

The Madonna Mystique

By 1987, Madonna was already one of the biggest pop stars in the world. But did anybody really know the person behind the celebrity?

By Mikal Gilmore

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SKIN-DEEP
In Tokyo, 1987

T IS A SEVERE, WIND-SWEPT SATURDAY NIGHT IN TOKYO, AND Madonna sits tucked into the corner of a crowded limousine, glaring at the rain that is lashing steadily against the windows. “We never had to cancel a show before,” she says. “Never, never, never.” With her upswept hairdo, her cardinal-red lips and her pearly skin, she looks picture-perfect lovely – and also utterly glum. † Madonna has come to Japan to launch the biggest pop shebang of the summer, the worldwide *Who’s That Girl* tour, and since arriving at Narita Airport several days ago, she’s been causing an enormous commotion. By all accounts, she has been fawned over, feted, followed and photographed more than any visiting pop sensation since the Beatles in 1966. In America, Madonna has attracted intense scrutiny: from fans, inspired by her alluring manner; from critics, incensed by what they perceive as her vapid tawdriness; and from snoopers of all sorts, curious about the state of her marriage to Sean Penn. But in Japan, Madonna is something a bit better than another hot or controversial celebrity: She is an icon of Western fixations.

Tonight, though, Madonna’s popularity in the Far East may have suffered something of a setback. Just a couple of hours ago, after spending a day trying to wait out a mini-typhoon, Madonna and her management were forced to cancel the opening date of a three-night stand at Tokyo’s Korakuen Stadium. Now, as Madonna sits in the back seat of a car en route to a dinner that she has arranged as a morale booster for her band and crew (many of whom worked the entire day in the rain), things get worse. The show’s cancellation, she learns, sparked riots when many of the 35,000 fans refused to vacate the concert site. In fact, some admirers are reportedly staying in the stadium, chanting prayers for the rain to go away and pleading for Madonna to appear.

A bit later, seated at the middle of a long dining table in an elegant Italian restaurant, Madonna pokes at a salad and sips halfheartedly at a liqueur as various members of her team offer their support.

Then, suddenly and quietly, a Japanese girl is standing at the end of the table, staring hard at Madonna. The girl – who appears to be about 15 – is clutching an armful of Madonna souvenir programs to her breasts and looks as if she’d been out in the rain for several hours. Apparently, she was among the many fans who spent the afternoon waiting at Korakuen, and here she is now, her face quivering with adoration and disappointment. Madonna meets her gaze, and the room fixes on their silent exchange.

“Please, please, so sorry, so sorry,” the girl says in broken English, bowing several times. A waiter rushes over to remove her, but Madonna signals him to stay back.

“Let her stay,” she says, still meeting the girl’s eyes. The girl holds forth her souvenir books with a pleading look, indicating she would like Madonna to sign them. Watching the singer sign the programs, the girl begins to sob uncontrollably, and watching the girl cry, several people in the band and crew also give way to tears.

When Madonna is finished signing the books, the girl again apologizes profusely and signals that she would like to come closer. Gingerly, the girl moves down the length of the table until she is standing across from the singer. Then, reaching out gently, she clasps Madonna’s hands and kneels before her, bowing her head, tears falling from her eyes.

