, Georgia, suggestively lifts the hem of her brown dressing gown to reveal her legs. “Touch them, go on. They won’t hurt, they won’t bite. I used to be like a BEAR. I am a bear. I was probably a bear in my first life.” I touch as instructed. The hair, the famous Mo’Nique leg hair, is indeed downy, not bear-thick or stubbly. The 42-year-old actress, stand-up comic and talk show host may have won a Best Supporting Actress Oscar, Golden Globe and Bafta for her performance as Gabourey Sidibe’s monstrous mother in the movie *Precious*, but it’s her hairy legs — revealed at the Globes — that have excited most comment. That and her “open” marriage to her third husband, Sidney Hicks. Of course such gossipy morsels disguise, and also symbolise, what a singular force Mo’Nique is. In the pantheon of preened and pliant Hollywood screen queens, she is unique: an unapologetic, outspoken maverick. A force 12 gale of passion and confession — about her incestuous childhood abuse, marriage to Hicks, Hollywood’s racism, the glories of leg hair, God and much more besides — is about to engulf me.

“I’ve been in the business for 20 years and they’re talking about this,” she says mock-scornfully about the hairy hysteria. “Guys, if you don’t like the hair on my legs you can look somewhere else. But because you keep looking” — her voice drops to a sultry whisper — “there’s something about it you like, but you don’t want to say it out loud. For me, brother, I enjoy every inch of me, and if I begin to change it based on your opinion of me, that’s when I go crazy. I only shaved my legs once: it was when I was a teenager. It was the most painful thing ever. When it started growing back it was prickly. Sugar, I can’t do it. I love it and my husband loves it. All the s*** going on in the world — we’re at war, Hurricane Katrina ... and my hairy legs make the news. What about the homeless? Can we go to Haiti and keep that story alive?”

We meet after the first of that day’s two recordings of Mo’Nique’s talk show, broadcast on Black Entertainment Television. The audience has been skilfully geed up by slick warm-up men, we know when to stand up and applaud, to dance (or sway woodenly in my case) when the house band plays, to look at each other quizzically when

someone says something moving. Mo’Nique appears to a bedlam of roars and applause in a dramatic off-the-shoulder red dress, hair bouncy and lustrous, stalks towards the camera and fires off a lecture about the importance of kindness. The audience — with muttered “Amens”, “yesses” and sighs — sounds like a congregation.

Mo’Nique doesn’t go to church and isn’t devout or judgmental, but she invokes God with her own fire and brimstone. The stage is her pulpit. Today’s guest, John Forté, the former Fugees producer, talks about being charged (and jailed) for possession with intent to distribute, and conspiracy to distribute, cocaine. His friend the pop star Ben Taylor, Carly Simon’s son, reveals why he and his mother fought to free Forté (whose 14-year sentence was commuted in 2008). Mo’Nique absolves a humble Forté, complimenting both men for showing how the race divide can be overcome by friendship. Everybody claps. “I don’t do interviews, I do conversations with friends,” Mo’Nique says later. “We ask the talent what they want to talk about.” Shouldn’t you be asking the questions an audience wants answered? “We’ll never try to catch a guest off guard. I don’t call myself a chat show host, I call myself a late-night party host. Here you leave your worries behind. This is where you come, baby, to have a good time.”

Mo’Nique is, she says, an “entertainer” first and foremost. From the outset, goaded by her brother Steve to take to the stage in her native Baltimore, her career has been centred on stand-up comedy (she is in the middle of a 20-city US tour). She was the first woman to present the US music TV programme *Showtime at the Apollo*. She found popular success in the comedy series *The Parkers*. She’s successfully produced her own reality show, *Mo’Nique’s Fat Chance* (celebrating larger-sized women). But stand-up comedy is her true passion.

“In stand-up, there’s no ‘Action’, no ‘Cut’, no director, no edit. Give me a microphone, say ‘Go’ and baby, I’m in heaven.” Her beatific smile is a million miles from the curdled spite of Mary, the abusive mother in *Precious*. “There weren’t lots of rehearsals or takes,” Mo’Nique says. “The moment Mr Daniels [Lee Daniels, the director] said ‘Cut’ we left those characters on the floor. We did not have to be deprogrammed. We laughed a lot, we had crabs legs and house music. I turned Mary on and turned Mary off.” After a screening in Hollywood, her husband recalls that the renowned actor Sidney Poitier told Mo’Nique that she had not had “one false moment” in the film.

