

Babs codex

Secrets from within the Streisand cult

12 STEPS

Gordon Bowness

WHAT AL-ANON IS to alcoholism, Al-à-Babs is to the cult of Barbra Streisand.

I've long wanted to found a group for friends, families, lovers and exes of Babs addicts. I was in a long-term relationship with a high-ranking member of the Babs priesthood and, as all you potential members of Al-à-Babs know, that meant an intense brainwashing campaign, a years-long initiation into the sublime mysteries of Babs worship.

It's a delicate process. Members of the priesthood — they all know each other — discuss how to craft each campaign to best seduce a new believer. Screen a copy of *The Main Event* too soon and a novitiate may be lost forever.

These boys know what they're doing. I was pulled in deep, almost as deep as you can go: the farewell concert (her first of many) in Las Vegas, New Year's Eve, 1999 — a millennial event in all senses of the word.

The road to Vegas was a long one, packed with detailed study. I can even tell you what song Barbra was singing during the *Happening In Central Park* concert when that divinely sent gust of wind made her salmon chiffon dress move just so.

Now that I have escaped the cult, found naked and drugged along a desert highway, I thought I might share my wealth of Babs knowledge. It's my way of acknowledging that there is a higher power. Use this dangerous knowledge as you will, for good or evil; the choice is yours.

Best CD introduction

For you Babs virgins, start with **The Second Barbra Streisand Album**. Recorded over four days in



1963, this disc captures how exquisite and powerful Babs' voice was and the dangerous risks she could

take as a vocal artist. Peter Matz's steamy, jazzy arrangements often boil over into showstoppers. Her renditions of five Harold Arlen numbers exemplify how, through acting, she can transform a song into a three-act story.

Best TV appearance

The "Happy Days/Get Happy" duet with Judy Garland on a 1963 episode of **The Judy Garland Show**.

It's like a passing of the diva torch; each singer inspiring the other to greater heights. And Ethel Merman!?



Best live concert recording

A Happening In Central Park.

Babs could still fathom herself a rock star standing in front of 135,000 screaming fans on a summer evening in 1967 (an hour-long version was broadcast on TV



the next year; it recently came out on DVD). Gorgeous, full of piss and vinegar, pushing her voice to its limits. As the perfectionist in her took over, that possibility of failure, that danger, disappeared in her later recordings and performances.

Best film performance

Funny Girl from 1968, the Willy Wyler-directed adaptation of the



Jule Styne and Bob Merrill musical written for Streisand. Babs is mesmerizing as Fanny Brice, a young Jewish girl from Brooklyn who makes good on the stage only to lose at love. Laughs, tears and that voice. She won her first Oscar: "Hello, gorgeous."

Sexiest role

On A Clear Day You Can See Forever from 1970 directed by Vincent Minnelli. Just jump to the

"Love With All The Trimmings" scene, where Barbra, portraying one of her past life-characters, wears the most voluptuous Cecil Beaton costume (it looks



like she is actually wearing the Brighton Pavilion where much of the film is set). The contemporary clothes by gay Canadian designer and Streisand fave Arnold Scaasi ain't nothin' to sneeze at, either.

First Canadian appearance

Prior to the Canadian stops on her current tour, you have to go back to 1961, Winnipeg when she appeared at the **Town 'N' Country** supper club. My brother's mother-in-law actually saw her but could only recall that she looked cute with her "yiddishe nose." Streisand would later tell Johnny Carson on the *Tonight Show* that the club was "beautiful" and "posh" but the audience didn't dress very well.

Other weird Winnipegness

That famous photo of Streisand in a white-turbaned Scaasi outfit on the arm of prime minister Pierre Trudeau — a mural of which



used to adorn the Cameron House on Queen West — was taken when Trudeau took her to the National Arts Centre in Ottawa for, ugh, a night celebrating the **Manitoba centenary** in 1970.

Overlooked minor classic

Up The Sandbox directed by Irvin Kershner in 1972. In a



nonsinging role, Barbra plays a bored housewife who has bizarre fantasies, including joining black terrorists planting explosives in the Statue Of Liberty. Ahead of its time.

Most bizarre single

Her cover of David Bowie's "**Life On Mars**" from the Jon Peters produced 1974 album *Butterfly*.



It's great, beyond kitsch, like Bowie himself. Not beyond kitsch, however, is the album cover with a fly on a stick of butter.

Worst film



The Mirror Has Two Faces from 1996, starring and directed by Streisand. It's *Main Event*-bad without yummy Ryan O'Neal nor the poodle perm (well, it's a different, less fun poodle). The self-indulgent ending totally undermines the film's message about good looks not equating worthiness. As Janet Maslin wrote in the *New York Times*: "Ms Streisand... demolishes her audience's goodwill with hubris that goes through the roof. Beguiling as she can be in duckling roles, she becomes insufferable as this story's gloating swan."

Most savage satire



Mecha-Streisand from the first season of *South Park* in 1998. Barbra turns into a giant monster who can fire lasers from her nose. Anathema to the priesthood.

Queerest discovery

It's not just the queens. Like Anglicans, Babs priests can be women. There were plenty of **dykes** at the Vegas millennium concert, including local filmmaker Elle Flanders, who agreed to share this story: As a teenager, Flanders was obsessed by Omar Sharif in *Funny Girl*... until she realized it was only the scenes where he kissed Barbra that mattered — she wanted to be Omar Sharif only to kiss Barbra.

Barbra Streisand performs at the Air Canada Centre (40 Bay St) on Tue, Oct 17 and Oct 20 with Il Divo opening. Tix run \$85 to \$550; call (416) 870-8000.