HIV: Behind the Music

Fallen pop star. Sex-abuse survivor. Psych patient. Recovering addict. Jewish suburban girl. Voice of female empowerment. For Sherri Lewis, life with HIV has been one long, strange trip.

May 1, 2008 By Kellee Terrell

It's 1 a.m. in New York City, and the line in front of the legendary rock club Max's Kansas City stretches down the block. There's a seedy stench in the air—it is 1981, before Disney sanitized Times Square and before baby strollers invaded Greenwich Village.

On any given night, Patti Smith or the Ramones may be found on Max's stage. (And lines of coke may be found—and snorted—right on the bar.) Tonight's main attraction is one of the hottest pop acts around, a band called Get Wet. Lead singer Sherri Beachfront (a stage name), 27, peers out from behind the curtain and glances at the crowd of 200. She lives for this.

Zecca Esquibel, Get Wet's keyboard player and Sherri's boyfriend, gives her a nod. And then, high on poppers, the petite, multicolor-haired chanteuse struts out. Fashion designer Betsey Johnson has handpicked Sherri's ensemble: a fluffy pink chiffon skirt attached to a matching strapless bustier. Purple ribbons and deflated red balloons tied to her wrist. On her feet: two-inch white pumps.

Looking like an early fusion of Madonna and Cyndi Lauper—Lauper's band, the Blue Angels, opened for Get Wet a few times—Sherri grabs the microphone. In a soulful, '60s-esque voice, she belts out the opening of her song "Just So Lonely."

Lonely, just so lonely
I'm so lonely
Lonely just for you
Just so lonely
Just for you…

The room erupts. At the time, it seemed as if Sherri's career had no place to go but up. She had inked a lucrative deal with Boardwalk Records, "Just So Lonely" was creeping up the Billboard charts and she was about to tape a video for the newly launched MTV network. She never imagined that just a few years later, she would be strung out on dope, hawking her belongings on the street, and living in a tiny apartment full of syringes, bloodstains and vomit. Nor did she have any inkling that six years later, on her 33rd birthday—three months before her dream wedding on

a yacht in the East River—she would get a phone call from her doctor. He would say, “I’m really sorry, Sherri, but your [HIV] test results are positive.”

Today, Sherri Beachfront’s new cult following can listen to her on their iPods—but not as a singer. At 54, she is the belle of West Hollywood, California, and the host and undisputed star of the podcast *Straight Girl in a Queer World*. The podcast, produced by the lesbian, gay and transgender-themed cable network here!, features Sherri’s interviews with diverse educators and activists who, the network says, “are making great strides in the fight against HIV/AIDS.” Her guests have included her friend actress Jasmine Guy, Olympic gold medalist Greg Louganis and Randy Jones of the Village People. In her slightly nasally voice, Beachfront (Lewis is her real surname) tells them of her own amazing race with HIV, which has taken her through almost every phase of the epidemic.

Paul Colichman, the founder of here!, points out that Sherri’s message of HIV empowerment and prevention is unique—and needed—because it transcends sexual orientation. “When she seroconverted, the only support groups [available] were for gay men, so she was submersed in that community,” he says. “Now the fastest [growing] group [of newly infected people] is straight women, so her experience of being a long-term survivor is relevant to other women who may be struggling with a disease that some may incorrectly assume is a gay disease—which we all know it isn’t.”

The tale of how Sherri has come to a place in her life where she can help women living with HIV seems one part *VH1: Behind the Music*, another part *Ripley’s Believe It or Not!* From her California home, she shares her many-layered saga, hoping that it will inspire—and protect—others.

“I came from a family of performers, and my grandmother was an agent.” Sherri grew up in Livingston, New Jersey—24 miles from Manhattan—in a middle-class Jewish neigh-borhood. Her father, Irving, was a sales rep for women’s accessories, and her mother, Cookie, was a homemaker. “My parents were very glamorous,” she says. “I thought they were movie stars.” But Sherri’s Hollywood fantasy came to a halt when her parents divorced in 1972 and her father moved out.

