

There was something irresistible about Belinda Carlisle's rise at the end of the Eighties. A graduate of The Go-Gos, one of America's brightest pop successes of the decade, Belinda arrived with chart pedigree, a wise head and those cheek bones.

Heralded as one to watch in '88, she'd already enjoyed US chart success with her first solo album, *Belinda*, and Billboard top #3 single, *Mad About You*. But it was an altogether sleeker Belinda, second time around.

If her first album saw her paying homage to the iconic style of her heroine Ann-Margret's Sixties movies, *Kitten With A Whip* and *Viva Las Vegas*, for *Heaven On Earth* the shift was to an earlier golden era with Belinda's Californian blonde bob giving way to auburn hair, elegant lines and the expressionist lighting of a bygone era.

The fact that she and her movie producer husband Morgan Mason, son of acting great James Mason, had moved into Thirties screen star Carole Lombard's old house may have provided some of the inspiration. But it was a more contemporary movie-star who really got the ball rolling.

Belinda found the perfect visual collaborator in actress-turned-director Diane Keaton, herself striving for a new direction after her '87 documentary about heaven (what else?) had received a critical mauling. Between them, Diane and Belinda conceived videos for *Heaven*



Is A Place On Earth and *I Get Weak* which had the silky class of old school Hollywood mixed with quirky, pop-art images of bat-girls and trussed up prom dates.

The quirkiness was important. She may have been blessed with Californian good looks but Belinda had never been the typical high school cheerleader type.

"I was a cheerleader for one year," she told me in '88, "but only by fluke. The

way you got to be cheerleader was the school votes for you. The cheerleaders were really, really dorky while my friends were Jewish militant students who would do Abbie Hoffman stuff like painting our faces black.

"Cheerleading was a big joke to my friends. They thought it would be really funny if they saw me out there doing it. So everybody voted that didn't usually vote and I ended up as one. I thought,

'What the hell, I might as well do it for a laugh.'

"I used to do the football games completely bombed. I'd be way behind and all my friends would be in the first couple of rows really laughing. It was kind of fun for a year and then they wanted me to do it again and I said no. No way."

For *Heaven On Earth* there was also a new sound. With former Stevie Nicks producer Rick Nowels at the helm, the Sixties influences of the first album had been replaced by a sleeker more anthemic Eighties pop-rock. Something that held its own alongside the likes of Heart and Pat Benatar on America's AOR stations while also being a cooler, older sister to new teens on the block like Debbie Gibson and Tiffany.

With Nowels weighing in with songwriting credits on *Heaven Is A Place On Earth* and *Circle In The Sand* and fellow Californian Diane Warren, the most successful songwriter of all time, pitching in with *I Get Weak* the big guns were out.

On the cusp of turning 30, Belinda turned in the most assured vocals of her career. She'd been a teenager when she formed the Go-Gos with Jane Wiedlin and Charlotte Caffey, and the early years had been a question of simply blagging it but this time round the rewards she reaped were the result of plenty of hard graft.

"I take singing lessons all the time," she said back then. "I have to. I thought I had the best voice in the world until I listened to a tape from our first live

Go-Gos' gig. Luckily I can carry a tune, thank God. That's about all I can do. But when we got management and I had a bit of extra money I started paying for vocal lessons. Not seriously but about twice a month. Now I go about three or four times a week. Since I don't have a natural voice it's something that I'm constantly trying to improve. There's no question that it gives me more confidence."

Belinda's confidence prior to *Heaven On Earth* had taken a bit of a bashing. In '86 she had checked into a clinic to deal with substance abuse problems, after fellow Go-Go Charlotte Caffey had led the way, and she was still finding her way with a typical mix of Californian therapies like age regression, eating plans and the like.

In fact she'd never looked better. The Belinda Carlisle that promoted the new album had the sort of drop-dead movie star looks that made her a pin-up favourite with the pop weeklies, at a time when her only obvious competition was Madonna.

But the girl who had started out in her teens as drummer Dottie Danger, in a punk band called The Germs, still liked to stand apart from the mainstream Hollywood scene, only occasionally dipping her toes in places to be seen like Spago's.

"I go sometimes for entertainment," she said while on the promotion trail in the UK for 'I Get Weak!' "I actually like the food at Spago's and I go there once every couple of months because it's so

ridiculous that it's funny. You'll see Joan Collins and everybody there.

"Actually the place where you see everybody right now (in '88) is Helena's. I got the biggest kick there because a couple of Fridays ago I went and Madonna was there. She was dancing with a friend of hers on the dance-floor. I was at a table and I wanted to dance but she's such a good dancer that I couldn't.

"But the greatest part was we then saw Brigitte Stallone (Rocky's 80s Bride) get up and dance next to Madonna. It was like the face off. It was like this dance contest. I was dying. It was just the funniest thing. There was no acknowledgment between the two of them. Only in Hollywood would you see this kind of thing."

With monster hits at that time on both sides of the Atlantic, the bigger surprise is that Belinda felt intimidated at all.

A few weeks later she was off to the Grammys where she was nominated for Best Vocal Pop Performance for 'Heaven Is A Place On Earth' (she lost out to Whitney's 'I Wanna Dance With Somebody').

"My girlfriend wants to go so she can see all the fashion don'ts like the tight leopard pants with the feather boa corset," said Belinda. "I figure it's a good excuse to get a good dress."

By Paul Simper, writer for No.1 Magazine and DJ at Guilty Pleasures & Digging Your Scene. March 2009.