

The Re-Emergence of Annabella Lwin

By JEFF FARR

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When I was a teenager in 1980, the band Bow Wow Wow was a happy surprise. My friends and I, listening to the punk band the Sex Pistols *all the time*, had just about brainwashed ourselves into thinking that we were angry British kids (we lived in Arizona). The Sex Pistols said that there was “no future” — and they had almost convinced us.

Then from England came Bow Wow Wow, put together by manager Malcolm McLaren, also the Sex Pistols’ manager: This was a big change of pace. With its beautiful 14-year-old lead singer, Annabella Lwin, the band had all these funny (even hilarious) songs about the joys of being young: “Golly! Golly! Go Buddy!” “Go Wild in the Country,” the MTV hit “I Want Candy.” Annabella wasn’t angry; she seemed, strangely enough to us, to be...happy.

Eighteen (!) years later, two more happy surprises: I learn that Annabella is now an SGI member of eight years, and she has reformed Bow Wow Wow. (The band broke up in the early ’80s.)

When I interviewed her recently, I wanted to hear her perspective on the Bow Wow Wow story and, most of all, how it related to her experiences in faith.

“The positive energy came from the music being so up tempo and very heartbeat-oriented, i.e., tribal,” Annabella remembers of Bow Wow Wow’s beginnings. “For the rest, I just used my imagination and went with how I felt. I wasn’t really a singer at first — I was more of a screamer and shouter. When we were on stage, I always felt very happy and enthusiastic, and I felt that we were quite unique.”

Bow Wow Wow was indeed original, their sound a crazy amalgamation of fast Latin, African, surf and punk styles, with Annabella belting it out over the top of everything. But after a grueling worldwide tour and some serious blunders by management, Bow Wow Wow’s uniqueness wasn’t enough to keep the band together. On returning to England, Annabella awoke one day in 1983 to read in the music papers that she had been fired from the band. She was 17 then and heartbroken at the news; the brakes had been put on all the promise of her career.

“I was very naive, very stupid and didn’t have a clue about what the music industry was all about,” Annabella, now 33, admits. “When I was 14, I think that I was protected a lot, because I never got into the sex and the drugs and the rock and roll. But I was very disturbed at that time — I was a girl coming away from her family and friends, leaving everything behind and joining this rock group that was like *The Muppet Show* almost. It was a very lonely and distraught and distressed kind of lifestyle on the road.” In one song, “Chihuahua,” Annabella confessed, “I’m a rock and roll puppet / in a band called Bow Wow Wow.”

Struggling for a long time post-Bow Wow Wow to get a solo career started, Annabella eventually found herself in an identity crisis — not just about her career but about her whole life.

“I wanted to find my direction and my path,” she says. “I wanted to get back to me, to who I was. ‘Why am I here?’ ‘Why I am doing this?’ I was asking myself all these profound questions that we all ask at one point or another in our lives.”

Fame had happened to her so fast, at such a young age; now she was just starting to make sense of everything.

During this period, Annabella met an SGI member, who told her about Nichiren

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Daishonin's Buddhism.

At first, Annabella couldn't believe that the member was really a Buddhist. In Burma, where she was born, Annabella knew only Buddhists — including her father — who cut themselves off from society, who lived in temples, who prayed day and night, who had no worldly possessions. (Her father had tried to teach her that women could not attain enlightenment, a provisional Buddhist teaching, but she had always disagreed with him.)

At her first SGI meeting, when she met the wonderful people there who shared how they practiced Buddhism in the real world, she was convinced that this religion was for her, too.

“Yeah! This is what I need to be doing,” she thought. “This is exactly what I needed to find.”

When she first started chanting, it was rough going, though: Her record deal fell apart, as did a relationship she was in. But things going so bad were symbolic of the big internal changes she was making, she believed. She had started to realize how angry she was at the world — and to change that anger into something positive, into a new determination.

“Losing everything actually happened to me a couple of times,” she says. “I had nothing, absolutely nothing. Nowhere to live, no money. I had friends, but even my friends then weren't really friend-friends.

“But something that Malcolm McLaren said to me a long, long time ago came back to me when I was going through this,” she recalls. “It was the first thing that he ever said to me, in fact: ‘Annabella, you've got to learn that you either sink or swim. Don't ever change who you are.’

“Having been in the public eye so long, Buddhism brought home for me the superficiality of it all,” she continues, “and how it's very important just to be your true self, no matter what — and to not allow people to manipulate you and make you unhappy by their actions. The only way that we can stop people from making us unhappy is by not allowing them to do it; by being our true selves, you see.

“That is the simplicity of it,” she emphasizes. “I think that human beings tend to complicate their lives a lot. The Daishonin taught that ‘one should become the master of his mind rather than let his mind master him’ (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 146). This is very, very true.”

Mastering her anger with this perspective led to her realization that music was her true mission.

