

IN 1982, on their first visit to Australia, the Pretenders dropped by the Seven Network music show *Sounds* and goofed around on the studio couch. Cocky 20-somethings, with the world at their feet, they fielded questions with youthful insouciance: yes, they had emerged out of London's punk and new wave scene four years previously. No, their peers weren't jealous of their meteoric success. Yes, lead singer Chrissie Hynde had left the US because she didn't like it. No, they hadn't seen any Australian bands yet. Or rather, Hynde hadn't.

"I don't like to go out to clubs or anything," she said in her midwestern accent, kohl-rimmed eyes defiant under her long choppy fringe. "I like to stay in my room and drink hot chocolate and watch late movies."

Hynde's cohorts — guitarist James Honeyman-Scott, bassist Pete Farndon, drummer Martin Chambers — bunched up next to her as she spoke, ribbing their dark-haired frontwoman and sending up *Sounds* presenter Donnie Sutherland.

Fresh-faced but worldly, cool but wryly amused, the offstage Hynde seemed much the same as the rock chick who sang *Brass in Pocket*, *Stop Your Sobbing* and other hits from behind her Fender Telecaster, the focal point of a band whose chemistry was palpable. Archive footage of the interview, recently posted on YouTube, has an unintentional poignancy: a little more than a year later, Farndon and Honeyman-Scott were dead.

"Don't remember. That's like, what, 28 years ago?" Hynde snorts derisively and takes a tentative slurp of the coffee she's been given here in her publicist's office in St John's Wood, northwest London. "Urgh." She pulls a face. "That's really f. king horrible. Anyway, I just can't take any more of this looking back," she says. "Know what I mean? Enough!"

Things have not started well. Having rejected my handshake in favour of a fist bump, having then spent a few minutes sending texts on her mobile and ignoring me completely, Hynde sits back on a sofa in her skinny jeans and tight black top and stares at me resignedly, the jaunty daisy pattern on her canvas hi-top trainers at odds with the mood in the room.

At 59 she's as whippet-thin as she was in the early 1970s. That's when she arrived in London looking for a vehicle for her tremulous velveteen voice and played in early versions of the Clash and the Damned before co-founding the Pretenders.

She hated doing press back then. She hates doing it now.

"I can't keep talking about the past," she reiterates with a scowl. "All that 'he said this' and 'I read you said that'. I don't remember saying any of it. I have a new band, a proper collaboration with a very gifted guy called J. P. Jones, and that is what I am excited about."

"So I'll have someone else to do interviews with, so I won't have to do this any more."

The drug-related deaths of the band's guitarist and bassist (Hynde had sacked her ex-lover Farndon for his drug use two days before Honeyman-Scott overdosed) only temporarily derailed the Pretenders. Hynde eventually put the group back together, firing off riffs through a succession of line-ups, the sole original member until Chambers rejoined in the mid-1990s.



Chrissie Hynde and the Pretenders . . . the band evolved after two members died

Present tense

Chrissie Hynde still rocks, writes a slightly chastened Jane Cornwell ahead of the Pretenders tour

With her electric guitar, Cleopatra eyes and shaggy dolly cut — the trademark fringe that is part fashion statement, part camouflage — Hynde was the antithesis of, say, Debbie Harry of Blondie, another post-punk girl singer who'd emerged in front of a band in the late 70s.

Harry was blonde, wore a dress and didn't play any instruments. She left all the songwriting to her boyfriend, Chris Stein, whose band it was in the first place. Hynde hired and fired and clearly wore the pants. She was the main songwriter of stylish, hook-laden numbers, including *Back on the Chain Gang*, *Middle of the Road* and *Message of Love*, controlling the sound to the extent that the Pretenders always felt a bit like a solo project. It's a suggestion that has always riled. "I'm a real band person," she says wearily. "I like the chemistry. I'm nothing without a band." Unlike Harry, who reformed Blondie with Stein in 1997 after the

group split in 1982, Hynde, a mother of two, has never been away.

In a few months Blondie and the Pretenders will be co-headlining an Australian tour of inner-city theatres and countryside wineries, a couple of which Hynde and co played when they last toured Australia three years ago ("Some of our favourite shows of all time," states Hynde on the press release). It's a remarkable double bill: as different as they are, Hynde and Harry are much-admired pop culture fixtures. Their bands have transcended their punk origins to become staples of mainstream rock radio; both have been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Pretenders in 2005 and Blondie in 2006.

"Don't know her," says Hynde, shrugging, of Harry, 65 "I've bumped into her a couple of times over the years but that's it." So what is her favourite Blondie song? "Don't have one." OK, but what if she had to

have one? "Well, I don't have to." Hynde is almost sneering. "All right, that Union one," she offers, relenting slightly. "What's it called? *Union City Blues*."

Given that Hynde is here to talk about the tour and, by extension, the Pretenders, her attitude seems less rock 'n' roll than rude. Later, after I start rolling my eyes back at her, she'll soften and apologise and tell me she's having a bad day; that last night she got so drunk with old friends in Chelsea that she left her car on the street outside their home, and that when she went to retrieve it this morning she discovered it had been towed away. Later still she'll suggest we go and grab a pizza. The next day she'll text me to say she's bought me a book. Right now, however, my presence irritates her.

"Can't we talk about something interesting?" she says, jerking an arm in annoyance and spilling her coffee all over the floor. "Oh, you know what? NEVER MIND," she growls, jumping up in a tangle of limbs. I tell her how much I enjoyed watching the new DVD *Live in London*, which captures the Pretenders in fiery form at the Shepherd's Bush Empire last year. How I love the way her voice still sounds edgy and almost apologetically commercial. How she still rocks so hard that her mascara runs in rivers down her cheeks. How she has clearly blazed a trail for a host of female rockers from Alanis Morissette to Shirley Manson to Karen O from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs.

Hynde is grimacing, curling into herself. You're making a face, I say. "Please don't say anything about women," she says. "I'm not a pioneer. I haven't done anything different. Maybe I can be a pioneer one day with my vegan restaurants, because that's why I do this." She squares her narrow shoulders. Does what? "This. The music. I do the music to end the killing."

The younger of two children born to a part-time secretary and an ex-Marine in steak-eating Akron, Ohio — the "rubber capital of the world" in a state long reliant on manufacturing — Hynde has been a vegetarian since she was 17. "That's when everything changed," she once said. "Then I knew I wasn't going to be like everyone else. I was going to live by my principles."

Those principles are fierce and often wildly contradictory, many of them formed during her time as an art student at Kent State University, where she dabbled in hippie counterculture and Eastern mysticism (she still subscribes to Vaishnavism, a Hindu sect) and was present when the National Guard fired on anti-Vietnam protesters in May 1970, killing someone she knew. Today, however, she bangs on at length about the arrogant naivety of the 60s and 70s, given that all that fighting against repression has resulted in a society where pornography is everywhere, disrespect is rife and the planet is hurtling towards annihilation faster than you can say "I'll stand by you".

At the top of her list are animal rights and environmentalism, the two causes around which her life revolves. "I divide the world into meat-eaters and non-meat eaters," she says. She tries to avoid atheists, too, finding them boring and unedifying (her take on spirituality is complex), though she doesn't seem to want them dead like she does meat-eaters: "They [meat-eaters] have destroyed the planet and committed a criminal offence against God. So this is war."

I tell her that I'm vegetarian (but not that I sometimes lapse), and shuffle my leather