Daniels says that Mo’Nique added a “complex, twisted humour” to Mary and adds, sadly, that since the movie became so successful their relationship has changed.

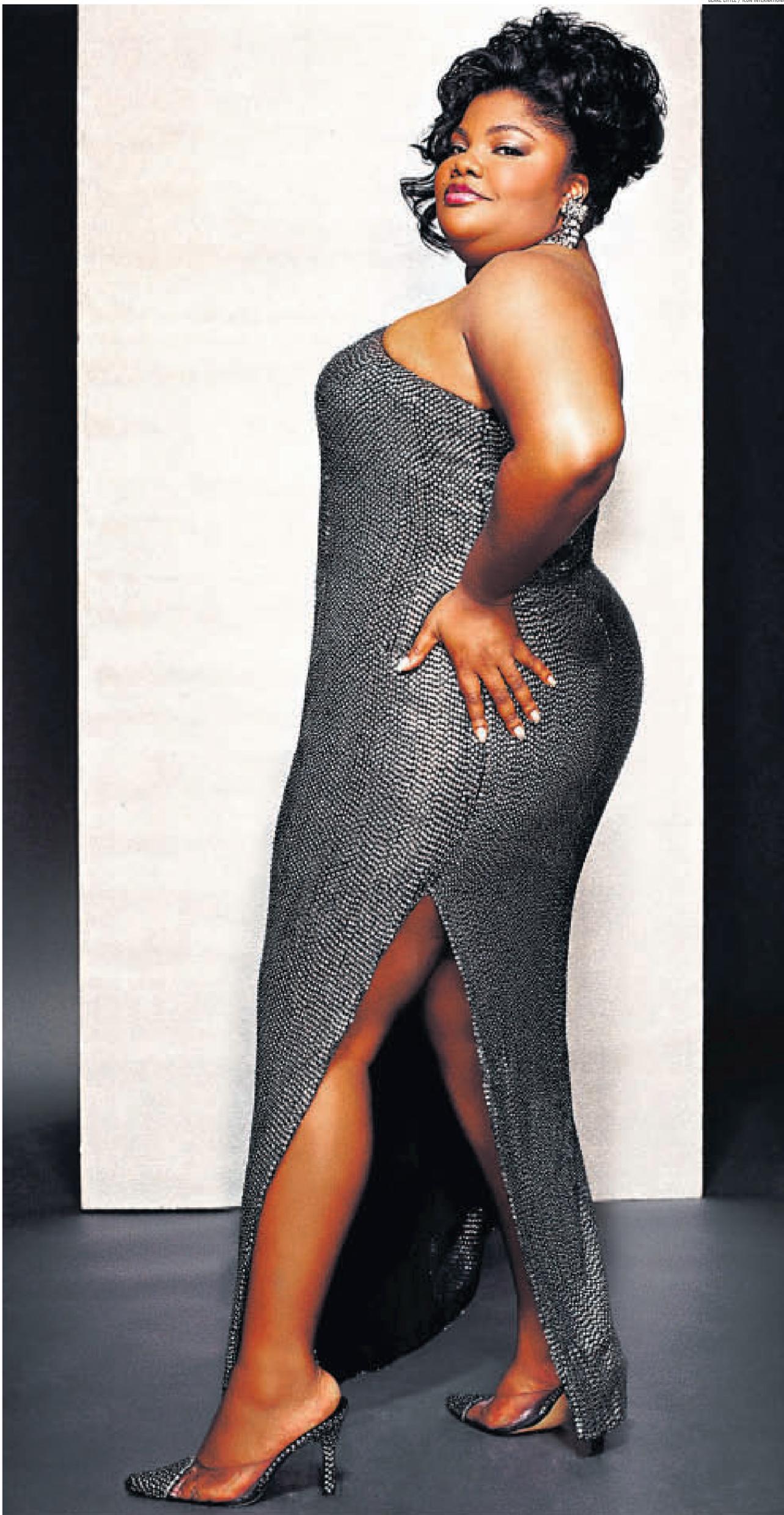
‘All that’s going on in the world — war, Hurricane Katrina, Haiti — and my hairy legs make the news’

