

Icon on Icon

Lily Tomlin dishes about working with gay legends

When I was doing the album *Modern Scream*, I got that call to go on the cover of *Time*. At that time *The Boys in the Band* came out; Cliff Gorman played one of the gay guys in that movie but was straight in his personal life—every interview he did, he made sure everybody knew he was straight. So I just flipped all the things he said in interviews. The interviewer, played by me also, is saying things like: “Lily, you play a heterosexual woman in *Nashville*. How did it feel seeing yourself on the big screen making love to a man?” And I said: “Well, I’ve seen these women all my life. I know how they look.” [Laughs]

That was my protest for thinking *Time* could co-opt me. I wanted my work to be acknowledged. I got on the cover anyway two years later.

I didn’t want to be known as a gay comedian; I wanted to be known as a human comedian. I don’t think gay people’s experience as humans is so different from any other humans. I was never secretive, but I never held a press conference.

JR: You’re turning 70 next year, but your energy seems unstoppable. Do you have a secret?

LT: No, I think I was just born this way. You could say that about most everything! 

LILY TOMLIN performs 7:30 p.m. June 7 at Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, 1037 S.W. Broadway. Tickets are \$20-\$115 from www.orsymphony.org.

Arts and Culture
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• **Cher (1999’s *Tea with Mussolini*):** I was on her TV show, too. I’ll tell you a really funny story about Cher. I had to take a different plane home from Italy, and Jane rode home with Cher. Cher was just distraught because she didn’t think she looked good in *Tea with Mussolini*, and of course she looked quite beautiful.

Jane was comforting her and saying: “Cher, I think you’re overreacting. You really look wonderful.”

And Cher turns and says to Jane, “Well, you don’t think Lily looks good, do you?” [Laughs]

Cher is one of the most down-to-earth, candid—you can’t help but enjoy her. She’s just so out there in some incredible, individual way.

She sent me one of her books, and she wrote: “Lily, you’re the best. But I’m the greatest.”

• **Bette Midler (1988’s *Big Business*):** There’s a kind of brassy innocence about Bette. And she’s so smart. Every day she was reading a new book while we were working; in fact, I remember her reading *And the Band Played On*.

We were having a hard time with Jim [Abrahams], the director—he’s a sweet guy, but he kept telling us we were too big, we were too broad, and trying to make us take it down. And I said: “Jim, you’ve got to let Bette and me do what we do. You hired us to do this.”

I was getting so unconfident from not knowing what to do or not to do that I brought an acting coach on the set. I didn’t want to embarrass Jim; he knew she was there, but I didn’t make a play about it. So she would send my makeup and hair people—she would put Post-Its under their scarves saying to me, like, “That was good, do that, don’t be afraid to do it” and so on.

“[Cher] sent me one of her books, and she wrote: ‘Lily, you’re the best. But I’m the greatest.’”

—Lily Tomlin

Bette’s standing over there with a cigarette and she looks over between takes, and suddenly out of nowhere, she finally sees what’s going on and she says, “I want some of those fuckin’ Post-Its!” and just blows everyone’s cover in a second. She’s kind of spectacular.

At that time [Midler’s daughter] Sophie was just a toddler—she’s grown now and graduated Yale, I think, and looks just like Bette—and she was looking for a new nanny. She said, “I interviewed this woman, and I like her, but she told me she wasn’t responsible for Sudden Infant Death.” [Giggles] I said, “Well, you’re not going to hire her?” She said, “Well, I’m going to interview her again.” I said, “Get an injunction right now, don’t let her come near the house!”

For someone so brilliant as she is and so amazingly funny and conversant in so many things, she would sometimes do the most surprising, endearing, naive things.

• **Dolly Parton (1980’s *Nine to Five*):** Well, Dolly’s not innocent. Dolly’s as sassy and saucy as they can be. So sharp and knows just what she wants and she doesn’t suffer fools, although you’d never know it—she’s just as charming as she can be! But rather than show that she’s put out, she’ll just disappear, she’ll just get whisked away.

She’s another one that’s spectacular. I saw Dolly at her first concert. It was ’77, and I was friends with Sandy Gallin, who was her manager for a long time and really engineered her cross-over from country to mainstream. She played at The Bottom Line in New York, then she came to see me in *Appearing Nightly*. You knew right away she was just dynamite.

• **Jane Fonda (1980’s *Nine to Five*):** She’s another one that’s innocent, but her innocence is very different. Her innocence is so girlish, so good. When she throws herself into something, it’s just amazing the commitment. She absolutely just gives her all and is tireless about asking other people to help or be a part of it.

[In 1979] Joan Baez had run an ad

in *The New York Times* that I had signed, which was against the Vietnamese government because of the boat people and everything. Of course, Jane and Tom [Hayden, her then husband] were very pro-Vietnamese government at that time because they felt that the war was immoral and so on—as did Joan, but she still, being a pacifist, was against any kind of inhuman treatment. And so was I.

Everyone who signed that ad got a letter from Tom and Jane sort of chastising us for playing into the hands of the military or something. I never said anything to her about it.

On the set, she and Dolly and I had really bonded and become great friends. Jane was going to do *Norma Rae* as a benefit for one of her charities, and she says, “Lily, I want you to go on the committee.” I said: “Well, do you think it’s something really good? Should I sign on to it? Because I always like to do whatever you or Joan Baez ask me to do!”

She pulled away. She just blanched. She didn’t know what to say to me. I just laughed and I said, “I’m just having fun with you.”

We’re still good friends. Dolly has the *Nine to Five* musical coming out here in L.A. in September. [Allison Janney of *The West Wing* will star as Tomlin’s character, Violet.]

• **Madonna (1992’s *Shadows and Fog*):** I didn’t lay eyes on her. I don’t know that much about Madonna personally. I think one time years ago, maybe during *The Search*, Sandra Bernhard brought Madonna backstage for a minute, but there were so many people, I never really got to engage with her at all.

I may be making that up. I can’t remember. It seems like that’s what happened.

Someone told me once that [Greta] Garbo came to see me in *Appearing Nightly*, my first show. I was just stunned, and I ran out to the street hoping I would catch her. She was in the back seat of her car with the driver, and all she did was just kind of throw me a kiss or something.

I thought: “I must’ve dreamed that. I don’t think that could be true.” But then later a fellow at the gay center here in L.A. told me he saw her there that night. Whether he’s hallucinating or not, I don’t know.

QT
tuesday, June 17th 6pm-close
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