

Laura Undressed

Presenter du jour and *Strictly* star **Laura Whitmore** talks strong women in broadcasting and the necessity of thermal knickers at the BAFTAs

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There's nothing like interviewing a bona fide interviewer to make you acutely aware of the flow of conversation. If they did degrees in chin-wagging, Irish-born presenter Laura Whitmore would get a first. After all, this is the girl who beat 3,000 other hopefuls to win MTV's Pick Me competition in 2008 and snare a role on the channel, and has gone on to quiz some of the most colossal names on the planet. George Clooney? Check. Taylor Swift? Sure. Robert Downey Jr? Affirmative. RiRi? Yessir, Whitmore's come face-to-face with them all.

And outside the red carpet? When she's not bantering with members of the BAFTA or Brit Award glitterati for ITV, she's jetting off with MTV to cover festivals and gigs. In the space of a few hours, Whitmore might mediate a boisterous quick-fire round with the lads from One Direction, hold her own in the face of Keith Lemon's tawdry japes, then shoot the breeze with granddaddy of cinema Sir Michael Caine. Having been in her industry for close to a decade, she's joked that she could probably cover the Brits in her sleep,

and it occurs to me as I arrive at today's shoot that her job demands a total absence of shyness.

"Hello! So... I'm in my pants!" is the cheery welcome from the beaming - and half-dressed - broadcaster. She's all artfully undone blonde waves and Disney-perfect bone structure, and looks younger than her 30 years. A moment later, she's zipped into a black cut-out bodice, sat on a sofa, moving fluidly from one pose to another in front of the camera. She needs little guidance and the shoot shifts between looks with relative seamlessness (languid sexiness in sheer bra and briefs, then playful girl-next-door vibes in an oversized ruffle-sleeved jumper) punctuated only by bursts of exuberant conversation. "Do I look a bit pissed off at this angle?"

Mid-afternoon, we escape the bustle of the studio for a chat. Given the sultriness of today's shoot, one of the first subjects to crop up is the apparent glamour of a career in TV presenting, a perception that Whitmore is quick to laugh off. "Oh my





Sheer Lingerie and White T-shirt, COS



“I’ve always liked banter - maybe it’s an Irish thing. It’s really important to listen to someone and let it flow naturally”

god, no, at the BAFTAs I was freezing my arse off!” She hoots, shaking her head. “I was wearing, like, two sets of thermals and three pairs of knickers. And there’s lots of hanging around. In the early days of MTV there were no make-up artists either, so I was running about in fields doing my own hair and make-up. I definitely learned the hard way but it was a good grounding.”

But what about the after-parties? Travelling the world? Chewing the fat with Clooney? Whitmore’s read my mind. “Some things are glamorous, of course,” she concedes. “I’m not going to pretend it’s hard all the time, there are great perks, but it’s definitely not an industry to get into if you’re just after a bit of glamour.” Unlike countless teens pining after a career in the entertainment business, Whitmore, who was raised in Bray by her single mother, a civil servant, had already studied journalism at Dublin City University before passing through the shiny doors of MTV. She arrived older - and savvier - aged 23, unafraid to research and write up her own questions. “I used to love drama and the entertainment side of things, but my parents wanted me to get a good degree behind me. I’d always liked talking to people and

was naturally quite curious and inquisitive, so journalism ticked a few boxes.”

Luckily, another four years of studying didn’t seem like a hardship. Whitmore has often talked about being an extra-curricular nerd back in school. “Anything I could do on the side, I was doing,” she says, reminiscing on her love of science and years filled with debate club, drama, Irish dancing and piano lessons. At the core of all this was Whitmore’s dynamic with her hard-working mother, who encouraged her to take up as many classes as she wanted. “I think when you grow up with a single parent, it’s a love-hate relationship. My mam’s the kindest person I know, but when we lived together we nearly killed each other. I think that’s just natural. For me, the fact she worked full-time and had a kid gave me the idea that there’s nothing you can’t do. We didn’t come from money, but no matter what it was, Mam was happy for me to do all these things.”

Fast-forward to 2008 and the MySpace/MTV Pick Me competition reared its head. Whitmore had finished her degree and was working as a researcher on Irish national radio station Newstalk. “One of

my friends had a camera that he’d borrowed from the university, so we filmed a two-minute clip, put it on MySpace, and sent it off.” A second wave of auditions in London followed and the rest, as they say, is history.