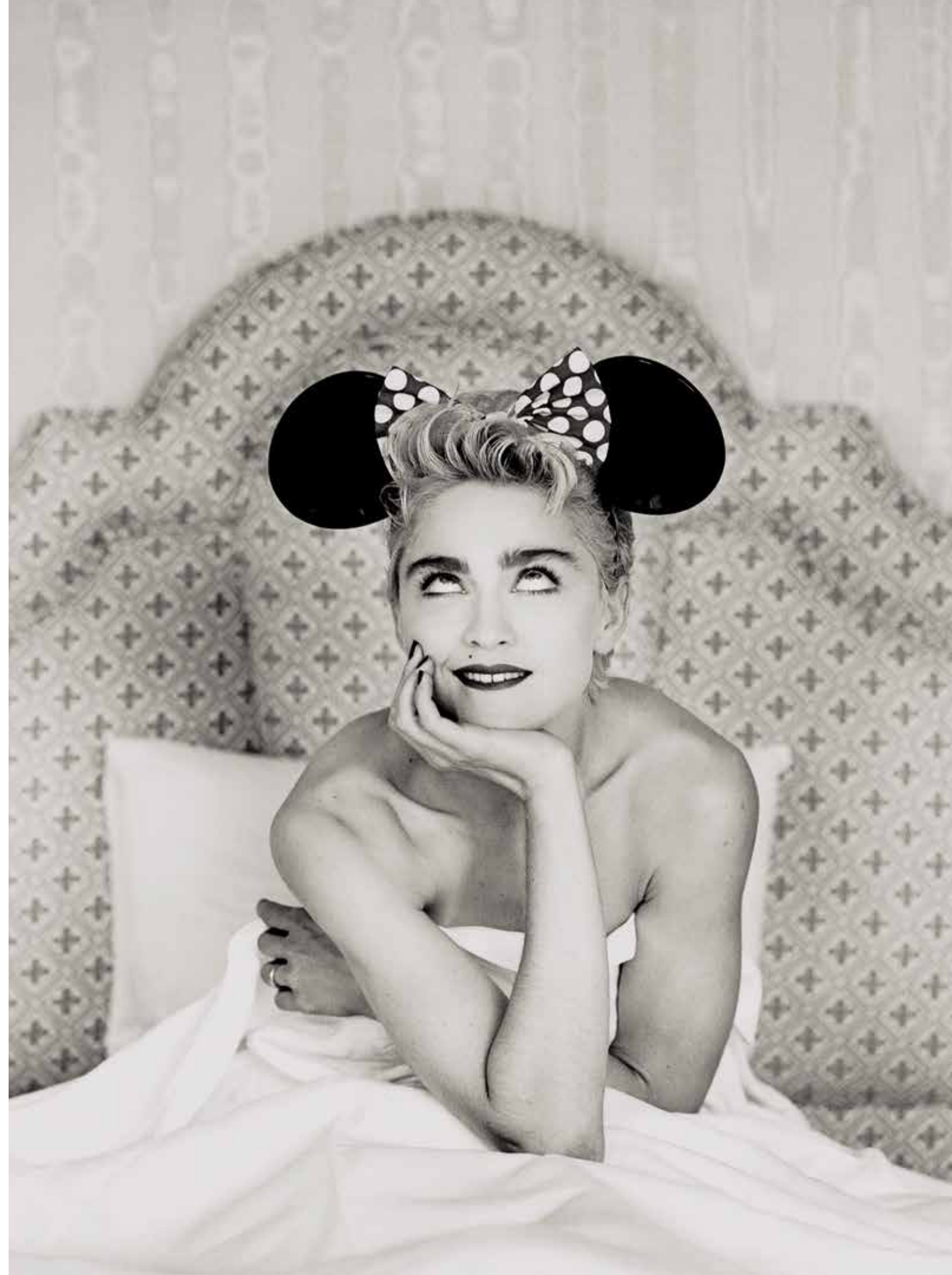
After a few moments, the girl stands, gathers her books and backs out of the room, to applause from the band and crew. A half-hour later, when it is time for Madonna to leave, a few dozen photographers have gathered outside the restaurant. It’s the typical shoot-the-celebrity scene, and Madonna strides through it all wearing a mask of poised unconcern.

“When people make themselves that vulnerable,” says Madonna of the Japanese girl, “they always endear themselves to me. I mean, I was touched by it. She was obviously acting that way because she gets some kind of joy out of what I have to offer. And yet there was something so servile about it, all that bowing and stuff. Sometimes it makes you feel like you’re enslaving somebody, and that’s a creepy feeling.”

DRESS YOU UP

“I stand for everything women are taught not to be.”
Tokyo, 1987.