She says her teen years were filled with misery—that her mother verbally abused her (“I had a bad temper,” Sherri’s mother, Cookie, acknowledges), a relative molested her and that she had a brief stint in a psych ward. “I knew [the relative] hurt her,” Cookie says, “but those types of things we were quiet about.” She never filed charges.

Sherri began experimenting with drugs at 16. She says they were “an escape from the chaos in my life.” She smoked weed, dropped acid, took downers and Quaaludes, and occasionally shared heroin-filled needles with her friends. (This later resulted in a diagnosis of non-A/non-B hepatitis, now called hep C; though still coinfected, her liver’s fine now.) “That [first] diagnosis scared me straight for a little while,” Sherri says.

She began seeing a psychiatrist, quit drugs and graduated from high school, aspiring to become

an actress and singer. But after years of working odd jobs, the wild child in her wanted more. “Blondie and Talking Heads were on the scene,” Sherri says. “It was so theatrical and had no rules. That was so me.” She played for a few bands and in 1978 met Esquibel, a keyboard player for the punk group Cherry Vanilla. “She was electrifying,” he says. “There are very few people I’ve ever encountered that had such a powerful presence.” That same year, Sherri and Esquibel started their own group, Get Wet, and a love affair that lasted almost three years. He was bisexual, but Sherri says, “It never bothered me. I felt like he could understand all of my sexual issues.”

Get Wet quickly gained popularity: In a year, they were signed to Boardwalk Records and were guests on *American Bandstand, The Merv Griffin Show and Solid Gold*. (As for Cyndi Lauper, Sherri won’t say that Lauper stole her career, but she’ll tell you who sounded better. “I had the voice,” she says matter-of-factly. She quickly catches herself. “I am not talking bad about her; she’s great.”) Sherri was living her rock ’n’ roll dream—which included being high and drunk a lot of the time. “Drugs were just part of the culture,” says Esquibel. “Once we were walking through the hallways at [a record studio]. Out of nowhere, we were pulled into a broom closet and two random employees stuffed coke down our noses,” he says. “No one said anything.”

The drugs stuck around, though the group’s success didn’t. In 1982, Neil Bogart, the head of Get Wet’s label, died of a heart attack. The label went bankrupt and Sherri got bought out of her deal. She and Esquibel parted ways both professionally and personally. Having no hope of getting a contract elsewhere, Sherri was lost. When the usual suspects—coke, poppers and booze—no longer eased her pain, she turned to another old friend, heroin. For the next two years, they were inseparable. Soon, Sherri was homeless, living in abandoned buildings, eating out of garbage cans and begging people for drugs. She asked her father to check her into a detox center for 21 days and spent six weeks after that in rehab. When that didn’t work, she checked herself into a New Jersey live-in program called Straight and Narrow, funded by the state. “It was so bad that people could opt to go there or prison, and some chose prison,” she says with a laugh. After nine months, she came back to New York City. Friends told her about a local Narcotics Anonymous meeting. She went. “There were so many emotions in the room and I was so frozen,” Sherri recalls. “I wanted to be like those people.” She saw one of her old dealers there getting help, and thought that if he could do it, she could too. She got a sponsor, attended 90 meetings in 90 days and embraced the one-day-at-a-time mantra (which she follows to this day).

Her life soon improved in other ways. One weekend in 1987, Sherri’s longtime friend Shelley Weinstock came to town with a man named George Lewis. “Five minutes together and they clicked,” Weinstock says. After six months of dating, Sherri and George were engaged. She moved to Boston with him and lived the suburban dream: fiancé, huge house, adoring stepson. “I finally had this normal life with all of these material things,” she says.

Later that year, Sherri learned that her ex-roommate Laurie, a former addict, was in the hospital, dying. “I kept telling Laurie’s mother that she was going to be fine,” Sherri says. “I was prepared to go in there and talk about how fabulous my wedding was going to be.” But she noticed that Laurie’s room was in a desolate area of the hospital and had a bright-orange caution sign on the door. In the back of the room, Laurie’s mother peered out from behind her sunglasses and said,

“We know what Laurie has and we are not going to talk about it.” Sherri just nodded her head. As shocked as she was, she was no stranger to AIDS. She had spent summers sunbathing on Fire Island, a largely gay vacation spot near New York City, with her gay best friend, Richard, hearing stories of the emerging epidemic. So in 1981, when *The New York Times* wrote that a “rare cancer” was killing gay men, it wasn’t news to her. But even six years later, she’d never heard of a woman contracting it. “I kept telling myself that if Laurie, who was Jewish like me and a recovering addict like me, could have HIV, I could too.”