“It’s about business now, it has a different dynamic. But I’ll always savour the filming. We talked about sex, who’d got some the previous night. I had the best, obviously. Mo’Nique was making jokes, Mariah [Carey] was singing, Lenny [Kravitz] was playing the guitar”. What will Mo’Nique do next? “You know,” Daniels says, “I’d be curious to find out.”

The model for the abusive Mary came from the most horrible source: the youngest of four, Mo’Nique claims she was sexually molested by her eldest brother, Gerald. “I was 7, he was six years older. It happened for a while. For a long time I resented and despised him. But the moment I got done with that movie, the resentment went.”

She reveals that it’s been four years since they last spoke. “I love my brother. The last conversation we had was, ‘I never want to see you again and I wish you nothing but the best that life has to offer’. I understand his sickness. I just couldn’t have him in my life.” He has not publicly commented on the allegations. The first people she told about the abuse were her parents, when she

Continued on page 2 ►



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Mo'Nique: every inch a star

◀ Continued from page 1

was 15. "I don't have the horror story. I was a playful child. What you see now is what I was then. I don't know if that was my way of dealing with it. I was never inward. I was outward. Now, at 42 years old and after going through therapy, I want to be free. I said to my brother, 'If I hate you I'm not free. If I resent you I'm not free. But if I totally let it go I'm free. If I let it go, God can now step in and deal with you. But as long as I hold on to it nothing can be done.'"

Did she feel able to fight back at the time? "You're a kid. What do you say?" she replies. "There is no language, so you go along with it." And her parents? "For a long time I was very angry with them: they didn't know at the time, but why didn't they do anything about it after I told them?" Gerald, she has revealed in the past, later served a 15-year prison sentence for sexually molesting a young girl. "A few years ago my mother said, 'I didn't know what to do, you're both my children. I was embarrassed, ashamed, guilty. Do I stop loving him?' I understood what she meant so it stopped me being angry with them. With *Precious*, I was honoured with all the awards, but I was never looking for them. I signed up for the reward of people who would be healed. Lots of people have said, 'You've told my story'. That's amazing."

The molestation, Mo'Nique says, made her "a very promiscuous young lady". She would go from man to man, "like, 'This one will be 'it', the one to protect me so it will never happen again, 'No, this one', 'No, this one'. I was very dominant in the relationships, I wanted to be in control." She was a supervisor for a phone sex company ("I was like quality control," she has said), and she married and divorced twice.

"There came a point, five years ago, when I said to myself, 'I don't want to be sick for something I really had nothing to do with,'" she says. At about the same time, "Fame was coming, money was coming," she recalls. "But at home the pain remained the same. No one knew. I've always been the life and soul of the party." Her mood swings became extreme and Hicks and her close friends told her to seek help. At 37 she started therapy: "It literally saved my life. Without it I would have been a mess. I think I wouldn't have been able to be a good friend. I wasn't always the most considerate person. I thought it was all about me. No one should believe they're special 'cos your ass is going away from here one day and you can't explain it."

However, her determination to succeed has always been unwavering. Her father, Steven Imes Jr, once said that "she was always an aggressive individual who seemed to carry out everything that she started". She tells me: "When I found out I could stand on stage and all eyes in the room would be on me, and I was going to be paid to do that, it was a no-brainer." Her father may have been a clinical therapist and her mother, Alice, an engineer, but when I say that it sounds like a cerebral



'Hollywood should show the world is a true melting pot, that beauty comes in many colours. Why are we still so secondary?'

house in which to grow up, Mo'Nique roars. "No. I love to entertain. I love to dance. I didn't want to study. I told my parents, 'I'm going to be a star, don't you know it.' I couldn't wait for people to do my make-up and hair, to walk off a plane and have people say my name, and now we're walking in the midst of that." Does it live up to the dream? "Every second," Mo'Nique whispers. "The little girl in me goes..." And she lets out a piercing, delighted yelp.

