



**B**ack in the day, we all wanted to be Suzi Quatro. Girls at my school got dolly cuts. A few of us even had leather jumpsuits. Someone used to bring along her dad's bass guitar; we'd take turns strumming it at lunchtime, standing with our legs splayed. "48 Crash! 48 Crash! Come like a lightning flash!" we'd screech, banging our heads.

Quatro was our inner rebel, our role model, our rock'n'roll pin-up. Blue-eyed and petite, with an hourglass figure under that tight all-in-one and a low-slung bass that she played – like, really played – herself, she delivered hit after hit in a voice that could strip paint. *Can the Can*, *Daytona Demon*, *Devil Gate Drive* and, yep, *48 Crash* ... all of them laden with hooks and riffs and enough raunch and attitude to make them feel wicked and wild but never scary or slutty. This was the 1970s, the era of glam rock. Punk was but a sneer in the sky.

Thirty-odd years later, Suzi Q is still rocking. Two nights before we meet she's playing Berlin, wowing a multi-generational crowd with a show filled with high-energy entertainment and singalong tunes. Today she's at home in her 16th century manor house in Essex, England, gearing herself up for her 23rd tour of Australia. At least she's supposed to be at home. All is quiet as the photographer and I crunch up her (devil gate) driveway. A summer breeze rustles the willow tree next to a moat, flutters the pretty flower baskets hanging outside an olde stable block-cum-garage. Perhaps she decided to stay on in Germany with her concert

promoter husband of 16 years, Rainer Hass, who has a place there. I've emailed to reconfirm, to no reply. The 59-year-old, 45 million record-selling Wild One might well have gone AWOL.

But suddenly, here she is. Freshly showered after a jog. Tiny, bossy, remarkably pretty. "Shoes off!" she says in her Detroit twang, leading the way past walls of framed gold and platinum records and heavyweight works of art (is that a *Chagall*? A *Picasso*?) and into her beige-carpeted music room with its floor-to-ceiling wooden doors. There's a white piano next to the window. Guitars – big and small; white, primary-coloured and paisley – are arranged around a fireplace. One of them is the 1957 Fender Precision bass that her dad, Art Quatro, gave her in 1964. When, aged 14, she really was Little Suzi.

"I'm my dad's kid as far as show business is concerned," she says of the part-time jazz bandleader who held a day job at General Motors. (Quatro is her real name; the American authorities shortened her grandfather's name from Quattrocchi when he arrived in New York from Italy.) "My father made sure all his children could play as many instruments as possible. What could be better than having that kind of musical training plus the right kind of professional attitude to business?" She flashes a megawatt smile. "Music is my job. It's what I do."

Quatro's Hungarian mother Helen, a staunch Catholic, wasn't exactly overjoyed when three of her four teenage daughters – their brother is also a musician – formed an all-girl band called Suzi Soul and the Pleasure Seekers and set off on the road. Inspired by both Motown and Detroit's raw, hard-nosed guitar rock, one of the few girl bands who played their own instruments, they recorded a couple of singles and even toured Vietnam to entertain the troops. "Just before my mother died [in 1992] she told me she regretted letting me go so soon – but I just had to be in a band," says Quatro with a what-can-you-do shrug. "I remember seeing Elvis sing *Don't Be Cruel* on TV when I was five and I said,

'I want to be him.' No bullshit." She gazes at me steadily. "After we saw The Beatles we called each other and said, 'Let's form an all-girl band!' We learned three songs for the first gig; I remember getting up on stage and feeling like I was home."

Whether her sisters Arlene, Patti and Nanci liked it or not – and as Quatro wrote in her 2007 autobiography *Unzipped*, they didn't – Susan Kay, the second-eldest and the tomboy, was the one who stood out. In Detroit working on an album with the young guitar god Jeff Beck, celebrated British producer Mickie Most turned up to watch a girl band that was by then called Cradle, and he noticed her X-factor immediately.

"He wanted me, not the band, to come over to London where he would make me a star. That rejection was very hard for my sister Patti. She's a Piscean and very sensitive." Quatro pauses and sighs. "There are always going to be issues with families," says the mother-of-two, shifting her weight on the pristine cream couch. "You're stupid if you think otherwise. Arlene and I are twin souls, but since the book came out I've powwowed with Patti and Nanci a lot on the phone. I thought after writing it they'd get me and they still don't."

**LONDON IN 1971 WAS GRIM AND DEPRESSING.** Most put Quatro up in a bedsit without a private bathroom in London's Earls Court, and her first single, 1972's *Rolling Stone*, flopped. Nonetheless, she believed in Most. More vitally, she believed in herself. Clad in her soon-to-be signature jumpsuit ("It was sexy but at least I was clothed; people had to *listen* to me"), she and her band supported glam rockers Slade. Then Most introduced her to Nambour-born songwriter Mike Chapman and the hit parade began.

In-house writers for Most's RAK Records, Chapman and his writing partner Nicky Chinn had been supplying material to bands including Mud and The Sweet. Given an opportunity to subvert the motley, male-dominated glam music

scene, and with feisty Suzi Quatro as their muse, they embarked on a creative frenzy.

In 1973, *Can the Can* gave Quatro her first No 1, throughout Europe and Australia. Then *48 Crash*, also written by Chapman and Chinn, swiftly followed: "It's about the male menopause. Men get it too, you know." These and the likes of *Glycerine Queen*, which Quatro wrote with then husband/guitarist Len Tuckey, featured on her self-titled debut album (titled *Can the Can* for its Australian release). As did a gender-bending cover of The Beatles' *I Wanna Be Your Man* and a proto-riot grrl version of Elvis's *All Shook Up*.