These days, Whitmore is in the same league as the trio of presenters who judged the competition - Trevor Nelson, Emma Willis and Alesha Dixon. She’s earned her stripes and rubbed shoulders with a stream of A-listers in the process - but does she still get star-struck? “All the time!” she insists. “But often not until afterwards. I interviewed Kylie Minogue at the Brits this year, she’s the sweetest person, and because I’d met her at the NME Awards a few days previously she was like, ‘Oh, it’s lovely to see you again.’ Afterwards I sat back and thought: ‘Kylie Minogue knows who I am?! Jay-sus, that’s mad!’ Dave Grohl was my favourite though. They always say don’t interview your idols, but thankfully he was lovely.”

Like any skilled presenter, Whitmore has those three magic ingredients: likeability, wit and the gift of the gab. You’ll rarely see her with cue cards in hand because she categorically prefers working without them. “I’ve always liked banter, maybe it’s an Irish thing. Even now,

when people hand me questions, I'll look through them, but I'll do it in my own way, which sometimes annoys producers. I think it's really important to listen to someone and let it flow naturally. I'm probably more confident now, at the start you don't quite trust yourself."

It helps too, of course, that Whitmore is pretty easy on the eye. What's it like, I ask, being constantly under scrutiny as a woman in show business? She considers for a moment. "It's weird, especially on social media – you get people who idolise you and people who're like, 'Go back to Ireland!' Such extremes. Women definitely have it harder than men, and you have to get a thick skin to a certain degree. That's something I've learned to deal with, people writing things that just aren't true. I'm really good friends with a lot of female TV presenters and there's a great solidarity. Davina McCall, Caroline Flack... it's the sisterhood! I've always been weird about my personal life and tried not to talk too much about it because I've interviewed people and they've told me too much. So yeah, you kind of learn how to protect yourself."

The latter half of this year has been an interesting time for Whitmore. As well as the summer festival circuit, which found her pitching up at V Festival, Glastonbury and the Isle of Wight Festival, she was deeply affected by a trip to Nepal with UNICEF to draw attention to the devastation caused to schools by the earthquake that struck the Himalayan country in 2015. It's far from the first charity work Whitmore has done: she sponsored a little girl in the Philippines for seven years via Plan International, supports the gender equality campaign Because I Am A Girl and has visited the Masai Mara region in Kenya with Free The Children. "UNICEF is a great charity," she says. "For me, I've always been about causes for women and children. Maybe it's because I grew up with my mam and am a big advocate of women's rights. In Africa last year I was working in local schools with the girls. If you have any type of platform, it's important

to show your audience that you're about more than what you're wearing."

But it's a spot on the 14th series of BBC juggernaut *Strictly Come Dancing* – an opportunity opened when she stepped down from hosting *I'm A Celebrity...*, a major fixture in her calendar for the previous five years – that has made Whitmore a tabloid fixture of late. She's always been a dance enthusiast – though it's fair to say that ballroom moves weren't her style previously. "I dance like a nutter!" Whitmore breaks into a demo from her spot on the sofa, limbs going like the clappers. Her publicist bursts out laughing and nods in agreement. "Bambi on ice. Legs everywhere. I'll be sitting there quite reserved and a Justin Timberlake song comes on and I think I'm Beyoncé, but actually I'm quite uncoordinated." Still, it's already been enough to earn her the joint highest score for a waltz with her professional partner, Giovanni Pernice.

Whitmore has also been concentrating on the second collection in her Daisy Jewellery line, a festival-themed range built around lyrics by the likes of David Bowie and Fleetwood Mac, plus spiritual trinkets and emblems. Whitmore is a music nut and has dabbled in DJing and hosting Virgin Radio alongside her festival coverage, so the theme was a natural choice. "It happened organically, really. I said I'd do it if I could fully be involved – I still have the sketches and all the ideas are my own. The festival line is very me. Music has such a personal aspect to it, I think lyrics in a way are kind of like affirmations or mantras."

When the cameras stop rolling, what does she do to get away from it all? Other than chilling with pet pooch Mick (named after Jagger), it's the odd bit of exercise that keeps Whitmore sane. "I love bikram yoga or just going for a run – anything that's good for your mentality, totally switching off. I was in Mexico City last year for two nights to interview Daniel Craig on set for James Bond, and I'd seen fecking nothing because you

spend all your time in hotels, so I got up early one morning and ran around the city before everything was open. It's a great way to see a place."

It's time to wrap up, and leaving the studio my abiding image of Whitmore is less of the flimsily clad babe we saw working the camera a few hours ago, and more of an explosively chatty Dublin girl with an expert knowledge of thermal pants, capable of serious dad dancing. Good craic will get you everywhere, and this woman has it in droves.

Shop Laura Whitmore's Daisy Jewellery collection at DaisyJewellery.com

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