“Having gone through a lot of karma, a lot of crap, a lot of learning, understanding and realization,” she says, “and having met Buddhism and spirituality and having opened my mind, heart and soul to what I was doing back then, and what I was continuing to do — it made me realize that as artists we should feel fortunate that we can perform for people. We're doing something we love doing. We're connecting with people. If we manage to make people smile and be happy, then that's what we're here to do. It's not to be up there posing around and pretending we're something special, because we're not.

“We're here to inspire and support and give love to people through what we do,” she concludes. “I hope that comes across when I'm on stage, because that's really all I'm trying to do.”

Part of inspiring people this way became the return to her Bow Wow Wow roots. Last year, Annabella and the band's original bass player, Leigh Gorman, put a new four-piece together and toured America. (The results will soon be heard on *Wild in America*, the band's new, live CD.)

Annabella and Leigh decided to stay after every show and meet their fans face to face. “What I was really amazed about,” she says, “was that there was such a broad range of

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ages. There were 14-year-olds to 70-year-olds, which was fantastic! There were people from all over the place. I realized that our music had obviously touched a lot of people. But what was *really* amazing was the young kids, who would say: ‘My brother was playing your records, and my big sister and my mom were.’ ‘You were so positive.’ ‘We’ve really missed you.’”

In the ’80s, Annabella had little control over her career; now she’s in charge. “Originally with Bow Wow Wow,” she explains, “I didn’t have any say or any involvement — or was not given any involvement — in what went on in the band. They didn’t even like it when I talked very much on stage. They used to get funny with me if I said anything more than ‘The next number’s called...’”

“I suppose my confidence now comes from being in the business for 18 years,” she adds. “And being a writer now. I think I’ve done my apprenticeship.”

Near the end of the first Bow Wow Wow, Annabella started writing her own songs, including one of their biggest hits, “Do You Wanna Hold Me?” But especially in recent years, beginning around the start of her Buddhist practice, Annabella has been constantly writing. She saw that “if I wanted to do well at this and do this the best way that I knew how and my own way, I had to write my own lyrics and melodies and start to come to grips with what it was that I wanted to say.”

Not everyone in the business was ready for this new Annabella, though. “I started telling people, ‘This is what I want to do, and this is how I want to do it,’” she remembers. “And from there it kind of got easier and easier — but it started off quite hard. People were just starting to realize that they were dealing with an adult now as opposed to this little girl.”

One of her new songs, the exotic “1,000 Tears,” will soon appear as a Bow Wow Wow track on the soundtrack for *Desperate But Not Serious* (a comedy film in which Annabella has a role).

Many of the women who have proven that they weren’t just “little girls” in the male-dominated music industry have had strong women role models in the business to look up to, and this has been true of Annabella. Tina Turner is a favorite.

“My first-ever live performance that I saw was Tina Turner,” she says. “That was at the Ritz in New York, when Bow Wow Wow was on tour all those years ago. I was completely blown away by her act and the way she was and everything. She made me realize that when I get to be 50, I can still be doing this!”

Annabella’s also fond of the classic girl group the Ronettes. In the early days of Bow Wow Wow, McLaren gave her a Ronettes record for study purposes; he thought that it would help her to get the idea of singing to her own age group. The first time he ever heard her sing was when he went to meet her mom, just after she had passed the Bow Wow Wow audition; Annabella performed Gloria Gaynor’s disco hit “I Will Survive” for him. “Yeah! Very interesting,” he said. “But why are you singing a song by an old woman? You’re only 14! You’ve got to be doing things that are more relevant to your age group.” Thus, the Ronettes became an inspiration.

For her faith inspiration, a couple of Annabella’s favorite passages from the Daishonin’s writings are: “The journey from Kamakura to Kyoto takes twelve days. If you travel for eleven but stop on the twelfth, how can you admire the moon over the capital?” (MW-1, 254–55). “As you crave food when hungry, seek water when thirsty, long to see a lover, beg for medicine when ill, or as a beautiful woman desires powder and rouge, so should you put your faith in the Lotus Sutra” (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 306).

“Sometimes people say that this practice is difficult,” Annabella reflects, “because it requires a lot of discipline. That’s true to a certain extent, but I think that they also forget

that it's not about disciplining yourself to do prayers because you *have to*, but because you *want to*. It's not like sitting there and offering flowers and fruit to a statue, because at the end of the day it's about us all having Buddhahood within us. We all have a higher self. It's about connecting with that and bringing it out.

"A lot of us forget that we're very special beings," she sums up. "To be born a human being is a very, very precious thing, because we can change life, we can change people's attitudes — the way that they look at things."

Finally, Annabella shares some advice for all young women who also dream of becoming singers or performers: "Don't look for fame," she says. "Do it because you truly love it. And just be yourself when you do it."

When I saw Bow Wow Wow recently play Las Vegas, Annabella was clearly setting an example of exactly that — her love for inspiring people through music was for real.

And as she jumped around the stage and joked with the audience, as she screamed, shouted and sang, I thought of all she's been through. She's a survivor. Her life and music share a message: Survive and thrive. Be yourself. Don't sink — it's a lot more fun to swim!

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