But while she's achieved stardom she's also determinedly become an atypical star. Bigger men and women have thanked her for proudly embodying a larger body shape than Hollywood's toned fembots ("Baby, I thank God for using me as a vessel"). She was criticised for not lobbying more actively for the awards that she eventually won. "I'll do what my maker tells me to do," she replies, opaquely. Later she says: "My attitude was, 'Hey guys, I didn't sign up to



ON THE COUCH Mo'Nique playing a monstrous mother with Gabourey Sidibe in *Precious*, top, and chatting to the actor Danny Glover, above, on her show

win any awards'. My performance stands for myself. I have beautiful children. I was honoured last year to take care of my 85-year-old grandmother in her last days. How could I give up those jewels to deal with the pressure of the business? My grandmother and I would go to the supermarket and she would point people to the covers of the magazines and say, 'This is my granddaughter. Isn't she beautiful? I've not grieved her. How could I? I think God

would say, 'For real? You greedy ass. You knew it wasn't permanent, so enjoy every moment'. On the last day, I said, 'Baby, I'll see you on the other side', and she winked."

In her Oscars speech Mo'Nique thanked Hicks for reminding her not to confuse what was popular with what was right. She referred to Hattie McDaniel, the black *Gone With the Wind* star who wasn't allowed to attend the film's premiere and who was made to sit at the back of the audi-

torium of the Oscars in 1940 (where she won Best Supporting Actress). Is Hollywood still racist? "I don't think too much has changed from 1940 to 2010. Look at television: how many people of colour do you see? When you think the Oscars have been around for 82 years and only five [lead category] performances by people of colour have been worthy of an Oscar, you have to ask, 'Guys do you not see the elephant in the room?'" She asks that the big studios be held to account on black under-representation. "Hollywood should show that the world is a true melting pot, that beauty comes in many colours. Why are we still so secondary?"

Has her career felt any post-Oscar bounce? "I am the highest-paid woman in the history of this network. That was before the Oscar. I'm a *New York Times* bestseller [*Skinny Women are Evil*, in 2003]. That was before the Oscar. If I take that one trophy and base my entire career on it, I think God would say, 'Are you serious?' They say it should change my career somehow. We'll see." She seems so tough, does she ever feel intimidated? "I get intimidated at the top of the rollercoaster before it comes down from the top and I feel myself coming up in my seat and want to make sure the bar is tight around my waist. But I'm not intimidated by anything in this business."

The headlines over her open marriage to Hicks are met by a weary shrug. "It's such an old story," she says. "You put these unrealistic expectations on people and we said, 'Hey

guys, we can't live that way. I'm not judging your situation, so how can you judge mine?" Has she or Hicks had sex outside the relationship? She dodges the question. "It's not a deal-breaker. It wouldn't break us up. My husband and I have been best friends since we were 14. We have no secrets. There are people who lie next to their partner at night and not know what they are thinking. I refuse to be one of them."

I ask again: do you have sex outside the relationship? "Do we look for other people to have sex with? No. We're here [at the studios] three days a week [their company, Hicks Media, produces the show], we're on comedy tour, we have two children at home [their four-year-old twins Jonathan and David]. Sidney has a son, Michael [6]. I have a son, Shalon [19]. But we are in our forties." She claps her hands together. "We might live another 50 years. For another 50 years, can I tell you I won't be attracted to another human being?" She is shouting now. "I can't tell you that."

Hicks, a handsome man with diamond earrings, says that Mo'Nique's "naked honesty" is her most attractive characteristic. She doesn't get embarrassed, but is "free". He won't say if they've had extramarital sex either ("it's not relevant and it's private"). The one thing that annoys him about her is when she steals snacks he has just made. "I'm used to it. When she was 20 she would steal my cookies and always remove the raisins before eating them."

Later, listening to our conversation, I realise how much Mo'Nique imputes to God, rather than her relentless determination, talent or business savvy. It is God, she claims genuinely and passionately, who



has made her a "victor" rather than victim. "I believe God, not in God," she says. When does she feel God? "Right now." She takes my hand. "You're my brother. I'm very careful with journalists. They've changed what I've said in the past. If you write this wrong, the Universe will deal with you in a way that you're going to be like, shiiiiitt..."