I T IS THE DAY AFTER THE CANCELED PERFORMANCE, and yesterday’s bitter weather has given way to clear skies. Madonna sits at the dining table in her hotel penthouse, wearing a tailored black suit with dark-gray stripes and munching steadily on some sort of greenish health nuts. She says she did not sleep much the night before – perhaps because 300 Japanese fans kept an all-night vigil outside the hotel, occasionally chanting her name – and in an hour, she is scheduled to leave for Korakuen Stadium to begin the sound-check for this evening’s concert. For the moment, though, she





sits picking through her health kernels and tries to account for her intense appeal to the Japanese.

"I think I stand for a lot of things in their minds," she says. "You know, a lot of kinds of stereotypes, like the whole sex-goddess image and the blonde thing. But mainly I think they feel that most of my music is really, really positive, and I think that they appreciate that, particularly the women. I think I stand for everything that they're really taught to not be, so maybe I provide them with a little bit of encouragement."

Madonna runs her fingers through her blond tufts and smiles. For a person who hasn't slept much, she looks radiant. There's nothing star-conscious or affected in her manner. If anything, Madonna frequently seems indifferent to her own mystique, more bemused than imperious about it.

To observe Madonna is clearly to consider a star of the times, a star, in fact, who seems to be growing bigger and bigger with every move. In four years, she's had more than a dozen smash singles. And by the end of the *Who's That Girl* tour, she will have performed before nearly 2 million spectators on three continents, in what may be the most elaborately staged large-scale pop revue to date – and reportedly for more money per show (perhaps as much as \$500,000) than any other entertainer in show-business history.

Besides the tour, Madonna is currently appearing in her third feature film, a neo-screwball romp titled (what else?) *Who's That Girl*. As Nikki Finn – a streetwise woman wrongly convicted of murder and hell-bent on vindication – Madonna turns in a cunningly dizzy, often affecting portrayal that has inspired speculation in Hollywood that Madonna may become one of the most bankable new actresses of the decade. "There was just something about the character – the contrasts in her nature, how she was tough on one side and vulnerable on the other – that I thought I could take and make my own," she says.

Beyond *Who's That Girl*, Madonna is set to star in an updated remake of the Marlene Dietrich film *The Blue Angel* (to be produced by Diane Keaton and directed by Alan Parker). Beyond that, she is currently considering producing several other movies, including an Alfred Hitchcock-style thriller and a film version of Lorrie Moore's novel *Anagrams*. All this activity has led some observers to wonder how deeply committed Madonna is to her singing career. Madonna, though, sees a similarity in what she's doing with her two careers.

"Acting is fun for me," she says, "because, well...for most people, music is a very personal statement, but I've always liked to have different characters that I project. I feel that I projected a very specific character for *Like a Virgin* and that whole business and then created a much different character for my third album. The problem is, in the public's mind, you are your image, your musical image, and I think that those characters are only extensions of me. There's a little bit of you in every character that you do..."

What is it that she and Nikki Finn have in common?

"Nikki? Um, she's courageous, and manipulative." Madonna pauses and giggles. "And she's funny, and sweet. That's enough."

Isn't Nikki also terribly misjudged?

"Yes," says Madonna, with a nod and a smile. "Yes, she is, but she clears her name in the end, and that's always good to do. Clear your name in the end. But I think I'm continuously doing that with the public."

Has that ever been a hurtful process – for example, weathering all those unflattering characterizations around the time of "Like a Virgin"?

"At first it was," she says. "I mean, I was surprised with how people reacted to 'Like a Virgin,' because when I did the song, to me, I was

singing about how something made me feel a certain way – brand-new and fresh – and everyone else interpreted it as 'I don't want to be a virgin anymore. Fuck my brains out!' That's not what I sang at all."

Madonna pauses and glances for a moment at her reflection in the tabletop. "People have this idea," she says, "that if you're sexual and beautiful and provocative, then there's nothing else you could possibly offer. People have always had that image about women. And while it might have seemed like I was behaving in a stereotypical way, at the same time I was also masterminding it. I was in control of everything I was doing, and I think that when people realized that, it confused them."

