

'I'm grateful for every day that I feel good'

Eighties pop star Mari Wilson now combines her music career with motherhood and a glamorous Californian lifestyle – and at 51, careful management of her diabetes is key to ensuring she stays fit, healthy and stylish as ever.

Neasden's most famous daughter has always believed in the pursuit of glamour. Mari Wilson put her north London birthplace on the map when she first stormed the charts in 1982 with her beehive hairdo and her own brand of exuberant, retro-style pop songs like 'Just What I've Always Wanted' and 'Beat the Beat'. It was the beginning of a long, versatile career.

When the hit singles subsided, Mari extended her range as a singer, crossing the musical divide into jazz and lounge, winning over tricky audiences at venues like Ronnie Scott's and appearing with artists as varied as BB King, Stan Getz and Ray Charles. She also ventured into musical theatre, playing Dusty Springfield in *Dusty: The Musical* in 2000, and following that up with a stint in Boy George's West End cult hit, *Taboo*. And with fellow singers Barb Jung and Claire Martin she formed the cabaret act *Girl Talk*, which quickly gathered a loyal following thanks to its risqué exploration of life, love and men through song.

From beehive to bob

The beehive has long since become an impeccably stylish blonde bob and at 51, Mari is busier than ever. A new album of self-penned songs – the basis of a forthcoming one-woman musical – is in the can, and she will embark on a nationwide tour this autumn. All of which adds to her 'survivor' credentials. But perhaps a greater measure of her tenacity is that diabetes has been a constant companion throughout her career, adding a layer of complexity to a choice of profession that rarely shows mercy to physical or mental frailty.

'I was diagnosed 30 years ago this summer,' she says. 'It was 21 June 1978. The World

Cup was on and my mum asked why I was squinting at the television. Everything was blurred, which was the main reason I went to the doctor. But the signs had been there for ages. I was always drinking as a teenager – water, juice, Coke – and always needed two glasses. I'd lost a bit of weight even though I wasn't eating any differently. I didn't look very good and I couldn't stop going to the loo.'

Mari went to the doctor on the Friday. By Monday, she was on her way into Northwick Park Hospital in Harrow, which would become home for the next three weeks as type 1 diabetes was confirmed and she got

'I discovered that exercise was the secret of staying in control'

to grips with the prospect of a new diet. The consultant explained that the glucose in Mari's lenses had increased with her high blood sugar level, causing blurred vision that would correct itself once she started her insulin treatment. To her great relief, it did.

'All I knew about diabetes was that Mary Tyler Moore had it,' she remembers. 'You didn't hear too much about it back then. Nowadays you wouldn't even go into hospital, they'd just get you on insulin. But then it was so... Victorian, in a way: that awful, huge, stainless steel and glass syringe sitting in a tube of surgical spirit. I did my first injection in my thigh and I must have gone into a blood vessel because I got a great big bruise. I was a bit

pathetic about it until the nurse told me she'd just taught a five-year-old how to do it, which put me in my place.'

To begin with, Mari admits, she didn't take the condition as seriously as she should have done. When she started to gain weight as her blood sugar stabilised, she would sometimes manipulate her insulin. And the bruising routine of injections got her down.

A low note

The turning point came when she was readmitted to hospital with a tooth abscess. The only bed was in an amputation ward where she met people who were losing digits and limbs to gangrene because of the complications of uncontrolled diabetes. This time, she came home determined to get herself fit and healthy, and to find out everything she could about the condition.

'I read lots of books,' she says. 'I realised that if I started exercising, I wouldn't gain the weight, and I started swimming. Until I had my daughter Lily, who is now 11, I swam a mile a day, five days a week. I still do at least half a mile three times a week, but I also go to the gym and have a personal trainer. I discovered that was the secret because it kept my weight controlled, kept me feeling and looking good, and kept my diabetes under control.'

Mari wasn't about to let her newly discovered condition get in the way of her ambitions, however, despite the fact that it was hardly conducive to the erratic working hours and pressures of a singer's life on the road.