Before I am turned to dust on the spot, I ask Mo'Nique about ageing. "Baby, I love it," she bellows, bringing the crown of her head to my eye level. "Do you see these grey hairs? I will not hide them. I will not have one wrinkle removed. Surgery? Noooo. I love the gift I've been given. I don't want to get to Heaven and St Peter to say, 'Who the hell are you?' I want him to see wrinkles, grey hair, double belly, double chin, arms that jiggle, thighs that rub together, big feet — it's me." Suddenly she stands up, and shouts into my recorder: "Now I'm going to eat 'cos I got another show to do. I love all of you in Britain and thank you for loving me." Then to me, dressing gown chastely covering those downy legs, she says softly: "God bless you, brother."

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culture notes



Runaway rock by Jude Rogers

Next Friday in the US, lovers of *Twilight*, the vampire saga, will see its female star, Kristen Stewart, in a very different role. Playing Joan Jett in the biopic of the Seventies rock band the Runaways, she snorts drugs, teaches her bandmates how to masturbate, and kisses the group's singer, Cherie Currie, played by the former child star Dakota Fanning.

But this is not exploitation, Joan Jett says. Instead, it's a reflection of how her all-girl group shocked audiences in 1975 and lit the touchpaper for the punk phenomenon. "What we did was very punk rock. Our music wasn't punk — it was rock 'n' roll — but our attitude was very do-it-yourself, and outside the rules."

Jett was only 16 when she approached the Hollywood producer Kim Fowley in 1975 about forming a girl band. By that December, drummer Sandy West, guitarist Lita Ford and singer Currie — a 15-year-old who dressed in corsets, knickers and stockings on stage — had completed the line-up, and the Runaways quickly became notorious internationally, with songs such as *Cherry Bomb*, *Queens of Noise* and *Born to Be Bad*.

Critics accused Fowley of taking advantage of his charges, but Jett says that wasn't the case. "Feminists would say we were belittling ourselves by getting a man to dictate how we dressed, and we were, 'Hold on, we are dictating this. Are you

saying a girl's got to lock it up because she can't control it?' I don't get the equality in that, or the feminism. We were battling to be allowed to be ourselves."

Before the cameras started rolling, Jett told Kristen Stewart stories and secrets that wouldn't be in the film. "I wanted her to know who I was, rather than her think of me as a rock star. I wanted the film to be about us as real people."

She says that Stewart did a great job, especially getting across the message that she has been trying to give young women all her life. "It's about telling girls, as well as boys, that they should not have limits for what they want to do in life. To make mistakes, to follow their own path."

Joan Jett and the Blackhearts: Greatest Hits is out now on Blackheart Records. therunaways.com



My teen shame by Ian McMillan

Look: here's Ian McMillan, the middle-aged poet, the property-owning grandad with his sensible steel-grey hair and his briefcase from Marks & Spencer bulging with slim volumes and notebooks full of scribbles.

But who's that standing behind him in the stinky old army greatcoat, with the forest of curls and the sideburns, carrying his typewritten verse in a plastic bag that has a homemade sticker on it that reads Stamp Out Reality? Ah, yes, that'll be Ian McMillan, the teenage poet, angst

bubbling from every pore, contempt for form and punctuation spreading across his face like a rash, shock and rebelliousness so bolted to his very being that he's wearing odd socks and simply doesn't care, even though his mam has warned him several times about the wearing of odd socks. She even said she might stop his pocket money and that would be a disaster because he's saving for a subscription to *Second Aeon* magazine.

I started remembering the teenage Ian McMillan recently when I was thinking about the new crop of Foyle Young Poets; somehow these teenagers (sometimes pre-teenagers) seem more poised than me, more poetically confident, less likely to pronounce Goethe Go-eth, as I did. The Foyle Young Poets show us that the written and spoken word is alive and well.