Quatro was 24 years old when Presley, loving what she'd done, rang and invited her to Graceland. Heart racing, she said no. "He was my hero," she says softly. "I wasn't ready to meet him." She never did. But a few years ago, here in this very room, she wrote a tribute called *Singing With Angels*, then recorded it in Nashville with Presley's original backing group the Jordanaires and guitarist James Burton. She springs up and puts the CD on her stereo; the song is poignant, respectful, even spine-tingling. "I didn't write that alone," she says, standing there rubbing her upper arms. "I definitely feel that he helped me."

As one might imagine of a woman whose oeuvre embraces songs with such titles as *The Wild One*, *Daytona Demon* and *Your Mama Won't Like Me*, there were plenty of japes during the heady 1970s. On tour with Alice Cooper she almost broke his nose in a dartgun fight. She had a wasted Iggy Pop chucked offstage for trying to muscle in. She and her band wrecked ►

Story Jane Cornwell

# rock of ageless

At 59, Suzi Quatro is proving there's still life in the old leathers.





Suzi's cue ... Quatro with the Fender bass her father Art gave her in 1964 and (opening page) playing it onstage, 1973.

a Melbourne hotel room by pouring alcohol over every electrical appliance and blowing them up; steam let off, no doubt, by the hysteria she engendered in Australia in 1974.

"Killed 'em in Sydney ..." she writes in *Unzipped*. "We hit Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth and Brisbane, and for the first time I experienced not being able to walk the streets: there were screaming fans everywhere and it wasn't safe." She'd made a pact with herself – with her other self, Little Suzi from Detroit – that she'd always be normal, no matter how famous she got. She is now, she says. But nothing was normal then. "Australia and me go back a long way," she adds. "It's a straight-talking, no-bullshit place and I love it. We understand each other."

She tells of being approached in the foyer of a Brisbane hotel in the early 1980s by a 14-year-old named Patrick Doonan. "He'd been a fan of mine all his life. He had all my albums and as I was signing them I said, 'So are you coming to the show tonight?' He said he couldn't because he was too young. So we hid him backstage and he watched the whole thing from behind an amp.

"And you know what?" Another smile. "That guy now runs my official website! He drives me on every Australian tour! I never thought that pesky kid would become such a good friend. It was clearly meant to happen."

As big as Quatro was in Australia, Europe and Japan, it was her late-1970s stint on TV show *Happy Days* – as the guitar-playing Leather Tuscadero – that broke her in America. Offered a spin-off series, she refused. "I had my sights set on furthering my acting career. So now, when it comes, I do it." There have been appearances in television series including *Midsomer Murders* and *Absolutely Fabulous*, and lead roles in London stage productions of the musical *Annie Get Your Gun* and *The Exonerated* – a play about death row in a Texas jail. "I need to be touched mentally," says Quatro. "Otherwise I'm not interested."

In the 1980s she took time out to raise her children, Laura and Richard. Not too much time; music, after all, was her job. It was what she did. "It was tough being a working mum but I had little choice," she says. She has negotiated

a stormy relationship with Laura, a singer and the mother of Quatro's only (and very beloved) grandchild, eight-year-old Emma. "We're okay now; she even helped me write a song on my last [2006] album, *Back to the Drive*, called *I'll Walk Through Fire With You*, which is about mother-daughter relationships." Later I find a 2006 interview from London's *Times* in which mother and daughter gave a précis of life with the other. "My mum's been a rebel all her life," said Laura Tuckey. "So for me to rebel has been really difficult. I got a tattoo and she liked it; at 14 I had my nose pierced and she said, 'That looks nice.'"

Yet for all her rocking ways, Quatro is surprisingly wholesome and refreshingly normal. "Rainer always says that when I'm at home the wild one becomes the mild one," she offers. And yet despite (or perhaps because of) this, she has still managed to inspire a host of female rockers – everyone from Joan Jett to Chrissie Hynde, Debbie Harry to Duffy. And with a new album in the works, produced by Connecticut-based Chapman ("He's taking me right back to basics"), there's life in the leathers yet.

Quatro's rock credentials are reflected weekly on her national BBC2 radio show, now in its 11th year: "The music I play was created at the beginning, at the birth, when there wasn't an industry as such. People were drawn to it because it was in their soul. They worked for nothing just to be able to play. I mean, I started off very young and I played every gig God sent and worked my way up the ladder." She sighs. "Trouble is, there's no ladder any more."

So how will she square all this with her stint as a guest judge in *Australian Idol*'s first Top 12 elimination round, to be aired tomorrow? Maybe she'll have to be careful about what she says? Her eyes flash. "I always say what I feel," she says with feeling. "These shows are great entertainment but I don't know how safe they are. One minute you're flipping burgers, then you're on nationwide television, then three seconds later you're flipping burgers again. So I will be wanting to vibe in on that person – are they just trying to be famous or do they really have to do what they do?"

Interview over, we go outside for photographs. Quatro poses next to her beloved bass guitar, looking straight into the camera, the summer breeze gently ruffling her dolly cut. "You're thinking too much," she says, tuning into my emotional state. "You should go home and play rock music really, really loud. Go and put your brain in reverse and let your senses take over."

She flashes a grin. "Then you'll be cured." ■

Suzi Quatro plays Twin Towns Resort, Tweed Heads next Friday and Saturday and the Empire Theatre, Toowoomba, on Sunday.