So is it feminism she's offering or a denial of it?

She considers the notion, then shrugs. "I don't think about the work in terms of feminism. I certainly feel that I give women strength and hope, particularly young women. So in that respect, I feel my behavior is feminist, or my art is feminist. But I'm certainly not militant about it, nor do I exactly premeditate it."

"And when women didn't like me, I just chalked it up to the reason women always have a problem with me: I think that women who are strong, or women who wanted to be strong or be respected, were taught this thing that they had to behave like men, or not be sexy or feminine or something, and I think that it pissed them off that I was doing that. Also, I think for the most part men have always been the aggressors sexually. Through time immemorial they've always been in control. So I think sex is equated with power in a way, and that's scary in a way. It's scary for men that women would have that power, and I think it's scary for women to have that power – or to have that power and be sexy at the same time."

Is that why so many critics seemed perfectly comfortable with male rock stars' sexuality but were incensed by Madonna's displays?

"Well, yeah! I thought about that, certainly. I'd think, 'Why aren't they letting all this stand in the way of appreciating Prince's music?' He was certainly just as sexually provocative, if not more than I was. I wasn't talking about giving head. He was much more specific than I was."

There's a knock at the door of her suite, a reminder that it's time to head over to the stadium. "Actually, I can't complain," Madonna says, getting ready to leave. "Plenty of people are getting my message. I'm not going to change the world in a day. I don't know, maybe it never will be where men and women will be equal. They're too different. I mean, it just seems like as long as women are the ones that give birth to children, it'll never really change. I'm not saying that in a sad way. I think more and more women will be able to have more freedom to do whatever they want, and they won't have so many prejudices thrown at them, but I think it would be too idealistic to say that one day we will never be discriminated against because we're women."

"I don't know, am I too cynical?"

Several hours later, Madonna stands onstage before 35,000 fans – outfitted in a brazen corset-bustier, executing fast, sure pirouettes and striking starkly bawdy poses. It rapidly becomes apparent that all Madonna's talk about sexual pride was hardly trifling. Indeed, although it may come as a major surprise to many of her critics, there has probably never been a more imaginative or forceful showcase for the feminine sensibility in pop than Madonna's current tour. In part, that's because Madonna is simply the first female entertainer who has ever starred in a show of this scope – a fusion of Broadway-style choreography and post-disco song and dance that tops

WHO'S THAT GIRL
Onstage in Montreal, July 1987.

the standards set by previous live concert firebrands like Prince and Michael Jackson.

But there is more to the show than mere theatrical savvy. Actually, a majority of Madonna's new song-and-dance routines amount to stirring statements about dignity and triumph. Some of these are simply fun – for example, the skit in “True Blue,” where the singer gets charmed and then used by a muscle-bound lady killer (played slyly by the show's choreographer, master break dancer Shabba Doo) but then wins the cad back. Other moments come off as unabashedly serious, particularly a rendition of “Papa Don't Preach” that takes sharp aim at some of the current batch of male authority figures (including the pope and the president) who would presume to have the power to make key decisions regarding a woman's control of her own body. (“Ronald Reagan,” Madonna says later, “is one papa who shouldn't preach.”)

But it is in “Live to Tell” that Madonna makes her most forceful comment on feminine spirit. She sings her ballad of battered hope while standing stock-still at the front of the stage, under a giant projected photo of herself that strongly resembles Marilyn Monroe. At the song's end, as the photo turns dark and deathly, Madonna slumps onto the floor, in a pose that suggests surrender and desolation, and then gradually forces herself back to her feet, as if recovering her strength and courage through an act of titanic will. It's a moment that could be seen as a mourning of Monroe's gloomy end or as a refusal of the very sort of despair that was the fate of the actress.

It's also a moment that makes plain a link between the stars: Like Monroe, Madonna is bent on epitomizing and championing a certain vision of female sexuality, and also like Monroe, she is often damned and dismissed as an artist for doing so.

