

YOURS CRUELLY, ELVIRA X

Written by Roberto Croci Photography by Matt Irwin Styling by Simon Robins



Elvira wears dress by Versace



Elvira wears dress by Emilio Pucci, tights by Wolford, shoes by Mugler, ring Elvira's own

Elvira's publicist Courtney issues a polite summons to the star's dressing room. After observing her tangled into new poses, some recognisable, some iconic, some fresh, a love affair between subject and fan is about to start all over again. Witnessing her in front of the camera merely wets the appetite. Elvira is 60 and showing no signs of succumbing to the surgeon's knife. She may be pensionable; she is still hot.

As a merchandising mogul, few can compare with Elvira. She turned a tiny TV persona into a formidable 30 year long media empire. Behind the fiction, though, there is the real person. Cassandra Peterson: a red-headed spirit who ran through the 70s, defying hippy logic to become the self-invented Queen of the Night. It is Cassandra who I am here to meet. Will my love affair survive the transition from fiction to fact?

Cassandra Peterson was born in 1951 in a rural spot in Kansas known to the locals by the charming colloquialism Little Big Apple. Population: 300. 'All related to me,' she quips, 'You can figure out why, with all the screwing around.'

A local business endeavour to build the Tuttle Creek Dam in the 50s saw Cassandra embroiled in a heart-breaking accident around the conception of the power-plant that covered over one third of her body in burns. Out of hardship comes only resolve. Eventually. The traumatic effects of the accident saw more than a blemish on her milky-white Midwestern skin. For years to come she became a shy recluse, the antithesis of her fictitious persona.

She tells the dark tale of her two and a half year old self quietly and purposefully. 'I had skin grafting on 35 percent of my body torso, waist, back, everywhere but luckily for me not in the face, not hands, especially not upper chest. So it was kind of ok.' She laughs as she looks down on her breasts, the unequivocal Elvira asset. The Petersons moved to Colorado Springs in 1957. They bought Cassandra a toy turntable and an Elvis single and her assent into fantasy land was sealed. Here was

stardom. Was it to be hers? She'd dance to Hound Dog on loop to entertain mom and pop. Despite her shyness, family and friends noticed a singular new side to Cassandra. The skill to delight. She was swiftly and sharply sent off to the local dance class.

She continues her biographical tale. 'From 7 to 17, I moved and was raised in Colorado. I had no friends, not even the geeks wanted anything to do with me. My skin complexion was so white. I had little freckles and red red hair.' Just like Sissy Spacek in Carrie. 'I was wearing turtle-necks and long sleeves even at 40 degrees in the shade. I was a loner, a misfit.'

The seedlings of Elvira were metamorphosing mentally, if not physically. Then the artistic streak hit. 'I spent a lot of time by myself, in my own world painting monsters, zombies and mummy dolls. While other girls were playing with Barbies, I was making vampires dolls. I was into Bela Lugosi and Vincent Price, and went to see all of their movies. I was shy, afraid of myself. My mom had a costume shop with my aunt Lorraine, so Halloween was the best time of the year for me growing up. I had the best costumes. They used me as a model, and I would pick out whatever was the hot costume that year. Ginger from Gilligan's Island, I Dream Of Jeanie, Miss Kitty from Gunsmoke. My mom would make one in my size, so I would wear costumes to school all the time. Everyone thought I was a total freak. But I knew I would grow up and wear a costume one day, and that's exactly what happened. Kind of strange I ended up wearing a costume, don't you think?' All things considered? Kind of not.

In 1964 the young Elvira saw Viva Las Vegas, starring Elvis and Anne Margaret. Our little Goth Queen in the making was so enamoured with the romantic scent of the story in Sin City that she began carrying a fascination for a new, dreamlike, romantic adventure. She obsessed over Vegas – what did this fantasy town mean? – until her parents took the whole family on a brief vacation. She ended up applying for a showgirl contest. Of course she won. A combination of parental opposition and the small fact of her still being a minor presented

immediate interruptions to her being hired.