'When I started to get some success, touring was very difficult,' she admits. 'I'd be with the band on a 16-bed sleeper bus. We'd do the ▶▶



gig, get on the bus, party, go to sleep, and wake up in the next town. But it wasn't ideal for me because they could eat whenever or whatever they wanted. I had to make sure I had my own store of food, available to me when I needed it. Diabetes really is best suited to a 9-to-5 lifestyle – which this isn't!

The diabetes sometimes set the show business rumour-mill running. Playing a late-night gig in Los Angeles in 1983, Mari's blood sugar level had plummeted and she threw what she remembers as 'a complete tantrum', sending her manager out into the night to get a sandwich. Duly supplied, she retired to a quiet corner to recover from her hypo. By the time she returned to the UK, the story had assumed a life of its own.

Diva? No, diabetes

'Some bright young upstart at my record company was thrilled to let me know that he'd heard how I was too drunk to go on stage,' she recalls. 'Another time, I did a gig at a venue in Victoria, and somebody found one of my syringes, which must have fallen out of my bag. So suddenly there was talk of "Mari Wilson, the junkie". That, as well as being an alcoholic. Very good for my street cred!'

Mari says the evolution of diabetes treatment, particularly the insulin pen, has changed her life as a working singer. Testing, injections and diet have long since ceased to be a problem, but having a hypo remains her biggest fear, with the inconvenience of losing concentration during important professional discussions and engagements. She always tests her blood before driving – 'It's not just your life on the road, it's other people's' – and



makes sure she has a bottle of pop in the car. And she always tells people she's working with about the diabetes, just so they know.

'I do still have to be careful when I'm on tour,' she says. 'Singing is difficult and I need my blood sugar to be right so I don't feel knackered. For example, interviews have to fit in with my rest. I won't cram them in before or after a show.'

Pregnancy was an extra challenge and Mari planned hers very carefully from the start. Constant blood tests, regular HbA1c tests and six-weekly scans helped to keep her blood sugar level between 5 and 6 and make sure the baby wasn't growing too big – although she confesses that a mashed potato addiction pushed her insulin management skills to the limit and she had to raise the dose throughout the pregnancy.

Diet, she says, was the key, combined with gentle exercise (swimming and long walks rather than gym workouts) and plenty of rest – two or three hours an afternoon during the first trimester. Staying in control of everything was hard work but worth every minute.

'I gave birth to a very healthy 7lb 4oz girl and in fact, the diabetic team were brought

'Diabetes is really suited to a 9-to-5 lifestyle – which rock 'n' roll isn't!'

around to see me as proof that having a normal-size baby can be achieved with a little effort and determination, which made me very smug,' she says.

'Remember it's only for the best part of a year to put the work in and once you have that beautiful child in your arms... I don't really agree with this trend of going back to the gym the day after you give birth. Enjoy your baby. They grow so fast.'

In some ways, Mari's diet was actually simplified 15 years ago when she was also diagnosed with coeliac disease and had to cut out gluten. She jokes that she has become the 'biggest connoisseur of salads' but says that as with the diabetes, it's mainly been a question of re-educating herself.

Mari resisted talking openly about her diabetes for many years. There was always the professional worry about what people – particularly record companies – might think.



Above: Big hair and top of the pops
Below: With her new band, Girl Talk

But now she feels strongly that everyone should be educated about it so that if nothing else, they can recognise when somebody is having a hypo and offer appropriate help. And she is very keen to alert teenagers to the dangers of manipulating their insulin.

'Your health is everything,' she says. 'I also have an under-active thyroid gland, so that's three things that can affect my immune system and I do have phases of being sick, especially during winter. I think that's why I'm always depressed when I see how people abuse themselves with food and alcohol. I drink less and less alcohol these days, but I think that happens as you get older, with or without diabetes. A couple of glasses give me a headache. There's too much to do and the last thing I want is a hangover.'

Mari makes plenty of time for rest and relaxation. Spending time with her daughter has always been a priority so during the holidays, when they're in Los Angeles where Mari and her partner, television producer Mal Young, have a house, Disneyland is popular.

'I like to go to the theatre and concerts,' she says. 'And above all, to shop. It's a glamorous life and somebody has to live it! I'm grateful for every day that I feel good. Most people wouldn't know that I have diabetes, because after 30 years it's part of my life. Brushing my teeth and taking my injections, it's all the same.' ■

WORDS: PIERS FORD