THE NEXT EVENING, ABOARD A PLANE en route to Los Angeles, Madonna seems surprised, even a tad miffed, to learn that her performance of “Live to Tell” may be seen as a commentary on Marilyn Monroe. Apparently, she never intended for the portrait that accompanies the song onstage to bear such a striking resemblance to Monroe.

“Actually,” she says, “I think ‘Live to Tell’ is about something very different. It's about being strong, and questioning whether you can be that strong, but ultimately surviving.”

But she's aware, isn't she, that many people see certain similarities between her and Monroe? After all, she was the one who deliberately evoked Marilyn in the “Material Girl” video. And both artists inspire arguments about sexual values and share a certain allure.

“Oh, sure,” she says. “I mean, at first I enjoyed the comparisons between me and her. I saw it all as a compliment: She was very sexy – extremely sexy – and she had blond hair... Then it started to annoy me, because nobody wants to be continuously compared to someone else. You want people to see that you have a statement of your own to make.”

“But yes, I do feel something for Marilyn Monroe. A sympathy. Because in those days, you were really a slave to the whole Hollywood machinery, and unless you had the strength to pull yourself out of it, you were just trapped. I think she really didn't know what she was getting herself into and simply made herself vulnerable, and I feel a bond with that. I've certainly felt that at times – I've felt an invasion of privacy and all that – but I'm determined never to let it get me down. Marilyn Monroe was a victim, and I'm not. That's why there's no comparison.”

But has she, like Marilyn, ever had times of wondering...

Madonna anticipates where the question is headed. “Of wondering, ‘Oh, God, what have I created?’ Oh, yes. Like when *Desperately Seeking Susan* came out, and I was going with a well-known actor, then I announced my marriage, then the *Playboy* and *Penthouse* pictures came out – everything sort of happened at once, one big explosion of publicity. No matter how successful you want to be,

you could never, ever anticipate that kind of attention – the grand scale of it all.

“And at first the *Playboy* photos were very hurtful to me, and I wasn't sure how I felt about them. Now I look back at them and I feel silly that I ever got upset, but I did want to keep some things private. It was like when you're a little girl at school and some nun comes and lifts your dress up in front of everybody and you get really embarrassed. It's not really a terrible thing in the end, but you're not ready for it, and it seems so awful, and you seem so exposed. Also, *Penthouse* did something really nasty: They sent copies of the magazine to Sean.

“That whole time was almost too much,” she says after a moment. “I mean, I didn't think I was going to be getting married with 13 helicopters flying over my head. It turned into a circus. In the end, I was laughing. At first I was outraged, and then I was laughing...”



IN THE SPOTLIGHT

With Sean Penn, 1986. “I didn't think I was going to be getting married with 13 helicopters flying over my head,” she said. “It turned into a circus.”

Does she ever get the feeling that people want her marriage to fail?

“Oh yes, from the time we got married. They couldn't make up their mind: They wanted me to be pregnant, or they wanted us to get a divorce. That put a lot of strain on our relationship, too, after a while. It's been a character-building experience, and a test of love to get through all of it.” She falls silent for a time, studying the darkening sky outside the window. “A lot of the times,” she says, “the press would make up the most awful things that we had never done, fights that we never had. Then sometimes we would have a fight, and we'd read about it, and it would be almost spooky, like they'd predicted it or they'd bugged our phones or they were listening in our bedroom.”

Unfortunately, Penn's way of handling attention has often been belligerent: He has perhaps become more famous for fighting than for acting – which has led him to legal difficulties, as well as a troubled public image. Madonna herself has been present for some of the fisticuffs.

“It was traumatic,” she says. “I mean, I don't like violence. I never condone hitting anyone, and I never thought that any violence should have taken place. But on the other hand, I understood Sean's anger, and believe me, I've wanted to hit them

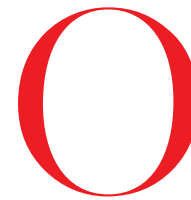
“People have this idea that if you're sexual and beautiful and provocative, then there's nothing else you could possibly offer.”

many times... I have chances to vent my anger in other ways than confrontation. I like to fight people and kind of manipulate them into feeling like they're not being fought, do you know what I mean? I'd rather do it that way.