'I went to see the best show at the time at The Dunes Hotel, where they thought I was a showgirl. I started to look old enough to get into shows - stuffed my bras really well, wore make-up, high heels, eyelashes. They asked me if I wanted the job. They were having a show called Viva Le Girls, and I auditioned. They hired me on the spot. They loved my long legs. But then my parents took me back to Colorado.'

Two days after her high school graduation she took off to rehearse a burlesque act in Vegas under a contract with an Italian impresario. The limelight had found her. 'I graduated from Palmer High School in 1969 and went straight to Vegas for Spring Break. Went again to the Dunes hotel where I finally got my very first job.' Her dreams were starting to turn into reality. 'It was Vegas.'

The Vegas years didn't come without warning. Introduced to Elvis, she began an affair with the most famous man on the planet. He warned her hard. Her future was not as a blackjack dealer or burlesque dancer on The Strip. Loftier ambitions began fomenting.

'Meeting Elvis was the realization of my American dream. There were only six people spectating. They cleared out the room. I didn't know Elvis was there with his entourage. I did my show and then they called me to go to a party, where I met him. We spent all night... talking. About politics, music, singing Hound Dog, and making out. He gave me advice on my singing. I kissed him and he said to me "Leave this town. You have a beautiful voice, use it, go after your dream."' One problem. Young Cassandra had earned herself something of a reputation as a Vegas groupie. 'I have been sort of a groupie all my life,' she confesses, 'Dancing had always been one of my own early loves, therefore I couldn't resist the magic of Voodoo Chile Jimi Hendrix when he came back to play at the Denver Pop festival in 1969. Jimi told me that he was tired of living in the US and he didn't want to live here anymore. Unfortunately those words were more than prophetic. He died without going home.'

Cassandra moved on. A time in Paris dancing with La Folies Bergeres clashed with her temperament. She was loose, they were strict. Befriending a Corsican, Marisa, in the chorus line, she decamped to Linate climes. It was all part of her story, amassing material for a character that would become the sum of its parts. 'For the public, my breasts were like magnets. My fellow performers hated me, so I left. Italy here I come.'

The adventurous, ambitious young woman hired a Brazilian guitarist and set about touring Italy as a double act. A young American film director took Cassandra aside in Rome and reminded her he had filmed her for a documentary in Vegas. Joseph Birnbaum was about to become Elvira's new mentor. 'Joe was an apprentice director to another king over there, Federico Fellini, whom he'd met at a party. He hired me for a part for 30 days on his upcoming masterpiece, Roma. He said that my curvy figure inevitably reminded the Maestro of his wife, Giulietta Masina.'

A string of b-movies, strip show adult material and bit-parts followed. As a garter-belt wearing Italian nun in a 1300 year old convent, the light-bulb moment happened. 'The movie was L'Onorevole Piace Alle Donne with the Italian soft-core movie star, Lando Buzzanca. Nuns with sexy lingerie. It was a tits and ass film, but I had fun. Italians are really a bunch of interesting people, I have to admit that. We were doing a scene and everything was perfect until we got completely naked. The director shouted "CUT! CUT!" Let's redo it. Then we did the same thing and the director then yelled "CUT!" again. After two or three times we understood it. Cut was a way for us to get dressed again and then naked again. Smart little suckers, those Italians. Then I did some Spaghetti Westerns. I was hired because I was great at riding horses. I'd grown up on a farm riding. I also had great boobs, red hair and looked great in a skirt on a horse. Weeks later, someone at Cinecitta studio introduced me to the famous Italian singer Memo Remigi and then to Mina, who was known as The Voice and he said to me there was a band looking for a woman singer. I got the job, travelled with



Opposite:
Elvira wears dress by Dolce &
Gabbana, brooch by Alexis Bittar

Elvira wears dress by Salvatore
Ferragamo, tights by Wolford,
ring and knife Elvira's own



**“WHILE OTHER
GIRLS WERE
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BARBIES, I
WAS MAKING
VAMPIRES
DOLLS”**

them for almost a year in Italy and Switzerland.”