A few months later, Richard was also in the hospital dying of AIDS. Even with the death of her two closest friends, her own history of unprotected sex and the studies suggesting that IV-drug users were the second largest group of people living with HIV, Sherri didn’t get tested—until just before her wedding.

Three months before the big day, Sherri got a blood test for her marriage license. “I wasn’t even worried about the results,” she says. “I’d actually forgotten about it.” But on April 12, 1987, Sherri’s 32nd birthday, her doctor delivered the news. “I dropped the phone,” she recalls. “I got scared that I may have passed it on to George.” He tested negative.

She told her family and close friends, but thought it might be best to downplay the news for her mother. “I told her I was positive, but that it wasn’t a big deal, that it didn’t mean anything.”

Sherri racked her brain as to how and when she might have contracted the virus. She soon focused instead on staying alive. “When George and I went to my first appointment after my diagnosis, the doctor said all I could do was to eat right and take care of myself,” she says. “I was like, what the fuck does ‘eat right’ mean? Steak and potatoes? Back then, we didn’t know anything, only that this was a death sentence.” After starting a macrobiotic diet (whole grains, fish, and legumes), she incorporated cardio, yoga and meditation into her daily grind—and kept symptom-free for almost a decade. She also kept going to her Narcotics Anonymous meetings and to her therapist. “It honestly never crossed my mind to do drugs again,” she says. “I don’t know why.”

While her health was prospering, her relationship wasn’t. The first year of the marriage was rocky; it ended for good in 1992. “When my father passed away, I think that it became a reality to [George] that I could die too,” she explains. “From there, it just got ugly.” She says she felt stigmatized in her own home—and walked out. On her own again, she started speaking in high schools to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS and wrote and performed a one-woman show about her life, called *Life Is a Beach*. She also found herself becoming more comfortable with her status and found love with someone seven years her junior.

But just as she was becoming more comfortable with HIV, her symptom-free stretch ended. In 1997, she noticed some red blotches on her neck—which resembled the rash that had overtaken over Laurie’s body. Soon, she discovered that her T cells had dropped to the low 200s. Sherri had refused to take AZT—the principal AIDS med in the era before the arrival of protease inhibitors (PIs)—because she felt the side effects weren’t worth it. But once on PIs, her health and CD4 count

drastically improved. “I was on 19 pills and surviving this disease, and I was thankful,” she says. “But these bottles sitting on my kitchen table were real reminders that I had HIV. When a boyfriend saw them, he couldn’t deal and we broke up.... I needed a change, so in 1999, I left Boston and moved to California, not knowing anyone or knowing what I was going to do. All I needed was to find a 12-step meeting and I knew I was going to be OK.”

She started working at a number of L.A.-area AIDS service organizations. One day during a youth-oriented AIDS event, Sherri had an epiphany. “It all made sense to me. My music career failing, being infected with the disease,” she says. “This is what I was meant to do.” In 2007, here! asked her to be the keynote speaker for the Red Ribbon Awards, honoring TV’s achievements in raising AIDS awareness. It led to her podcast *Straight Girl in a Queer World* and an even stronger presence in the AIDS and recovery communities.

Other good news: Her viral load is undetectable, she has reconciled with her mother and she’s in the process of writing her autobiography. She also finds continual fulfillment through her outreach work. When talking about past and current disappointments—her failed stardom and marriage, her loneliness, the fact that she never had a baby and the difficulty of finding men her age who are comfortable dating someone who is HIV positive—she expresses no self-pity.

“I have my dark moments,” she says. “But first I had to address why I put myself in these situations that would put me at risk. The key is moving through the losses. I don’t have to like it to accept it, but I have to accept it in order to live my life and make room for other things.”

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Sherri-Lewis-profile-14359-7447