Inside every adult poet the teenage bard lurks, a first, unshaped draft of the writer and the human being you will eventually become. I was a particularly ripe example of the teenage poet: I loved Dylan Thomas and Samuel Beckett, a strange combination that led to me writing lush pieces about dead babies found on the local bowling green by tramps in coats that "frayed like the edges of a mind" (and thankfully it's one of the few lines I can remember). My long-suffering girlfriend, now my wife of 30 years, had to bear the brunt of my pretentiousness. I'm reddening as I write this, but I remember walking her home one evening in the early Seventies and remarking that the sky was like an upturned bowl that at any moment could be lifted up by a three-headed beast to reveal the turmoil behind the stars. Her pace seemed to imperceptibly quicken.

Some people have kept their early work for a volume they might call *Early Moments*; I haven't, just like I haven't kept my *Valiant* annuals or my old balaclava. I've lost, or thrown away, or burnt, or recycled my early stuff, which is good for me and good for society.

But sometimes it resurfaces at inopportune moments: turmoil behind the stars, I call it.

The Foyle Young Poets of the Year 2010 is open now. Ages 11-17. Deadline for entry is July 31; foyleyoungpoets.org



Restless spirit by Jim Scavunos

The singer and guitarist Alex Chilton, who died last week, was generally regarded as a wayward and eccentric genius. Chilton, 59, collapsed with heart failure only days before a scheduled appearance at the SXSW festival in Austin, Texas, where he was due to take the stage with a reconstituted version of his Seventies power-pop outfit, Big Star.

Until a few years ago Chilton had vexed and confused devotees for decades by refusing to revisit the past glories of this influential cult band, but his musical explorations ranged far beyond power-pop. From his beginnings as the teenage lead singer of the Sixties blue-eyed soul outfit the Box Tops to his 2000 release, a covers album entitled *Set*, Chilton revealed himself to be a restlessly eclectic spirit.

I first met Chilton (or "Butch", as he was known to bandmates) in the early Eighties when I enlisted as a drummer for a short US tour. Chilton was en route from Memphis when I was contacted by the erstwhile guitarist, a fellow New Yorker exhilarated at the prospect of reviving the Big Star numbers side by side with his hero. Said guitarist instructed me to assiduously study the three Big Star albums: *#1 Record*, *Radio City* and *Third* (later released as *Sister Lovers*) in preparation for Chilton's imminent arrival with a pair of Memphis sidemen.

My sole rehearsal with Chilton and the band consisted of a quick run-through in a seedy suite at the Gramercy Park Hotel in New York, where I sat cross-legged on the floor whacking drumsticks onto a pillow. However, contrary to the guitarist's expectations, Chilton excluded any Big Star numbers from the set, and the following night, immediately after our first show at the Mudd Club, the disappointed Big Star enthusiast was peremptorily dismissed.

I was thrilled to be part of these shows, although Chilton was not at the height of his powers. At the end of the tour, saying that he needed a break from music, Chilton relocated to New Orleans for a stint as a dishwasher. Before vanishing mysteriously into the steamy mists of a sink full of dirty water, he enticed me into moving to Memphis to join the Panther Burns, a band he had formed to back up the blues enthusiast Tav Falco.

Like Falco, Chilton had a huge enthusiasm for obscure, bizarre, raw-as-guts roots music. His affinity with

the style of music that would come to be known as psychobilly is manifest in his work with the Panther Burns (*Behind the Magnolia Curtain* and *Sugar Ditch Revisited*), as well as his production work for the Cramps' earliest singles, including the signature tune *Human Fly*, and the first album, *Songs the Lord Taught Us*.

Confounding umbrella summation or evaluation, the myriad musical tangents of Chilton's career spanned forays into Chet Baker-style jazz: *Cubist Blues*, a collaborative album with Alan Vega and Ben Vaughn; the Seventies proto-punk single *Bangkok*; and his underappreciated landmark solo effort, *Like Flies on Sherbet*. For Chilton, confusion was as much a strategy as a side-effect. He got quite a chuckle out of bewildering fans, fellow musicians and sundry supporters; and if the many legends surrounding him are to be believed, excess was the foundry of his art and chaos his beloved muse.

Jim Scavunos is the drummer with Grinderman and Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds

hard times by laura & abe