The way Cassandra floats through stories, it is as if her life of globe-trotting on the back of her incredible charisma just happened upon her. Perhaps it did. Some people are born to get the most out of life. For others, life happens to them. Somewhere within her Italian tour, the little girl Cassandra came back to haunt her. ‘I got homesick,’ she says. At a casino in San Remo she was told bitchily by a conductor that he and his wife were getting paid more than her. She got in the elevator, took it to the ground floor and headed straight for Miami. America was about to happen.

Miami led back to Vegas. ‘I got a job as a lead. Lead nude. Feathers and a g-string. I was back at the Dunes. Then this guy Matt who was an LA producer.’ He whisked her away. ‘Since I’m in Hollywood? Why not? Some acting jobs, please.’

Mid 70s LA was a lawless merry-go-round for Cassandra. She made friends with the A-gays, only to watch them decimated by AIDS within the decade. ‘After Miami,’ she says, ‘I decided that I would give singing another chance. These turned out to be my last performances. I put together a band with seven boys, called it Momma and Her Boys. All gays. We were doing dancing, singing, comedy and social commentary, travelling around the USA. I was the only singer and we performed hardcore disco music thus making me kind of a gay icon of the disco era. I loved my boys, I loved them all. We were a family. I became a Fag Hag.’ She relishes the term, using it as no form of detriment to herself or her self-esteem.

‘The gay community always made me feel safer than normal people. They were not judgemental. They embraced me in their community. They taught me how to put on make-up, how to walk, how to support and lift my boobs, how to dress. How to be in drag. Actually, I was the very first female drag. You get the drift. Then the Big One hit us.’ She lets out a short, stout, sad laugh. ‘Not the earthquake, but the AIDS epidemic. They all started to die, one after the other. It was 1982 and all you needed was a fever, shingles and two days later you were dead. There

could be no more Momma and Her Boys. Only one lived through that period, Robert Redding, who sketched the original Morticia Addams/Ronnie Spector template for Elvira.’ It was rejected by TV station after station.

The Epidemic claimed her one brave and talented life-long friend and confidante later on too. ‘So all dead. No worries. Seriously, that is why I became an activist, one of the first activists of that time.’

She turned to acting. ‘I said to myself “Why not?” Since I always had that big, bad, quick-witted valley-girl talk that made people laugh I decided to try acting. Why not comedy? I went with Matt to see one of the Groundlings shows and decided that is what I wanted to do. I was with them for the next four years, my friends were Paul Ruben aka PeeWee Herman and SNL alumni Phil Hartman. Comedy was an escape for me. I was to be able to get out my fears, my frustration, my childhood, all of my scars. I found out why the most successful comedians are the ones with the shittiest upbringings ever. It’s like, the more famous you are, the more fucked up you were as a kid.’ Cassandra met her husband at the Starwood club on Santa Monica Boulevard in 1982. He was the manager of the then unheard of John Cougar Mellencamp band. He cemented her rock’n’roll credentials. They married precisely two weeks before she was invited to film the wraparounds for late night Horror movies and her most feted character was born. But first, the music:

‘I was working on a popular TV show, the Don Kuschener Rock Concert Show, as a photographer and a PA. They were doing live bands. I got to see Ronstadt, Devo, Jackson Browne, The Go-Gos. I was really into music. I love musicians, besides sleeping with them. I love, love music - since I was a kid. I am still into music now. I was too stupid to learn how to play an instrument. I really did want to be in a band, in Kansas, in Vegas, Italy, Miami and LA. They didn’t work out because life has strange ways to show you where to go. I really wanted to do rock, but I kept ending up doing these “other” things. Don’t get me wrong, it was great to be in the bands, period. I was definitely a groupie. But I loved rock’n’roll and

that’s how I met my husband. That particular night Johnny Cougar was playing and he was his tour manager. We met, talked, laughed, made out and then got married.’