“But yes, those were very traumatic experiences for me, and I think...” She pauses thoughtfully. “I don't think they'll be happening anymore. I think that Sean really believes that it's a waste of energy... They really went out of their way to pick on him, to the point where they would walk down the street and kind of poke at him and say, ‘C'mon, c'mon, hit me, hit me.’ It's not fair. And they insult me, and they try to get him to react that way.”

In just a few hours, she will be landing in Los Angeles, then shortly winging off to Miami, where the American tour begins. One has to wonder: With all this work, all this scrutiny of her private life, does she ever question whether the fame is worth all the trouble?

“Sure,” she says quietly. “There have been times when I've thought, ‘If I'd known it was going to be like this, I wouldn't have tried so hard.’ But I feel that what I do affects people in a very positive way. That's the most important thing, and that's what I always set out to do. And you can't affect people in a large, grand way without being scrutinized and judged and put under a microscope, and I accept that. If it ever gets too much, or I feel like I'm being overscrutinized, or I'm not enjoying it anymore, then I won't do it.”



ON THE DAY MADONNA ARRIVES IN Los Angeles, the press is abuzz with the latest about Sean Penn, who has just been sentenced to 60 days in jail for punching an extra during the filming of his movie *Colors* and for a reckless-driving charge.

Matters grow even worse a few weeks later, when – after having won

a reprieve of his jail term so that he can finish work on a new film in West Germany – Penn apparently violates his agreement with the court by turning up in New York to see his wife's AIDS benefit concert at Madison Square Garden. Back in L.A., the city attorneys grow furious and obtain a warrant for the actor's arrest, then quash the warrant when Penn heads for Europe to make his movie. Madonna, meantime, prefers to stay mum on the issue. “I don't know all the details,” she says, “and I don't want to know.”

Still, the whole affair manages to kick up several rumors – namely, that Penn's sentencing has either saved or helped finish what has reputedly been an often tempestuous marriage. “If we have our fights,” says Madonna, “I think that's pretty normal for young people in their first few years of marriage.”

It's normal for anybody who's married, but when you put all the pressures that we've had on top of that, I think the fact that we're still together is pretty amazing. You know, we're working it out... It's easy to give up, but it's not easy for me to give up.”

Amid all the hoopla about Penn, Madonna's AIDS benefit is relatively overlooked. Shaken by the death of a good friend, artist Michael Burgoyne, and mindful that much of her initial support came from the gay, black and Latin communities – the same groups that have been hardest hit by AIDS – Madonna decided to lend her name to the cause of

raising money for medical research against the deadly disease and, in the process, became the first major American pop star to stage such a large-scale fundraiser. Many of the concert's songs, such as “Open Your Heart” and “Holiday,” take on a new resonance in the context of the event, though none is more affecting than “Live to Tell,” dedicated on this evening to Burgoyne. Indeed, the moment when Madonna pushes herself up off the stage floor and back to her feet comes across as both an act of hope and a gesture of solace in the face of terrible, fearful impossibilities. Two days later, *The New York Times* calls the show “shallow, kitschy pop entertainment.” Madonna says, “There are still those people who, no matter what I do, will always think of me as a little disco tart.”

As the tour progresses, “Live to Tell” seems to take on more and more of the focus in the show. By the time she hits Los Angeles, Madonna has taken to halting in the middle of the song and gazing thoughtfully up at the large photograph of herself that looms above her head. What is she thinking about while looking at her own larger-than-life image? “I see it and I say, ‘Oh, God, what have I done? What have I created? Is that me, or is this me, this small person standing down here on the stage?’ That's why I call the tour *Who's That Girl*: Because I play a lot of characters, and every time I do a video or a song, people go, ‘Oh, that's what she's like.’ And I'm not like any of them. I'm all of them. I'm none of them. You know what I mean?”