

A quarter of a century ago, before Lily and Amy were even glints in a pop marketer's most prescient dreams, Mari Wilson bestrode the British pop charts with a beehive of tottering proportions and a fist of exuberant 1960s pastiche hits like *Just What I've Always Wanted* and *Beat the Beat*.

'Neasden's Queen of Soul' – a tribute to her railway-cottage roots in north London – was a welcome breeze in a sea of stars who all took themselves very seriously.

But her shimmering takes on the Julie London standard *Cry Me A River* and the sultry *Dance With a Stranger* – the soundtrack of the 1984 Ruth Ellis biopic – gave an early indication that there was more to Mari than a set of disposable pop tunes and a taste for well-tended suburban glamour.

When her flurry of chart success subsided, she set about reinventing herself as a song stylist, going back to basics to learn about lyrical interpretation for more intimate audiences.

She has long-since established herself as one of our most respected and accomplished female singers, equally at home in Ronnie Scott's – the ultimate testing ground where she proved her jazz credentials to considerable acclaim – or as part of the irrepressible cabaret trio *Girl Talk* with Barb Jungr and Claire Martin.

Mari has generally avoided the nostalgia circuit, preferring more contemporary collaborations and increasingly, to write her own material. But this month, to coincide with the release of a new package of her vintage material, she is touring the UK with a show that recalls those joyous early successes and blends them with the maturity and life experience that marks her latest work.

"My personality and voice aren't

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only determined by my hairstyle!" she says, slightly exasperated.

"I've been singing for a long time and I'm just not the same artist that I was 25 years ago. There will still be plenty of glamour but I'm not going to come on with a beehive. If you want to look like Bet Lynch at a certain age, fine, but I don't want to go there."

In the early 1980s, Mari toured with a 12-piece band and backing singers who included Michelle Collins and Julia Fordham. This time round, she has a small band with a top class pedigree: pianist Adrian York, former Haircut 100 drummer Blair Cunningham, Jamie Cullum's bass player Geoff Gascoyne and guitarist Matt Bakker.

"None of them have played my old material, and neither have I in a long time," she says. "I've got to decide which songs are appropriate at this point in my life – I don't think I'll be doing *Beware Boyfriend* – and I won't know until we start rehearsing. But I expect there will be half a dozen of the old numbers on the playlist.

"I'm a much better singer now: experience counts for a lot, my attitude is different and frankly, I've got better chops! I sing correctly. When I had a 12-piece band behind me I couldn't hear myself and I didn't know the right way to sing. And I've actually got a wider range – particularly in the lower register – which we just didn't use back then because Tot Taylor (her songwriter on those early hits) could only play in one key!

Much of Mari's life experience went into the writing and recording of her most recent album, *Dolled Up*, released a couple of years ago after a long time away from the studio. She hopes that it will eventually be the basis of a one-woman show.

"The fact that I've made so few albums isn't for the want of trying," she says. "There's always the option of going to a small record company and making a small jazz album – and I should record that side of me. But because of the nature of what I do, I like to use real musicians. I'm not into looping and sampling. And that costs money. It's hard competing with the big boys, getting on the television.

"I was really lucky with *Dolled Up*. Bill Kenwright heard me singing at Pizza on the Park in London and offered to help finance the album, which meant we could put real strings on it and that made such a difference. My friend Dave A Stewart (Eurythmics) said I'd made a concept album. And that's when I realised that I'd poured so much into it: the breakdown of an 18-year relationship with the father of my child, finding someone else and moving on."

Mari hopes that a raised profile following the tour and the greatest hits package will give her a platform to pursue more projects like this. In the meantime, there is the continued success of *Girl Talk* – intermittent because all three members are busy singers in their own right – regular commutes to Los Angeles where she and her television producer partner have a