Her nuptials coincided with the birth of Elvira. She takes up the tale. ‘I got a call from a girlfriend insisting that I hurry back home to LA. A local station, KHJ-TV, was looking for a sexy, funny chick to host its long-running showcase of cheesy old horror movies. I was a sexy, funny chick with a long-standing thing for Vincent Price. I was perfect for the part, although I did not want to do it, so I stayed on honeymoon. I loved Vincent Price’s movies - Twilight Zone, Zombies, The Swamp - Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi. If Goth was hot back then you were looking at the Goth Queen. To cut a long story short, I went to the auditions a few days later and wanted to make fun of the whole thing. So I used my funny Valley Girl voice and landed the role of Elvira, Mistress of the Dark, the host of Movie Macabre. For me, it was just something to do. It only took one day a week and it paid \$300. Thanks to the costume, nobody would recognize me so I could continue acting.’

The iconic look stuck. ‘After a few shows Elvira became a sensation. We got requests for her for mall inaugurations, bar openings etc, etc. I was talked up as an alternative pinup and self-sufficient post-feminist dame. Wow! I ended up on the Tonite Show five times. After that, me and my husband started to get control of Elvira’s rights, and eventually we ended up owning the whole Elvira character, pulling in seven figures a year. Elvira became the first person to be broadcast over American airwaves in 3D.’ Her first idea for the Elvira look came from local Hollywood scandal. ‘I loved Roman Polanski’s movie Fearless Vampire Killers. I loved Sharon Tate. I wanted a really pale, ghostly look: big, dark eyes and white lips, like a dead girl. It was a pre-Tim Burton look I was after. They didn’t like that at all. They said, “No, it has to be black hair. You have to have a black dress.” Fuck it. Black it was.’

The name was divined from the age old method of putting suggestions into a hat. Partly cultivated from her fellow horror

show alumnus Vampira, and partly from her infamous tryst with Elvis, its iconic status was assured.

The rest, as they say, is history.

Movies, TV shows, sit-coms, reality shows (Looking for the next Elvira), paperbacks, beer commercials, sporting goods, horror conventions, calendars, comics books by both Marvel and DC Comics, videogames, pinball machines, lunchbox figurines, toys and inflatable dolls, while her Halloween costume was the best-selling Halloween outfit for ten consecutive years. Her perfume was called Evil. Touche.

The Elvira franchise lives on. She is now reviving her legacy with a new Halloween Special, plus a series of DVD release of new episodes of the original TV show. A horror series, Elvira’s Movie Macabre, whose soundtrack was written and performed by friend Jack White, and will be sold on black vinyl. Natch. Who would have thought of putting the fun into Goth? Who would have believed, back in the 80s, that Goth could be sexy, knowing, ironic, meaningful, tarty, slutty fun? Cassandra Peterson would. That is who.

Retiring Elvira is an option only in theory. ‘You know,’ she says, ‘I’d like to retire sooner or later, I don’t want to squeeze into that dress at 80.’ You wouldn’t put it past her. ●

Elvira wears dress by Emanuel Ungaro, cuffs by Alexis Bittar



“IT’S LIKE, THE MORE FAMOUS YOU ARE, THE MORE FUCKED UP YOU WERE AS A KID”



Elvira wears dress by Versace,
tights by Wolford, shoes by Prada

Opposite:
Elvira wears dress by Jeremy Scott,
ring by Alexis Bittar



Hair Tom Hardcastle
Make up Christian Greenia
Fashion Assistance
Jesper Gudbergson
and Megan Kelly
Digital Operator
Douglas Irvine
Production by
Betty Kim at CLM
Shot at Milk Studios Los Angeles
Special thanks to Tere Wierson,
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and Paul Flynn